On Thin Ice: Managing Risks in Community-University Research Partnerships

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During a community-university research partnership some years ago, the author’s Indigenous research partners insisted we conduct a meeting on their turf, away from the university, in a locale in which they felt more at home. They suggested we meet in an ice fishing hut on Poplar Lake in the middle of Nipissing Game Reserve. Though the setting was within their traditional territory, our expedition took us all into unexplored terrain, breaking trails with our skidoo through the snow in the northern Ontario wilderness. For the author, who lives in the temperate climate of Vancouver Island, stepping out onto an expanse of ice was deeply unsettling: What if it collapsed? The partners were aware of uncertainties as well. We were entering a space that no one owned, and no one knew for sure what could, or would, happen. With a sense that our lives depended on focusing only on what was important, we fished – and made great strides in our conversation about our work together. We were fortunate, in this shared space, that the ice was thick and strong enough to support our endeavours. Our community-university engagement yielded a good catch.

In the new geographies of community-university engagements, such is not always the case. While community-engaged scholarship has become a buzzword in Canadian university research, the enthusiasm and emerging ethics associated with it create certain challenges on both the university and the community sides of the partnership equation. This chapter addresses some of these tensions. In the author’s experience, gained through a wide range of community-university research partnerships over three decades and spanning three continents, the indeterminate processes and outcomes of these engagements, and a lack of familiarity with the contexts and conditions for research carried out in communities, can evoke, for all parties, a sense of venturing onto thin ice.

Many of the projects the author has been involved in have been conducted with Indigenous community partners. The projects have been intended, in part, to demonstrate the implementation of emerging frameworks for ethical research conduct within a broader social agenda of restorative justice and self-determination of Indigenous peoples (Ball, 2005). Guiding principles have included community relevance, community participation, mutual capacity building, and benefit to Indigenous communities. In two recent projects, each carried out over five years, testimonials obtained from community representatives before and after the research projects indicated both projects had benefited the communities in the form of substantive knowledge; strengthened capacities to engage in collaborative research through community-campus

1 These projects are fully described and documented on the website of Early Childhood Development Cultural Partnerships (ECDIP), University of Victoria, BC, at http://www.ecdip.org/
partnerships were an additional benefit (Ball & Janyst, 2008). While successful in terms of research productivity and contributions to community goals, these projects were tremendously challenging for all parties. They yielded a number of insights, learning points, and unresolved dilemmas, and underscored some of the tensions between the aims and needs of university-based investigators\(^2\) and students and those of their community partners.

The act of situating research conceived, conducted, and communicated by university-based investigators and independent scholars is not new. For example, education faculty members have often tested pedagogical theorems and program designs in kindergartens, schools, and community programs. Mechanical engineers routinely test innovations in factories and dockyards. Biochemists use hospitals and clinics to recruit participants for clinical trials. Anthropologists and sociologists have been conspicuous in their zeal to conduct research in “the field.” And community-engaged research is the sine qua non for the field of community psychology. Student involvement in “service learning” projects (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996) emanating from virtually every corner of a university campus is another well-established tradition, with proven effects on student retention (Thomas, 2002) and on developing students’ social and civic consciousness (Boyte & Kari, 2000) and their confidence and competence for work outside the shelter of the campus (Astin, 1999; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Indeed, basing research in communities has been so common across academic disciplines that drawing attention to it now seems almost redundant. For the past half century, universities have sought ways to remediate their reputation as bastions of intellectual elitism and become more integrated, both physically and through outreach activities, with the communities in which they are embedded.

Thus, while community-based research is not new, it has recently generated fervour to such an extent that many universities are adjusting their strategic plans and realigning budgetary commitments to motivate and enable faculty and students to engage in it, thereby bolstering the university’s central role and credibility as contributing to solving social problems and responding to social goals. In many institutions in Canada and the United States, in-service training and workshops aim to motivate faculty to consider ways to engage communities and students in their research programs and to expand course content to prepare students to undertake course assignments and thesis research in communities. At some universities in Canada, faculty evaluation policies are being adjusted to reward faculty who engage with communities and innovate strategies for getting students into communities for research purposes.

This chapter explores the significance of the new expectations and enthusiasms for community-engaged research with reference to the mission of the university, the goals of faculty, the trajectories of university students, and the goals and needs of communities. Many advocates of civic engagement in research envision a blurring of differences – including institutional, role, status, and authority differences – between communities and academic institutions, between professors and students, and between “expert” knowledge in the academy and local knowledge in the community (Barber, 1992; Shefner & Cobb, 2002; Strand, 2000). While efforts to elevate the status afforded to community-based

\(^2\) Referred to variously as faculty in this chapter.
knowledge and the knowledge students bring to a project are extremely important, the
author’s experience suggests that it is perilous to deny that differences exist between
communities and universities in the ways that knowledge and resources are organized,
managed, and distributed. Both opportunities and challenges are likely to be overlooked,
while students, faculty, and community members may be surprised at every turn. This
chapter foregrounds the need for faculty, students, and community members to
realistically appraise the distinctive locations of universities and communities in terms of
mission, scope, accountability, constituencies, resources, needs, and goals. The author
holds as an ideal the potential for concepts such as ethical space (Ermine, 1995; Poole,
1972) to help transcend community-university binaries in the process of knowledge
creation and to mobilize toward a holistic understanding of universities and communities
as integral contributors to knowledge and praxis in a learning society. Like the chapter’s
opening scenario illustrating the creation of new geographies for community-university
collaboration, Ermine elaborates the concept of ethical space as recognizing parties’
distinctive positionalities – perspectives, worldviews, knowledge repositories, and
epistemologies – as they come together to engage in mutual learning and collaborative
action in a space that no one owns or controls.

A brand new day?
Given that community engagement has actually been a feature of university activity for
over fifty years, the question arises as to whether there is anything new about how
university faculty and students understand their mission, the nature of community
engagement, and their own locations, and whether we might expect new yields from
research that engages communities. Certainly the ideological rhetoric used to elevate the
significance and nature of community-engaged research has changed. Where
communities once were viewed as data plantations (Ladson-Billings, 2000), with
knowledge to be harvested and consumed by universities, today protestations of sincerity,
the centrality of authentic relationship building, mutual respect, and benefits for
communities dominate many discussions in workshops and courses for students and
faculty on community-involving research. Approaches to community-engaged research
have evolved in recent years beyond asking community members to host and participate
in research to engaging communities as full partners at every stage. Though far from
being the beginning of a brand new day for communities interested in partnering with
universities (Boyer, 1990), recognition is dawning in some university quarters of
communities’ rights to control and regulate access to knowledge, methods of categorizing
and creating knowledge, and strategies for disseminating knowledge products.

A part or apart?
A foundational argument for community-university research partnerships, variously
defined, insists that, after all, the university is a part of the community and therefore it is
not a big step for community members, students, and faculty to work together to resolve
mutually concerning social problems and pursue mutually beneficial goals. This
viewpoint has the allure of dismantling the image of the university as a distinct and
bounded entity in a community-university binary. There is undeniable appeal in
disrupting the anachronistic vision of separate worlds in which emissaries from each must
reach across a great divide to engage with each other. This image is often reinforced in university media depictions and academic conference reports of unforeseen positive returns from innovative projects that compelled university faculty and students to venture “beyond the borders” of university campuses and communities to “breach the walls” of the universities.

However, universities and communities are distinct social entities, with very different mandates, missions, modus operandi, capacities, distributions of power in relation to different constituencies, and abilities to respond to emerging challenges and opportunities. In the author’s experience, attempts to bridge the chasm between universities and communities can be fraught with bureaucratic barriers, interpersonal hurdles often involving cross-cultural differences, and seemingly incommensurable needs, senses of time, ways of doing things, and superordinate agendas.

From this standpoint, a naïve view of the distinctive natures of universities and communities and how they operate can result in gross underinvestments in the time and consultation processes needed to consider and formally negotiate community-university research engagements, including the roles of students, faculty, and community members in a project. Rather than venturing into communities with idealism, good intentions, and a linear research plan, it is important to identify some of the structural difficulties and tensions in terms of the mission and functioning of the university and the community group or organization, with consideration of how these tensions will be reduced or managed. These preliminary clarifications and negotiations provide the foundation for productive working relationships, ethical conduct, procedural integrity, and responsiveness to changing circumstances that invariably occur over the course of a community-university research project.

“You’ll never believe what happened . . .”

Cherokee author Thomas King (2003) suggests a phrase that is “always a good way to start. . . . You’ll never believe what happened” (p. 5). Over the course of many community-university research partnerships that have very often been characterized by ambiguities, sudden changes in direction, team members, circumstances, expectations, and anticipated outputs, the author has found it helpful to rely on this phrase as a motto. Every partnership project yields surprises, sometimes from beginning to end, that create often monumental challenges to the project’s feasibility or plausibility. Just as often, a windfall of opportunities allows the partners to explore new questions and data sources. King’s motto alerts those who take up partnered research to be ready for the unexpected. Universities have elaborate self-regulating structures, and they tend to be slow to change, making them relatively stable partners. In contrast, a community’s dynamic and emergent nature means that its circumstances, needs, and goals, even its boundaries, composition, and leadership can significantly change in a short time period – short enough to drastically affect a research engagement. The implications of this inherent instability for those involved are serious, particularly for students, who are invariably engaged for a prescribed time period and with predetermined expectations for completing a piece of work.
The current fervour in certain university circles about engaging students and faculty with communities for research about “real world problems” tends to focus on establishing trusting relationships as the biggest hurdle and the many benefits that will accrue to students and community participants as the biggest boon of community-engaged research (Strand et al., 2003). While these are important considerations, they represent only a fraction of the many complexities, obstacles, and potential risks and benefits that frequently face university-based investigators and students who embark on community-university research partnerships. Some of these complexities and a strategy for coping with them – the negotiated Memorandum of Agreement – are explored in the following sections.

**University-based investigators on thin ice**

**Indeterminate processes.** In funded, university-based research, while the findings of research projects are indeterminate, the fact of conducting a research project with a predetermined beginning, middle, and end is taken as a given, especially by granting agencies. It is assumed that a project will be done more or less as specified in a proposal, without major shifts in topic, methodology, timelines, budgets, or anticipated products. In partnered research, however, many events, most often on the community side of a partnership, can derail a project, for better or worse. For example, a project in the author’s experience was delayed for over a year after three community members drowned in a boating accident. According to cultural protocol, the community could not carry on the research until the spring when the water was warm enough for the bodies to surface and be properly buried. Another project was shut down when the chief and council of a First Nation, who were signatories to a Memorandum of Agreement governing the research, were voted out in an election and the new leadership did not wish to support a project initiated by the outgoing leaders. Several other projects have shifted significantly in topic focus as more urgent or more apt questions have emerged, or new data sources have been uncovered, or a better methodology has been hammered out. University-based investigators can often accommodate these changes through ongoing communications with granting agencies and ethics committees. Students, however, are more vulnerable to having their own needs going unmet when a project they were counting on for a course or thesis is significantly delayed or altered.

**Indeterminate outcomes.** One of the most frequently expressed principles of community-engaged research is that some benefit must accrue to the community as a result of partnering in the research. But how far can university-based researchers go to promise benefit when research is inherently a journey of discovery with unknown outcomes? Research is not a contract that carries with it precommitments to particular outcomes. This in itself can be new to a community that may have experience contracting independent consultants to undertake projects going by the names of “research” or “program evaluation” and in which a specific outcome is expected. Common examples in the author’s field of study are requests for “research projects” to document a program’s success or to demonstrate the extent of an unmet service need. In one such case, when a community leader approached the author about a possible research partnership, he said he thought that community members would be favourably inclined to participate, “mainly because I think the project will make us look good! We’d like other communities to see what can be done and to learn from us some really good ways to go...
about it.” Understandably, many community partners anticipate that participating in a project will yield findings that benefit them, often in tangible ways, such as providing evidence of unmet needs or effectiveness practices that can be used to advocate for more financial resources from government or other sources. University investigators need to introduce the possibility that a community-university research project could yield findings that are counterintuitive or surprising to the community – and may even run counter to their objectives for partnering in the research. The discursive process that provides preliminary clarification about the nature, goals, and possible outcomes of a research project can help a prospective community partner to understand that a defining feature of serious research is that particular results cannot be guaranteed. All partners in these engagements need to be prepared for their own “you’ll never believe what happened” moments and potentially surprising outcomes. These understandings can be formalized in a co-signed Memorandum of Agreement.

In the end, the collaborating community may decide that the findings are not beneficial because they do not support their agenda. This possibility needs to be taken into account when a team aims to ensure that a community will benefit from participating in a project. A puzzling aspect of much of the discourse about community-based research (e.g., Strand et al., 2003), and earlier literature about participatory action research (e.g., Hall, 1992), is the presumed precommitment of campus-based collaborators to research that not only will address a community-identified need but will contribute to positive change toward social justice. Yet, without being biased from the start, how can researchers be certain that their findings will point in the direction of positive social change or support a social justice agenda? For example, in the author’s program of research, a study was undertaken because several First Nations were concerned that mainstream tools for screening children’s development were culturally biased and should probably not be used with Indigenous children, especially those living on reserves. Among other components of the research project, parents and Elders were interviewed about their perceptions of these screening tools. The results showed that the younger the parents, the more positively they perceived the mainstream screening tools and the more they disagreed with Elders who asserted that the tools should not be used. Overall, the study did not support the collaborating communities’ initial goal, which was to gather evidence to advocate for government investment in creating a new First Nations-specific screening tool.

Further, defining community engagement in research in terms of social change and justice seems unnecessarily limiting; community-university collaborations can also be useful for basic research that generates new knowledge without immediate tangible benefits. For the past decade, for example, the author has been active in research documenting English language and speech patterns of First Nation children to determine the extent and nature of First Nation English dialects, the developmental emergence and situational conditions for linguistic code switching, and the patterning of First Nation children’s storytelling (e.g., Ball & Bernhard, 2008). Many communities and individuals have participated in this research, with a clear understanding that it will not tangibly benefit them or First Nations in general for many years, when enough data have been obtained and the range and determinants of language differences are well understood. All of the collaborators in this research have agreed that if it takes thirty years to consolidate understandings, it will still have been a benefit. Much of the fervour about community-
university research collaborations seems to be fuelled by a motivation – easy to harness among youthful students – to contribute to immediate social change. Yet one of the most important messages for students to hear is that significant, sustainable social change often takes time and can be served by painstakingly careful, time-consuming research whereby evidence accrues and is replicated and refined over time and across locations.

**Indeterminate dissemination.** As with all research, community partners and individual participants have the right to exercise control over the information they have contributed, including the right to restrict access to it or to withdraw part or all of the information from the research findings. Memoranda of Agreement typically include agreements to protect not only individuals but community partners from negative impacts that might result from the project findings being made public. These measures may include placing a moratorium on the research material for an agreed period of time or keeping certain material confidential. For example, in the author’s experience with a study of youth risk behaviours conducted in partnership with public schools in Singapore (Ball & Moselle, 1999), the Singaporean government indicated that if the findings were not helpful to its overall mission with regards to youth development policies and services, they would not allow them to be published. In another community-university partnership project initiated at the request of the staff of a program that was hard won and heavily utilized by families, the program evaluation research failed to confirm that program participation resulted in improved outcomes compared to no program participation. In the Memorandum of Agreement, the community had specified that it had the right to suppress findings that could threaten the program’s funding base. If investigators or students want to ensure the right to disseminate findings – or any other areas of control – this needs to be specified during the partnership negotiation stage and ideally codified in a Memorandum of Agreement. However, agreement by faculty, students, or community members to unilateral decision making on any important matters in a collaborative research effort seems both unlikely and unwise, and raises concerns about ethics. Nevertheless, the question must be asked about where this kind of ambiguity leaves a university-based investigator who is committed to advancing knowledge in a given field or a student whose course assignment, thesis, or research scholarship may rest on being able to report research findings.

**Students on thin ice**

The momentous (and less momentous) shifts that can occur in a community-university research project can provoke a great deal of anxiety for students on the project team. While students may learn a great deal from being participant observers of the process of iterative change in a community-engaged project, they may also feel helpless as they watch their course assignment or thesis research going ineluctably off course or becoming unfeasible, especially within their time, financial, and other practical constraints. Large shifts in a project call for a reengagement with one or more research ethics review committees (e.g., with the university, a public institution, civic organization, or Indigenous community). Students can be effectively timed out of a project because reviews of research change plans can be lengthy processes. Students and their supervisors need to be able to provide an unvarnished characterization of how student engagement in a prospective project fits into the student’s course of studies,
assignment deadlines and grading criteria, funding for student engagement with the community, and other realities.

The foregoing discussion implies that community-university partnered research is best suited to investigators who can tolerate a high degree of ambiguity and are willing to shift gears in a research project to accommodate emerging constraints and opportunities. This flexibility is a virtue for seasoned researchers who may be able to keep their eye on epistemological and methodological integrity and the potential validity and reliability of findings. However, when students are involved, what impact do such demonstrations of flexibility have on their learning, as novice researchers? It is often a challenge for students to see the links between particular epistemological positions, ontological viewpoints, and methodological approaches so that their theoretical frameworks and research designs are coherent and cohesive. When students are immersed in a project that necessarily shifts to accommodate often inchoate preferences or emerging needs or constraints within a community, the quality of their learning experience can be compromised. While it is good for students to understand the need to be nimble, is it optimal for a student’s inaugural foray into research to involve the kinds of emergent, often catch-as-catch-can and nick-of-time accommodations that can perplex and tax even more experienced researchers?

Community-based collaborators on thin ice

A specific set of challenges frequently arises for community-based partners in a research project. Most universities are bureaucratic institutions that are relatively inhospitable to community members with no formal (e.g., salaried, tuition-paying, or revenue-generating) affiliation with the institution, for example, in terms of providing services, sharing facilities, opening access to library resources, or creating easy pathways for the flow of funds to community-based team members. Significant involvement by community partners in a research project occasions a number of practical negotiations involving finances, among other things. Financial transactions often signify trust and recognition of contributions. Yet in the bureaucracy of a postsecondary institution, the policies, procedures, and timing that govern matters such as travel advances, expense claim reimbursements, payroll time sheets, cheque disbursements, and food purchases can seem labyrinthine and protracted, even to the most conditioned employees. Procedural ambiguities and the slow pace of resolving some practical matters – described by a community collaborator in one project as “straddling two worlds that are often in collision” – can be almost overwhelming. In fact, in one of the author’s research collaborations, these challenges created so much ill feeling that they led to the resignation of two community-based research collaborators, who were subsequently replaced by individuals with previous employment experience in postsecondary institutions.

As mentioned, the author’s program of research involves partnerships with Indigenous communities and organizations. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to address the many challenging situations that invariably arise in cross-cultural research, but one point must be mentioned here: The long histories of catastrophic interventions by colonial governments that devastated Indigenous lives and of researchers exploiting knowledge in Indigenous communities and using community members as unpaid, uncredited knowledge providers have left many Indigenous community partners and individual team
members and participants to be understandably skeptical about trusting university-based investigators and students.

With any community-university research partnership, university-based investigators and students need to devote time to establishing some basis for community partners to trust them enough to collaborate in research project. They must be prepared to observe cultural protocols and to define who they are, the scope and nature of their authority over knowledge sources and methodologies, and their purposes, plans, and expectations in relation to the project.

Some of the challenges of partnered research may not be apparent to prospective community partners because of their lack of experience in university-partnered research or with university and research funding bureaucracies. Yet, just as a university researcher would expect to be shown around a prospective partner community or given an orientation to the way a partnering community-based institution operates, one of the roles of university investigators is to provide prospective partners with a look at the university’s inside workings. Community partners need to understand what the university can and cannot (or will and will not) do and how the bureaucracy works, with regards, for example, to research ethics review, the flow of funds and reimbursement procedures, library and facility resources, and so on.

These tensions need to be understood within the context of community partners casting their lot with a mainstream institution, in some cases for the first time. In the author’s experience, addressing these challenges requires (a) recognition of historical and ongoing unilateralism between public institutions and community groups that can shape how expectations, performance criteria, and mundane procedural matters can be interpreted by community members; (b) frank discussion between community and university partners as issues arise; (c) good-faith efforts to learn about one another’s work ecologies and to measure responses based on these understandings; and (d) humour. Across all critical and quotidian events, a Memorandum of Agreement can be an invaluable tool.

The Memorandum of Agreement: Efforts to control indeterminacy

Increasingly, prospective partners for a research engagement are negotiating agreements between the leading members of the university- and community-based teams (see, for example, Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003). These agreements typically specify most of the activities to be undertaken, including (a) the purpose and plans for an investigation; (b) the conduct of the research; (c) accountability of all members of an investigative team; (d) the nature of data to be obtained from specific sources; (e) the nature of data and data sources that must specifically be excluded; (f) jurisdiction over data regarding ownership, possession, storage, and access; and (g) primary decision making over research outputs, including dissemination of the knowledge yielded by the study.

In the author’s experience, formally written and co-signed Memoranda of Agreement have been invaluable for establishing understandings and embodying key principles for the conduct of research involving Indigenous community partners (Ball & Janyst, 2008). Community partners and university-based team members often refer to the Memorandum of Agreement to recall or reinforce agreements. The Memorandum is also a record that can be used to introduce new team members to the principles and procedures agreed upon.
with each community partner. This is especially helpful for students who may cycle through a project at various points. Memoranda of Agreement are especially critical when projects are embedded within larger collaborative or networked investigations that may involve large numbers of faculty and students from various institutions and community members who have no relationships with one another, discussed subsequently.

While significant changes are possible in any research project, this probability is greatly magnified in community-university partnered research. Sometimes changes can improve a project, while at other times they can result in a project being aborted or significantly compromised (e.g., overdue, overbudget, underperforming). As surprises happen (e.g., conditions change, opportunities or needs emerge) over the course of a project, the Memorandum of Agreement can be a critical document for partners to review together, to revisit where the project started and who committed to what, and to negotiate changes relating to the research plan or the people involved. As an administrator in one partner community stated, “our MoA was a mast to cling to in stormy weather.”

Yet, even with a fully developed Memorandum of Agreement, community-university research partnerships are not (typically) contracts, and all parties have the right to withdraw from the project or to change the nature or extent of their commitments at any time. The author’s most daunting experience with this potentiality occurred in a project on Indigenous young children’s development involving five rural community partners that had signed Memoranda of Agreement after a full year of discussion, negotiation, and communitywide information-sharing events. The Indigenous project coordinator employed as part of the university-based research team encountered innumerable challenges. As someone familiar only with working in Indigenous community organizations, it was understandable that the coordinator would be mystified and frustrated by various university policies surrounding such practical arrangements as travel advances and reimbursements, disbursement of funds for honoraria for Elders, and the seeming authority of the research ethics committee over research processes about which the communities had already expressed their preferences. Adding to these tensions, the project was one component of a networked study that involved nine other components. The coordinator was often the only Indigenous person in meetings populated by investigators and a changing cast of graduate students who were unfamiliar yet entitled to peer through the windows, as it were, of the vehicle that was carrying the community-university research team conducting the Indigenous child development project component of the larger study.3 When tensions became too great, the coordinator resigned precipitately and asked the community partners to reconsider their collaboration. Without prompting, each partner reviewed the Memorandum of Agreement they had co-signed with the author. One community chose to discontinue their partnership, while the other four elected to continue, stating that their review of the Memorandum reassured them that, despite the problems experienced by the coordinator, the project was proceeding as had been agreed upon and there was no need to rethink their commitment.

3 The problems that can arise with networked or multi-component community-university collaborations that rely heavily on building relationships of trust are addressed elsewhere (Ball & Janyst, 2008).
Optimizing the benefits of community-university research partnerships

Researchers who work successfully with communities tend to have an open-ended, flexible program of research that can shift in focus to accommodate communities’ requests and emerging needs and take advantage of emerging opportunities to pursue a question through knowledge sources and methods that reside in communities. The greatest challenge within these negotiated partnerships is remaining open to emergent opportunities, needs, and concerns while establishing a structure sufficiently clear and stable that community partners and research participants know what they are agreeing to and do not feel blindsided by unexpected objectives or demands. Strong relationships, nurtured from a project’s inception, are the backbone for ongoing negotiation of ethical, productive practice in partnership research. Open communication about project details and points that remain ambiguous or subject to change helps to establish trust between the university- and community-based team members. Open communication also generates insights on both sides of the partnerships about what the partners need, want, and can bring to the work.

While community-university partnerships are not a panacea for research, they hold the potential to benefit partners and the learning society in a number of ways, as explored in the following sections.

Redistribution of power

One of the rationales often given for community-university partnership research is that it “levels the playing field” and redistributes power over the legitimation of truth claims and access to knowledge-mediated resources. As pressure has mounted for university-based investigators to demonstrate the social relevance of their research, the pendulum has swung toward a focus on communities’ knowledge needs and the primacy of deploying university-based expertise to assist communities with resolving social problems and pursuing social goals. A growing repository of case studies illustrates the benefits that have accrued to communities as a result of university engagements (e.g., Bannister, 2005; Institute for Community Research, 2007). Many of these projects answer questions posed by communities using data sources – and sometimes ways of knowing – that reside in communities. While these instances are to be celebrated, it is important not to overlook universities’ distinctive role to refine methodologies for generating knowledge and communities’ distinctive role to respond to their constituents’ immediate needs. Knowledge generation and problem solving characterize the work of both universities and communities, but resources to undertake these tasks are distributed unevenly, a point that is usefully addressed by Flicker (2008). University faculty and many students have expertise in research design and data collection and analysis that allows them to make unique contributions to the quality of research outcomes. In a case study described by Williams, Labonte, Randall, and Muhajarine (2005), “maintaining ‘buy-in’ from diverse constituencies, while drawing limits around the research terrain itself, was partly managed by gradual acceptance by community partners that university researchers needed somewhat more authority over research design and methodology” (p. 295).

Both faculty and students need to acknowledge that as members of mainstream social institutions – typically with funding and university positions – they have certain kinds of
power. The potential to oppress and exploit community partners must be a matter of concern, and deliberate efforts should be made to level the playing field in negotiating research relationships.

**Institutional change**

Considerable enthusiasm in the literature on community-engaged research focuses on the contributions that faculty and student involvement in community-university research can make to advancing community agendas for social change, as if the academy is not also susceptible to and in need of reform. Yet when students and faculty engage as partners with communities, the possibility exists to stimulate critical engagement within the institution about principles, policies, and procedures that create barriers for university-based partners to be responsive and productive with community-based partners. Examples of some of the spheres where the author has found it necessary to become active include policies and procedures for research ethics review; the conditions governing access to university resources, such as meeting rooms, online and physical libraries, and equipment; and procedures for disbursement of funds. As well, engagement with research funding bodies is critically needed to stimulate changes that enable more community involvement during proposal development, more funding flowing directly to partner communities to enable their collaboration on an equal financial footing, more time for negotiating Memoranda of Agreement during a project’s inaugural year, and so on (see Williams, Labonte, Randall, & Muhajarine, 2005, for a good discussion of issues pertaining to funders). The processes of mutual engagement and multilateral learning that often occur through community-university research have the potential to shift how the university sees itself and its primary mission as an institution embedded within the broad context of society.

**Mutual learning in ethical space**

Capacity building is a top priority for Indigenous people across Canada: Indigenous researchers are urgently needed to take the lead on a range of projects in all fields that will contribute to the development of Indigenous people. Partnership in research can be an opportunity to learn new skills, explore topics of interest, and network with other individuals and organizations. This learning is not unidirectional, however. Research that is premised on principles of social justice involves commitments to strengthening capacity on both sides of a partnership. This principle exemplifies the concept of ethical space: a space between two knowledge systems, where engagement involves openness and mutual learning (Poole, 1972). As expressed by Ermine (2006), “it’s a gift to walk in two worlds, but also a responsibility. Ethical space does not exist unless you look at it, affirm it” (para. 8). Through partnerships, there is much that students, faculty, and community partners can learn about themselves and about ways of knowing, living, and communicating, in addition to the primary products of a research project: generating and testing the application of knowledge. This learning can expand ideas about research, about the topic under study, and about the roles of communities and universities in a knowledge society.
Engagement in applied and basic research

As noted above, defining community engagement in research in terms of social change and justice is unnecessarily limiting. Community-university partnerships can be useful not only in research oriented primarily towards social action or social change, as in participatory action research (Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall, & Jackson, 1993), but also in programs of basic and applied research (Flicker et al., 2010). For example, in the author’s research on multilingual acquisition in childhood, three community partners worked tirelessly with the author on a series of case studies to identify instances of bilingual code-mixing to examine their grammatical properties. It would be a long way from this basic research to any practical recommendations regarding language socialization practices or early learning programs. Yet, both the community and university partners were keen to explore this aspect of some Indigenous children’s early language experience, and neither could have undertaken this research effectively without the other.

Although the literature is dominated by examples of community-involving research that draws upon qualitative data sources (Hall, 1992; Leadbeater, 2006; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008), community-university engagement, including projects with Indigenous partners, does not prescribe any particular methodology. In the author’s research with Indigenous communities on the topic of fathers’ involvement, the community-based collaborators were emphatic about their preference for a survey tool with largely closed-ended questions rather than a storytelling or narrative approach (Ball & George, 2007). The collaborators explained that they wanted to impose some limits on the scope and depths of fathers’ self-disclosures during this first study in Canada to examine Indigenous fatherhood. They anticipated that many fathers had experienced trauma or secondary trauma associated with Indian Residential Schools, and the community members who were collecting the data might be unprepared to deal with the psychological impact for fathers from telling their whole story.

Following this study, the community partners wanted to expand the research nationally, and they collaborated with the author on a proposal to the Social Services and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) for a study using an original, population-based survey tool that would be administered electronically, by phone, and by mail. The proposal received feedback that the grant request was denied because it did not use a narrative or storytelling approach, which the Council deemed more appropriate for an Indigenous topic focus. The community-university team was also informed that the proposed research was not community-based because it did not involve relationship building with one community. This response reflects an unnecessarily constricting vision of the potential scope and focus of community engagement with university faculty and students to do research that addresses a community-identified social issue.

Overcoming binaries of local and expert knowledge

Just as scholars have begun to write about new geographies for Indigenous-academic engagements (Tipa, Panelli, & Moeraki Stream Team, 2009), the author’s journey with her community partners to the mutually unfamiliar territory of the Nipissing Game Reserve allowed us to engage in a space that none of us owned, where hierarchies of authority and status and contested notions of who knows what were blurred. Within this
space, we were able to more easily recognize that we possessed expertise that transcended boundaries of expert and local. The community partners, for example, possessed a lot of (academic) knowledge about linguistic features of Indigenous and English languages. The author, for example, had (applied) knowledge of a school-based initiative called “English as a Second Dialect.” I knew how to make bannock over a fire (Indigenous knowledge); they possessed (Western technical) knowledge about skidoos and augers. This easing of knowledge boundaries provided the conditions for creative, constructive discourse and project planning.

Conclusions

Relationships don’t always end when a project concludes. The author is still involved in some way with nearly every community that has been a partner in a research project. Many projects have sparked other projects within the same community or in ones nearby. Dissemination and mobilization of findings from research have been given more wheels because community- and university-based collaborators, including students, have different forms and avenues for communicating findings, and they respond to requests from different audiences and end-users.

In the expanding terrain of community-university engagement, risks are real and must therefore be carefully assessed. Before university-based and community partners venture onto the ice, they must be reasonably certain it is strong enough to withstand having holes drilled in it without risking lives. A negotiated, carefully crafted Memorandum of Agreement provides partners with a measure of insurance, but this insurance must be coupled with a brutally realistic appraisal of the short- and long-term risks and benefits to the community, the students involved, the university, and society as a whole. Within clearly structured and mutually agreed upon project parameters, however, community-university research engagements hold significant potential for communities and universities to generate and mobilize knowledge in partnership, and for students to develop insight and skill in deploying research in meaningful ways.

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