



# Communication Design Quarterly

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Communication Design Quarterly

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## Communication Design Quarterly

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# Communication Design Quarterly

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# Introduction To the Second Issue: A Conversation About Community-Engaged Research

Timothy R. Amidon, Colorado State University  
Ann Blakeslee, Eastern Michigan University  
Erin Brock Carlson, West Virginia University  
Lehua Ledbetter, University of Rhode Island  
Kristen R. Moore, University of Buffalo  
Emma Rose, University of Washington Tacoma  
Michele Simmons, Miami University

## ABSTRACT

This introductory dialogue invites readers to think with a range of scholars about the role of community engaged researchers in the field. It draws together a range of perspectives as way of honoring CER through both methodology and genre. The authors provide insight into their own experiences and draw attention to elements of CER that rarely get discussed and published.

## CCS Concepts

Social and Professional Topics

## Keywords

Community-engaged research, institutional critique, critical methodology, just use of imagination

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## INTRODUCTION

At the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW) 2022, we (Tim and Michele) were invited (by Kristen, Donnie J. Sackey, and Jennifer Sano-Franchini) to facilitate a featured workshop on Community Engaged Research (CER). In order to offer participants the broadest range of perspectives on CER, we invited a number of other CERs to facilitate breakout rooms, folks who could share their experiences and expertise. In lieu of a more traditional introduction to the special issue, we offer instead, a dialogic approach among some of those facilitators to understanding CER. This dialogue, written collaboratively, illustrates the challenges and joys of community-engaged research and unearths some of the knowledge that experiences has brought with it.

One core value of these special issues was an anti-racist, intersectional feminist commitment to exploring CER through non-traditional genres, experiential, and lived knowledges. Black Feminists like Patricia Hill Collins remind us that knowledge is made in dialogue, through lived experiences (Hill Collins 2008; Shelton 2020). In keeping with this commitment, we have treated this conversation as a coalitional endeavor. We invited a range of scholars to pen responses to questions about CER, to provide feedback, and to share their thoughts about the messy work of CER. Most contributors drafted individually, writing responses to one another and then those responses were integrated throughout. Then, we shared the draft with other leaders involved in CER and ATTW, requesting their feedback and hoping to integrate their perspectives as well as those of the authors included in this two-volume special issue.

We began with a prompt and three questions, which were developed by Emma, Erin, and Kristen:

1. Share one or two words that you think reflect the “real” or sometimes invisible work of community engaged research and practice. Tell us a story about your work that illustrates this term or phrase.
2. What advice would you give to your former self when you were started? What lessons have you learned the hard way?

How can or should we be “trained” to do community-engaged methodologies and methods?

3. How do you pursue justice, equity, and inclusion in your CER? What frameworks, texts, people, or practices enable and inform your work—feel free to draw on the materials you created for the ATTW workshop?
4. Do you have a specific call to action that you hope that practitioners, designers, and scholars in Communication Design (CD), User Experience (UX), Technical and Professional Communication (TPC) will take up or respond to as they work for, with, and in communities? If so, please share.

The following conversation is designed with the text developed from initial answers, feedback, and conversations.

LEHUA: To me, time is a big part of the real work of community engaged research. Time to work with a community, build organic relationships, invest in the wellbeing of the community—these are all central to doing the work. The other word that I believe is central to community engaged research is trust, which goes hand-in-hand with time. Building trust can only happen with time, and the process of building trust can’t be rushed (see Bernardo & Monberg, 2019).

Over the last four years, I have been working to build relationships with the local farm and food community in Rhode Island. Specifically, I have worked for a small, local organic farm, taking a shift of a few hours every week to plant seeds, harvest vegetables, prepare soil for planting, and prepare the harvested vegetables for CSA (community-supported agriculture). We harvested in the heat of summer and on frosty fall mornings, sweating profusely or blowing on our numb hands to stay warm, and the nature of our work shifted with the seasons. We told stories while harvesting cabbages and kale. Strong relationships with the members of the farm and community were the most important outcome of this work. Our relationships are built on trust and an understanding that we are all invested in serving the community and ensuring the success of the farm, especially when consumers have the option of supporting commercial agriculture. Research questions have emerged over the years, and in partnership with a community member who is also invested in local farming, I have developed a project, but the project is secondary to the wellbeing and success of the farm and food communities.

If I were going to give my former self advice, back in 2018 when I first started my work on the farm, I would have said: when community relationship-building comes first, keep in mind that you will not always have a “successful” research project in the end.

EMMA: I wholeheartedly agree with this statement and have found the same thing.

LEHUA: It might be a hard truth to swallow. Your project may span years, and you may have invested countless hours into the community, and you may still not have answers to your questions. Your papers may not be accepted at conferences or in journals. Or maybe it will take years for you to realize what your real questions actually are.

EMMA: Yes!

ANN: These relationships and the trust that strengthens them cannot be cultivated without that. And this, as stated, means that our research questions and projects might well become, or even should become, secondary to the wellbeing and success of our

partners and their missions. Many of us are accustomed to having far more control of our research, and in these contexts there really is very little over which we do or should have control. We have to be open to that and to the discomfort and dissonance it can cause. And arguably, control is something that our community partners and we should share.

KRISTEN: This is particularly important as we move into communities with a focus toward building with communities, moving away from the notion that our research projects should be pre-formed and stable.

ANN: And given the pressures some of us face in our academic contexts, especially to produce and publish, this can be unnerving and even a showstopper. I admit that it has been much easier for me to engage in this work as a later-career and established professional—and as someone who is not at a research-intensive institution.

LEHUA: But you will have hopefully succeeded in building real relationships that will benefit the community first and foremost. Training for community-engaged methodologies should take this into account; relationship building should come before outcomes, and you may not achieve your desired outcome. Relationships come before data.

ANN: The benefits of this work are first and foremost to the community, as they should be. And being open to the organic, evolving, and dynamic nature of this work—and committed to the relationships and trust that are essential to it—are really what define and lead to success. And building relationships and trust are processes that take time and require diligence and patience.

ERIN: I’m really struck by the idea of relationships when it comes to engagement work: “Relationships come before data” (Lehua); “Our research questions and projects might well become, or even should become, secondary to the wellbeing and success of our partners and their missions” (Ann); “At the end of the day, all of the work comes down to relationships, so prioritize and spend time on cultivating those relationships” (Emma). Anyone who has done this sort of work knows these things to be true, but to experience them written out in an academic forum is invaluable. If we take on engaged projects as part of our jobs, we have to frame them in ways that our institutions understand that work, meaning that we have to usually 1) classify it in a neat little box as research, teaching, or service, and 2) provide evidence of that work, oftentimes through deliverables like articles or class projects.

But that work is way more complicated than either of those options entail.

ANN: We remain so product- and deliverable-focused in higher education, and this work is so much about process and, again, about the relationships—and about outcomes that often are/cannot (be) expressed as neat and tidy “products.”

ERIN: And while we have lots of different models, heuristics, and concepts for helping us think through the complexities of engagement work (reciprocity, partnership, allyship, and many more), each of those models have limitations. (That’s the nature of models, I suppose.) Many of those limitations come from the fact that engaged work is situated work—there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to building relationships with communities around us, nor should there be.

ANN: I feel like this is something I bump up against all of the time

in both thinking about and trying to give expression to the work we're doing. If someone has an antidote for this, I would love to know about it!

MICHELE: These points are so important as we consider our roles as mentors for graduate students wanting to add capacity to their communities while also navigating graduate school, and for those who chose academic positions, institutional expectations. As our training for community-engaged methodologies emphasize relationships before data and acknowledge the liminal positionality of community-engaged researchers, what set of strategies or practices might we offer for identifying the models, heuristics, and concepts that help them reflexively consider and engage in each complex situation? So much of the ability to choose which heuristics align with the current situation, how to adapt, how to be nimble, comes with time. Beyond acknowledging these complexities and showcasing a range of heuristics and examples of community-engaged work, how might we better prepare students for this work?

LEHUA: Seasonality is another important aspect of community-based research to consider. Research methods don't always account for the seasons of activity that can shape communities. For example, when I worked on the farm, I learned about the seasonal nature of farm work, and that the most labor-intensive part of the season happens from June-November. During the active growing season, farmers may not have time to sit down and talk, answer research questions, or do guest appearances for classes. In fact, when I asked the farmer for whom I worked about coming to talk to my class, she replied by telling me that she could not afford to lose those hours to the urgent work that needed to be done on the farm. Planting and harvesting cycles are often on tight timelines; vegetables ripen and need to be picked before they spoil; a storm or a windy day could mean hastening a harvest before weather potentially damages crops. As academics, our work can also be cyclical, but it may not coincide with the farmer's rest period, when winter arrives and the crops die off.

EMMA: Love this and it so true! Another type of season but I found the same thing working with our local county on voting information. It's hard to get access to voting professionals in the month of November but that is the most fruitful time to support and understand voters' needs. There is varied seasonality of the different actors and stakeholders involved in community-engaged work.

Training for ethical academic research methods should take this into consideration as well: how can our research fit into a community's seasonality, and not the other way around? What cycles, if any, shape the community's periods of rest or activity? What methods best account for this in an ethical and reflexive way?

ANN: These lessons about the centrality of relationships and the importance of time—and patience—in community engaged work are perhaps among the most important. adrienne maree brown (see brown, 2017) talks a great deal in her work on emergent strategy about relationships (cultivating right relations) and trust. Those don't develop quickly, and in this work the time it takes to grow both of these can seem significant, especially for those of us whose lives and calendars are defined by the discrete increments of semesters and academic years. Those aren't the same increments that define the lives of our community partners.

TIM: I don't know that I've ever consciously recognized the notion

of seasonality in CER before, but your descriptions here, Lehua, Emma, and Ann, resonate with my past experiences partnering with fire service agencies on projects. I love that you've forwarded this concept of seasonality, as it seems so incredibly valuable for us as community-engaged researchers and folx vested with the responsibility of leading the next generation of researchers to engage with communities in ways that are more aware and purposeful in terms of understanding the ways engagement can wax and wane between and across academic and community organizations. Recently, I've been working on a wildfire project with a cohort of folx who represent a number of municipal, state, community, and federal organizations and seasonality has been very significant, as we've had to adjust and adapt event schedules because some members of the cohort haven't been able to attend or engage because their agencies or organizations began ramping up to prepare for wildland fire season in March. So, there's this very real way that I recognize ecological seasons directly influencing how and what unfolds within our collaboratory right now. However, now that I'm thinking of this also from an institutional lens, I can also recognize moments throughout the ongoing relationship with community partners when their organizations have been going through a kind of institutional flux that really mirrors seasonal change. For example, a couple of years ago, when a number of leaders left one of the organizations I had been working with there was a moment when other folx there were like, we'd like to keep working, but we need to focus on building relationships with the new leaders entering our organization before we can better understand what it might mean for partnerships between us and you. So, I really value the very material connections I'm noticing between seasonality and farming here in your work, Lehua—in terms of tilling the soil, patience, seeding, watering, investing, weeding—that really connect (metaphorically of course) to the kinds of relationship maintenance activities that come with partnering with community organizations over the period of years and/or decades.

KRISTEN: As I think about the work of community-engaged researchers, I think about all of the lessons that live in experience—not in the traditionally published works that we read. I've been thankful for the transparency of scholars like Ann Shivers-McNair and Laura Gonzales, whose work pushes us to think about actual strategies we need to implement. In “An Intersectional Technofeminist Framework for Community-Driven Technology Innovation,” they (along with their coauthor Tetyana Zhyvotovska) remind us, “Collaborative community building in technology design is relational and responsive. By emphasizing that collaborative community-building in technology design is relational, we mean not only that relationships are involved, but also that relationships are of utmost importance. In the case of researcher—participant interactions, the relationship must be centered on mutuality” (Shivers-McNair et al., 2019, p. 44). These lessons are so important for us as we move forward, as is the reflective work needed to discuss these lessons. That, in part, is why we asked y'all to discuss lessons you've learned and advice you might give to yourself.

ANN: One piece of advice I would give to my former self when starting this work is to always be open to new possibilities and opportunities. When we started YpsiWrites, our goals were modest—to create a community writing center that extended the work we were doing in other realms into the community. The intent was to create something of value and to amplify voices of community members by providing opportunities for support and feedback, which quickly expanded into resources, workshops, and

community partnerships. I would say we were always open to the possibilities, but we could have been more intentional. Connected to this, I have been struck by how brown talks about strategic intentions vs. strategic planning. Rilke's poem, "Try to Love the Questions Themselves" also comes to mind here, with the idea that in this work the answers do not always come quickly and are not always obvious (Rilke 2013). That ability to live with the questions, the uncertainties, and the possibilities—and to be patient—are what can yield the best outcomes. I don't know that we ever know what's coming next, as deliberate as we might try to be. So much has come of our work that we never anticipated. Remaining receptive to that, and letting it all—including the pandemic—unfold and fall into place, have been significant for us. We have embraced the uncertain, and the result has been what one of our team members now refers to as a "beautiful mess."

A related piece of advice I would give myself is to be nimble. Change in the academic world is often slow and even plodding. I would like to say it's also more deliberate, but that's certainly not always the case. With community work, change can occur more quickly, and/or unexpectedly, and those of us engaged in it need to be nimble enough to pivot, adjust, respond, and embrace it. Again, what happened with the pandemic provides a perfect example of this. brown talks in *Emergent Strategy* about being adaptable, which is different from having or being forced to adapt. It is more of a condition or disposition, and one that really is essential in doing this work.

MICHELE: This distinction—being adaptable as a disposition, rather than adapting when necessary is an important lesson and practice. Talking more about how disposition, along with positionality, affect CER work, and what an adaptable disposition might entail, could be a useful conversation in CER.

KRISTEN: I think it's so important to draw attention to the differences between timing as it occurs in the academy—you know, where most of us are trained to develop research—and communities. I have found brown really useful for undoing some of our assumptions about this as well, but I've also found her work grounding, a prompt to think about being present while research emerges within the context.

TIM: I'm wondering if this kind of thinking helps us to distinguish between research stance and research positionality. To me, the distinction is that positionality is more about the resonance of individuals in communities, wherein identity, race, gender, class, experiences, opportunities, orientations, and histories converge to kind of mark what and how it means to interact within that networked location from various perspectives. Conversely, research stance, as Grabill (2012) articulated, is more about the possibility within a situated network, wherein a researcher can make different types of methodological decisions that affect the quality of interactivity (e.g., building in structures that ensure that relationships are prioritized over data; cultivating relationships where community partners participate in and when possible drive the formation and selection of work done through engagement and in some ways that means de-prioritizing research). So, I'd argue that like positionally, stance can be very dynamic, too. But/and, how we enact methodology within the academy and even in TPC have been traditionally quite staid, and I think that's the challenge for community-engaged researchers and scholars is that our conceptions of methodology aren't and haven't been flexible enough at disciplinary levels to really accommodate and support

CER in ways that would allow it to flourish.

MICHELE: I appreciate the distinctions between stance and positionality here. For me, stance feels like my long-term ethical and reciprocal commitments to partners and communities, to participatory and intersectional methodologies, and to think about whom my research serves—intentions I bring to all research. Positionality feels more liminal, informed by my relationship to the particular community, my expertise (or not) within the community and the issue being addressed, and as Ann and Kristen note, the research questions that emerge within the context.

ANN: As far as lessons we've learned the hard way, the work we've set out to do with YpsiWrites and our community literacy networks has not always gone smoothly and seamlessly. Although in this work, we have always embraced hope, optimism, and possibility. Words like "can't," "never," "not possible" have not been in our vocabulary for this. But there also have been some challenges. For example, what initially seemed like good collaborations and partnerships have not always turned out the way we anticipated. Because this work depends so much on relationships, it also is subject to the same challenges of relationships. They don't always work out. In our case this happened when one of our community partners didn't like our final deliverables—a scavenger hunt they asked us to develop—and ended up completely discarding ours and creating their own, without ever communicating their concerns. It also happened when one of our collaborators represented their own interests at the expense of our collaborative interests. This reminds me of brown talking about right relationships and murmuration (2017, p. 71). In both of the above cases, the intentions and missions of the organizations seemed misaligned, which has created both misunderstandings and missed opportunities—and disrupted our synchronicity.

In this work, it's imperative to listen and to always have an open disposition—and not think or believe that, because of our professional or disciplinary expertise, we necessarily know what's right or how best to do something. This is where that humility piece comes back in. As one of our staff said,

I came in thinking I thought I knew what I could offer, what the intentions were, and what the community 'needed.' Again and again, I have been blown away by how much I do not know or what I (continuously) have yet to learn. Not only has that allowed me to learn and grow, but it has forced me to become more flexible both in the way I engage in this work and as a human. I'm still learning to check my own ego and privilege (which I have a feeling will continue to be a lifelong process), but that reminder has pushed me to consider new opportunities, both individually and for YpsiWrites.

This might be an apt response to how we ought to be "trained" for this type of work. Our standard methodological training that we provide in and through our programs can help significantly, but it needs to be accompanied by continual reading and reflection that take us beyond our academic understandings and approaches to a broadened perspective that incorporates empathy, compassion, and a true understanding of the lived experiences of those we encounter and with whom we engage and collaborate in this work.

TIM: Such an important point here. The learning is never done, and it's so great that you mention humility here, as Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyaaq, Chris A. Lindgren, and Corina Qaaqraq Kramer's offer incredibly valuable insights into the importance of "cultural humility" in CER within their article in this special issue.



EMMA: Thinking back to when I first started working on community-based research projects, there are three things I would tell myself. First, the communities and organizations we work with already exist and are thriving. We are always moving into spaces with long histories that we may not be aware of or part of. I have learned this lesson through my collaborations with Alison Cardinal (see Cardinal et al., 2021) and Laura Gonzales (see Gonzales, 2018, 2022) on language justice and also by working with Soyeon Lee and Heather Noel Turner on community engaged user experience in our pedagogies.

LEHUA: Thank you for this important reminder.

TIM: YES! This is such a great reminder: Our own limited understanding of the histories at play for individuals and groups within organizations and communities is so critical to developing a methodological approach that is ethically and culturally harmonious with communities. This is a lesson I keep continuing to learn, and it's so true that even when I've devoted a significant amount of time and labor in coalition with individuals and groups, it's important for me to continue to actively dwell with humility in order to reflect on what I still do not and cannot truly know.

EMMA: The second thing I've learned is that we find ourselves in spaces and places where people have been hurt or harmed by academic researchers or government organizations. We, as academics, are not the factor constituting community-engaged work because communities are already there doing the work. So the advice for my former self would be to show up ready to do the work that communities are already doing. Ask "how can I help, what do you need?" (Rose et al., 2017) or "how can we help build capacity?" (Dush, 2014). Second, know that any sort of legible output or outcomes from a collaboration has to be reciprocal and what academic institutions care about is very different from what individuals, community members, and community organizations care about. Further, the community outcomes must always come first. This is easy to say post tenure. I have engaged in many projects that yielded nothing that appears to be legible to my academic institution, and that has to be OK. Engaging in the work for the sake of the work and the support of the organization must come first. I enjoy writing and publishing with community partners, but that is sometimes not their focus or interest. Third, the last piece of advice I have is that when you hang out in and with people in community, good things happen. So many of the connections I have made have been serendipitous, a meeting over coffee, an introduction from a colleague, a social event, someone finding me on Google. It takes both patience and effort and that once connections start, they beget other connections. At the end of the day, all of the work comes down to relationships, so prioritize and spend time on cultivating those relationships.

ANN: This is so well said! That hanging out piece is vital. We're all part of the communities with which we're engaging, and hanging out shows that. And it also does beget more connections.

TIM: Do you have a call-to-action? Or a suggestion for moving forward?

EMMA: I don't have a call to action, per se. I think the values I would recommend striving for are humility, curiosity, and a coalition spirit. I mention humility because the gift of working in UX is that we rarely fully understand others' needs without engaging them meaningfully in the process and people never stop surprising us. Being in UX is a constant reminder that your

knowledge is always partial. However, being in UX also reminds us that the work is both iterative and never done. We are not aiming for perfection, but rather a deeper understanding and trying and trying again. Next curiosity, this goes hand in hand with humility because our own partial knowledge can sometimes shield us from the things we do not know. Therefore, asking why and how, and engaging in meaningful listening is key to doing work in this area. And finally, a commitment to a coalitional spirit. Change never happens alone. Working in solidarity with others requires collaboration, negotiation, and difference.

ERIN: I remember thinking while I was trying to design my first big community-engaged research project: How do I actually do this? I wanted a guidebook on how to do community-engaged research, a nuts and bolts account of how to get the thing done, a step-by-step checklist, something that simply isn't out there; I wanted that perfect approach that would ensure our project would succeed. I remember being frustrated by this, but five years later, I know why: such a tool obfuscates the very nature of engaged work—work that requires a deep commitment to the people around us, an attunement to the rhythms of an organization or community that often run counter to the logics of our own institutions, and an acceptance that the work will challenge us, and often, change us.

LEHUA: Yes! Absolutely.

ERIN: So what can we do to prepare for engaged projects that build sustained partnerships that stretch beyond one individual relationship (since those often fizzle out) and generate possibilities for communities? One practice that I have been keeping at the forefront of engaged projects has been that of slow research. Productivity culture, which we are all steeped in, is toxic, and it contributes to harmful dynamics between researchers and communities that result in extractive, not generative, relationships.

LEHUA: Thank you for bringing this up. It's SO Important, especially, as you mention, to the relationships between researchers and communities.

ERIN: Slow research, an approach taken up across fields including the hard sciences, has offered me (yet another) heuristic for thinking through engagement work—one that prioritizes listening to communities, designing for stakeholder feedback, and adapting to participant needs. As a junior faculty member, this is admittedly uncomfortable as that tenure clock ticks away, but as I've been invited into community spaces to do collaborative work that reaches far beyond the walls of my university, the volume of that clock has lessened (but not disappeared). Instead, I'm listening to community voices and letting those guide me.

KRISTEN: Yes. The need for slower research and for institutional support for community-engaged research was one of the major motivations for this two-volume issue. The contortions that universities demand of community-engaged researchers are many—and they're often hidden from new scholars who want to do community-engaged research. This conversation and the special issue itself is one effort towards shifting our scholarly practices in the university to enable more scholars to work in the community with relationships and community values at the center of the project.

## WHAT'S IN THIS ISSUE

These conversations, insights, and lessons are extended throughout this issue rounding out the second special issue of "Valuing and making visible the labor of coalitional practice: Redesigning genres

& methodologies for justice-oriented communication design.” Highlighting the agility, innovation, capacity-building, seasonality, and relational labor of community-engaged research, these articles offer approaches, perspectives, and designs that broaden our understanding of ethical, inclusive, and intersectional participatory community engaged research. We hope that taken together, these stories, frameworks, and conversations will offer those in TPC who aim to participate in community engaged research a set of resources for reflexively considering their positionality within the messy, time consuming, and methodological and ethical challenges of CER and coalition building. We further hope these articles help journal reviewers, editors, and university administrators understand the labor of trust and coalition building as scholarship to be valued in write ups and promotion.

This issue extends the conversations from both the first issue and the dialogue that serves as the introduction to the issue. Each of these articles provide essential perspectives on how we can and should build relationships with communities that are impacted by and involved in our research. The beauty of these particular contributions is that they build from diverse and unique projects to help those of us committed to CER more effectively, ethically, and justly engage with others. From these articles, we learn:

- To engage cultural humility as a fundamental practice of CER particularly when we work with Indigenous communities (Itchuaqiyaq, Lindgren, and Kramer);
- To value emergent strategy in both Community-Engaged User Experience pedagogy (Lee, Turner, and Rose) as well as Community-Engaged Writing Programs (Blakeslee, Boeving, Gatchel, and Miller);
- To prioritize and value how lived experiences unfold within online communities (e.g., medical) (Cameron);
- To facilitate coalitional approaches to trust in CER from a dialogic treatment of sustainable farming (Ledbetter and Neelis);
- To align organizational values as we work to mitigate risks with and for our communities through an adaptable tool (Moore and Stone).

These lessons extend from and reflect the dialogic introduction, and the contributions here are diverse, careful, caring, and deliberate in their explanations.

In “Decolonizing community-engaged research: Designing CER with cultural humility as a foundational value,” Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyaq, Chris A. Lindgren, and Corina Qaagraq Kramer challenge us to consider not only the seasonal, slow work involved in CER but further explicate the need for cultural humility, particularly when engaging with Indigenous communities. Drawing on their research in Inuit communities, they illustrate the way cultural humility can and should drive our CER. In, “Beyond policy: What plants and communities can teach us about sustainable changemaking, Lehua Ledbetter and Alexandria Neelis articulate the way that trust and coalition building can “create a network of communication to guide the community towards a more sustainable and synergistic food system.” They invite us into a conversation about trust, collaboration, and the responsiveness of CER relationships.

In “Community-engaged user experience pedagogy: Stories, emergent strategy, and possibilities,” Soyeon Lee, Heather Turner, and Emma Rose draw from brown’s emergent strategy to develop

a methodology for community engaged user experience (CEUX) pedagogy, including three relational patterns between community partners and student groups. In their commitment to emergent strategy, they illustrate the limits of lone designers and researchers and forward approaches that engage students with communities.

In an invited article, Ann Blakeslee, David Boeving, Kristine M. Gatchel, and Brent Miller use emergent strategy, too, but in a completely different context. In “Story of a community-based writing resource—and a call to action,” they offer a framework for building inclusive, cohesive, and sustainable community-engaged outreach programs and literacy networks. Drawing from brown’s emergent theory that provides a “relational approach to social change,” Blakeslee, Boeving, Gatchel, and Miller argue that assessment of community outreach programs should focus on paying attention to the values, ethics, trust, and relationships of the programs and partnerships.

Shanna Cameron provides a portrait of CER in online communities, reminding us that CER approaches are useful outside of local organizations. In discussing Asherman’s syndrome and reproductive justice, she provides an intimate articulation of the need for prioritizing intersectional, lived experiences, particularly when working in medicine and health, and proves an ethical imperative for CERs.

In keeping with a commitment to lived experiences, Kristen Moore and Erica Stone provide a use journey of a particular tool/framework they have used “to intervene in organizations, engage coalitions, and mitigate risks as we move towards a more socially just future.” Their invited article reflects the emergent strategy articulated by others in the special issue: as contexts and communities shift, so do our methods and frameworks.

## **A FINAL REFLECTION: ANTI-RACISM, INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM, AND PUBLISHING PRACTICES**

We close by sharing our Anti-Racist Publishing Practices and calling for a commitment to both Anti-Racism (and intersectional feminism) when engaging with communities in research. One of the unique challenges to this special issue was our commitment to pushing against genre expectations, and we write with gratitude for reviewers who engaged actively with the Anti-Racist Scholarly Reviewing Practices: A Heuristic for Editors, Reviewers, and Authors (<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1IZmZqeNNnYfYgmTKSbL2ijYbR4OMovv6A-bDwJRnwx8/edit#heading=h.ymiupo69pn4r>) and with some non-traditional reviewing criteria in order “to ensure [their] responses are intentionally inclusive and avoid perpetuating oppression or marginalization of the author.” Our reviewers took seriously this task, and for that, we are thankful.

In designing our special issue, we intentionally:

1. Sought articulations of CER that traditionally have been suppressed;
2. Solicited authors diverse in rank, in organizational position (from communities and from academics), in disciplinary position, and in demographics like race, gender, class, and sexuality (among others);
3. Invited reviewers who had already expressed a commitment to anti-racism and asked for reviewers to use a non-traditional, anti-racist rubric as they reviewed full drafts;

4. Provided ongoing mentoring and support for authors as they developed their drafts.

In reflecting on our special issues, we note the range of perspectives needed to fully understand the work of community-engaged research and therefore acknowledge the limits of the current collection: we are limited in the kinds of community research and organizations represented, in the theoretical perspectives brought to the fore, and even though we aimed to amplify marginalized voices and sought genres that broke out of traditional formats, we observe the need to continue pushing back against expectations that might reflect oppressive structures in our writing and publishing spaces.

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# Decolonizing Community-Engaged Research: Designing CER with Cultural Humility as a Foundational Value

Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyaaq  
Virginia Tech  
cana@vt.edu

Chris A. Lindgren  
Virginia Tech  
lindgren@vt.edu

Corina Qaagraq Kramer  
Aqqaluk Trust  
corina.kramer@aqqaluktrust.com

## ABSTRACT

In this article, we uptake the call for equipping researchers in practicing socially just CER in Indigenous communities through developing a framework for cultural humility in CER. Sparked by our research team's experience considering the potential of CER to transform and contribute to the needs of both tribal and academic communities, we present cultural humility as a personal precondition for socially just, decolonial CER practice. We use the Inuit cultural practice of *nalukataq* as a key metaphor to present our framework for cultural humility: listening to the caller, setting your feet, pulling equally, staying in sync.

## CCS Concepts

Social and professional topics

## Keywords

Community-engaged research, Indigenous sovereignty, Decolonial, Arctic research, Cultural humility

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## INTRODUCTION

With the threats of climate change becoming everyday realities in the Arctic, the equitable inclusion of Indigenous perspectives, observations, and knowledges has become an important goal shared by both Arctic Indigenous communities and organizations promoting Arctic research. However, Indigenous organizations and Arctic scientists have raised serious concerns about equity in fulfilling diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) requirements in grant proposal evaluations, as demonstrated by the *Navigating the New Arctic Comment Letter* written by Alaska Native tribal groups (Kawerak, 2020) and the *Arctic Researcher Letter* written and signed by 228 Arctic researchers (Huntington et al., 2021). This point of tension illustrates a gap within the Arctic research community regarding how to engage and incorporate Indigenous communities and knowledges in Arctic community-engaged research (CER) in equitable, respectful, and meaningful ways.

These recent calls for DEI in Arctic research practices, such as CER, have required that Arctic researchers (i.e., researchers whose academic interest involves Arctic regions) adapt and transform their research practices within Arctic Indigenous communities to remain competitive for federal funding. For example, the National Science Foundation's (NSF) lucrative Navigating the New Arctic (NNA) program RFP highlights ethical and equitable engagement with Indigenous communities in CER as part of their grant proposal evaluation (NSF, n.d.) and directs researchers to an Interagency Arctic Research Policy Committee (IARPC) website for a compilation of resources on how to build ethical and equitable community partnership in Arctic research (Rohde, 2019). IARPC, a U.S. federal organization that brings Arctic researchers and organizations together with U.S. federal agencies, offices, and organizations, such as NSF, considered a focus on improving participatory research and Indigenous leadership in research a foundational activity towards achieving objectives outlined in the federally mandated Arctic Research Plan 2022–2026. They stated:

Indigenous Peoples have been part of the Arctic region for millennia and their histories, cultures, and knowledge are critical to understanding Arctic systems. Federally funded research efforts, however, have had varying levels of success (or failure) in regularly, sufficiently, and ethically including Arctic peoples. Indigenous Peoples deserve respect from researchers entering their communities, lands, and societies and should have the opportunity to benefit from the research as well as engage in meaningful consultation. (IARPC, n.d., para 1)

While “respect from researchers entering their communities” seems like a relatively simple undertaking to achieve, the embedded, and even foundational, tendrils of colonialism and white supremacy in mainstream academic research practices create barriers to achieving this seemingly simple task (Smith, 2013; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Furthermore, Indigenous community expectations for what that respect actually looks like is not necessarily based on Western ideals of respect, but rather community-determined cultural value systems and worldviews (Itchuaqiyaaq, 2021).

There are many guides/resources readily available for Arctic researchers in doing socially just CER in Arctic communities (e.g., Arctic Data Center, n.d.; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2018; Nickels et al., 2006; Riddell et al., 2017; Tagalik, n.d.). Despite these ample resources, the *how* of CER is lacking and often leaves community partners feeling frustrated and ultimately disengaged. For example, the Alaska Native non-profit organization, Kawerak (2020), described startling examples of the disrespect tribal organizations have experienced in relation to researchers’ *initial contact* with them about potential CER partnerships. They noted that “many researchers ‘cold-call’ [their] organizations with only a few weeks or less before the RFP deadlines” (p. 5), which leaves zero time for them to adequately consider and contribute to the proposed research. We think it is important to quote the insights that Kawerak professionals share, since it identified the core issue with CER approaches without cultural humility as a foundational value:

All of the researchers who contacted our organizations to ‘partner’ (or collaborate, or co-produce) reached out with almost or fully-developed research proposals. They had already determined the research topic, the research questions, methods, project leaders and staff, timelines, budgets, etc. This model of ‘partnering’ fundamentally undermines the process of co-production that our organizations support. Often the researchers/proposals that claimed ‘co-production’ only wanted a letter of support or endorsement (which is not co-productive research) or, once we expressed concern about the lack of time to contribute in an equitable way, the request would change from ‘partner with us’ to ‘well, can we just get a letter of support then?’ There were no opportunities to provide significant or meaningful input to these proposals. (p. 5)

Considering that this disrespect for tribal sovereignty occurs in the initial communication with tribal organizations, it calls into question whether academic partners are capable of effectively incorporating respect and humility into the design of the research processes itself.

In this article, we take up the call for equipping researchers in practicing socially just CER in Indigenous communities through developing a framework for cultural humility in CER. Sparked

by our research team’s experience considering the potential of CER to transform and contribute to the needs of both tribal and academic communities, we present cultural humility as a personal *precondition* for socially just, decolonial<sup>1</sup> CER practice.

## SCHOLARLY CONTEXTS

Technical and professional communication (TPC) has long been developing socially just CER approaches. Numerous scholars (Agboka, 2014; Bloom-Pojar & Barker, 2020; Torrez et al., 2017; Walton et al., 2015) have shared strategies for creating more equitable power roles in CER affecting decision-making and direction, navigating the field, establishing and maintaining trust, and holding space and time to listen and learn together with community partners. A common thread is active engagement with community partner’s values, such as *confianza* (Bloom-Pojar & Barker, 2020), *comunidad de cuentistas* (Torrez et al., 2017), *ubufatnye* (Walton et al., 2015), and *Iñupiat Iḷitqusiut* (Itchuaqiyaaq, 2021). Currently, there is a sharp increase in calls and funding for Arctic-based CER. Yet, the broader scientific research community is struggling to confront its history of settler-colonialism and how their models of research maintain white, Western-European power, knowledge, and values—science that engages communities without truly thinking about how research can and should serve the community’s self-determination.

Numerous new CER initiatives have been set into motion in response to the extractive history of Arctic researchers with shallow partnership goals. For example, the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) (2018), a Canadian organization that unifies 65,000 Inuit across 53 communities, set an ambitious “National Inuit Strategy on Research” for all Arctic research. They set criteria for researchers to move their community-outreach approaches, which excludes Inuit from the research process, to equitably and proactively include and invest in Inuit as rightsholders, experts, and collaborators, rather than sidelined stakeholders who lack true agency to contribute to Inuit self-determined goals and broader societal knowledge. This ITK initiative challenges community-outreach approaches that only re-package community-extractive research that largely aims at obtaining access to the natural land and resources integral to Arctic research. Further, ITK’s initiative is one example among many (see Itchuaqiyaaq, 2021; Nickels et al., 2006; Tagalik, n.d.) that might guide equitable practices in the Arctic, each of which stem from Indigenous communities’ own ethical practices.

Naming and addressing power in research matters, since it impacts the partnerships that people establish. Drake et al. (2022) conducted a meta-review of 72 community-outreach studies with Indigenous communities in Arctic regions between 1992 and 2020. They found a sharp increase in community and participatory language within their methodologies, beginning in the late 2000s. However, among all of the studies, *none* were Indigenous-led (p. 899). More so, the majority of the studies (81%) engaged minimally with communities, despite using methodological terms, such as “community-based,” “community-driven,” “collaborative,” “co-productive,” etc. (p. 899). Just as the testimonies of Alaska Native organizations describe, Drake et al. found that most researchers only consulted a few people after the initial conceptual and planning phases, while others designed their projects as purely contractual with Indigenous communities. They highlight how such research typically sought to attain access for the collection of data or to establish research centers

<sup>1</sup> See Itchuaqiyaaq & Matheson (2021) for more information about decolonial research.

owned and operated solely by academics. ITK (2018) and Drake et al. demonstrated the need for clearly defined methodologies related to co-productive Arctic research, because its early iterations have produced very little change in existing power relations between academics and Indigenous communities.

This continuing practice of CER in name only has created a consensus across Arctic research guides (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2018; Veazey et al., 2022) to always include communities from the beginning conceptualization phase of research design. Our framework extends these calls by establishing a legible, socially-just path for researchers to gain the internal skills necessary to serve communities, rather than merely engage communities in superficial ways. Research as service to community starts during the conceptualization phase, but there is work to be done even before that. Our framework guides researchers to develop a *culturally humble* perspective to CER that equips them to serve the needs of a community and invest in the community's self-determination better. We argue that a culturally humble perspective is a necessary component for ethical and socially just community and research outcomes in CER.

Before we define our framework for Cultural Humility (CH), we describe the community contexts, their value systems, and the project that guided our creation of it. From there, we preface the directives of the CH framework with a description about the Inuit practice called *nalukataq*. As we explain later, *nalukataq* is an ancient cooperative activity also known as the blanket toss. This blanket toss requires numerous people to listen and work in sync with each other, so they can ultimately gain a perspective of the land that would otherwise not be possible. This goal to see great distances, when working in harmony with each other, grounds each of the roles and responsibilities of community leaders, members, and researchers. Finally, we discuss what we collectively learned from this framework in light of our own CER.

## COMMUNITY CONTEXTS

### About the NANA Region, the Iñupiat Iḷitqusiāt, and the Rematriation Project

This article is based on the experience of a community-academic collaboration, known as the Rematriation Project, between Aqqaluk Trust, a tribal organization serving the Iñupiat of northwest Alaska, and interdisciplinary academic faculty members (TPC and library and data science) at Virginia Tech. This partnership was initially brought together through the personal and professional connections of one faculty team member (Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyāq) who is a tribal member and grew up in this region. Furthermore, Itchuaqiyāq is the sister of Aqqaluk Trust's Director of Operations, and Rematriation Project team leader, Corina Qaāgraq Kramer.

The NANA Region is a large area in northwest Alaska roughly the size of Indiana. This remote region is home to roughly 8,000 Iñupiat living in the 10 villages surrounding the hub village Kotzebue and is totally off of the road system. In other words, access to and within the Kotzebue region is limited to access by planes, boats in the summer, and snowmobiles in the winter. The NANA Region is considered a "frontline" community regarding climate change impacts. In 2015, President Barack Obama announced his climate resilience plan at the Kotzebue Middle/High School gymnasium. In his speech, Obama called the nation "to help communities build more resilient infrastructure. You shouldn't wait until disaster strikes. We should see if we can invest in communities before the

disaster strikes to prevent it" (2015). The NANA Region, situated on the western coast of Alaska above the Arctic Circle, is an area that Arctic researchers and funding agencies are increasingly investing in as a research site because, as NSF stated in their NNA grant information, "Arctic temperatures are warming faster than nearly everywhere else on Earth" (n.d.). As research activities continue to increase in this region, the need for Inuit-created frameworks for equitable community engagement in these communities also increases.

Equitable community engagement with the Iñupiat of the NANA Region begins with understanding that their community's value system, known as the Iñupiat Iḷitqusiāt, is central to community practices and represents a worldview that both challenges and complements typical Western academic practices and sense-making (Itchuaqiyāq, 2021). The Iñupiat Iḷitqusiāt are tools that help to effectively facilitate academic-community engagement in a manner that is respectful and productive in Iñupiat community contexts. While there are 17 codified values in the Iñupiat Iḷitqusiāt, all of which support socially just CER, in this article we will focus on humility. The NANA Regional Elders Council stated that "in humility is strength. A humble person is strong of character and does not need to boast. A boastful person shows lack of character" (NANA, 2016, p. 35). Further, the Elder Council provided specific instruction about humility:

- Speak only the truth about your deeds.
- Others who have witnessed your deed will speak for you.
- Never embellish, as people will lose their respect when the truth is known.
- Bragging is an embarrassment.
- It is wrong to pass judgment on others.
- Never think that you are better than anyone else.
- Elders and parents should teach and model humility.
- Effective leaders practice humility.

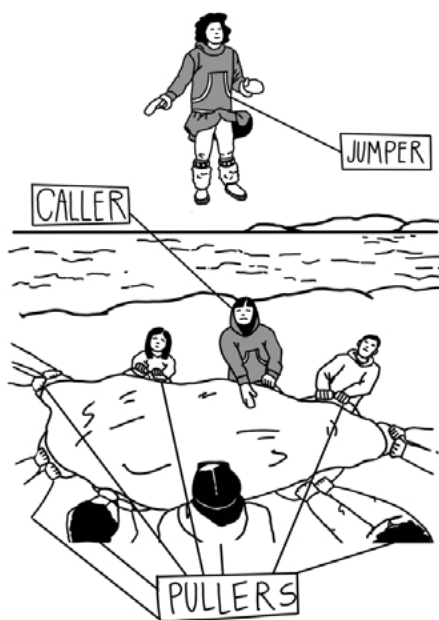
Our focus on humility, and specifically cultural humility, as a necessary precursor to socially just—or even merely effective—CER in Inuit and other marginalized communities is meant to equip scholars with practical tools for designing effective and equitable research and research partnerships. In truth, learning to use these tools can be difficult and certainly takes time to practice. Regardless, as our positive experience as a CER team has demonstrated, personally and professionally investing in a CH perspective yields important returns.

The Rematriation Project is an Inuit-led, Inuit-serving project that aims to increase local, Inuit capacities in digital archiving and data literacy in the face of environmental crises that threaten the cultural heritage and documented knowledges of the NANA Region. Furthermore, the Rematriation Project aims to create a model for equitable, respectful, and sustainable engagement with Inuit communities. Our team recognizes that having Iñupiat team members with a close-knit relationship (Itchuaqiyāq & Kramer) leading both the academic and community sides of the project is a unique opportunity for frank and productive dialogue about how to do social justice CER that actually feels like justice.

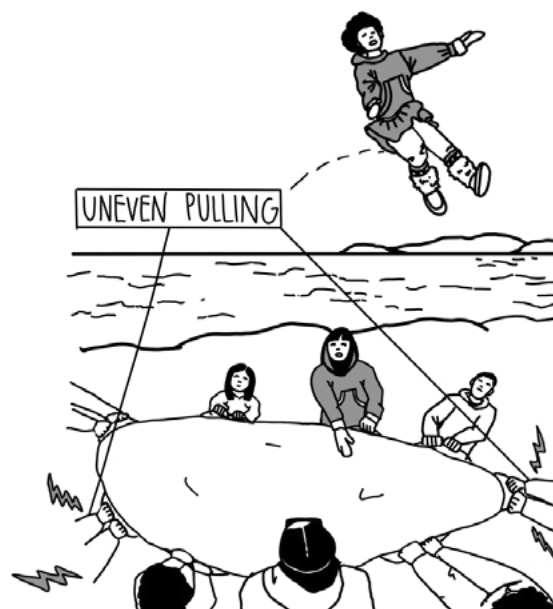
### Nalukataq

*Nalukataq* (*nuh-look-uh-tuhkq*), known as the blanket toss, is an ancient Inuit cooperative activity that allowed for long-distance

observations for hunting and other purposes (Figure 1 and Figure 2). *Nalukataq* is still practiced in Inuit communities. In *nalukataq*, a jumper is tossed high into the air from a round walrus skin blanket pulled taut by 20 or more pullers. The pullers are arranged and led by a caller whose role is to make sure that the pullers are in sync with one another and pulling equally on the blanket. The pullers set their feet in an active stance, with one foot slightly in front of another, and their arms remain straight as they lean back with their bodies to pull the blanket. The pullers, regardless of their personal strength, must pull evenly with one another or they risk injuring the jumper and even themselves. The pullers and the jumper rely on the caller to make decisions for the group, based on the caller's observations and expertise, in order to assure that the blanket is moving up and down rhythmically so that the *nalukataq* activity is safe and successful. The caller is both leading the activity as well as participating in it. Because there are many people contributing to the work of pulling the walrus skin blanket, the force needed from each puller is relatively minimal. If the pullers don't cooperate and pull too hard or out of rhythm, then they risk tossing the jumper unevenly or causing a bad fall. In other words, pullers need to act as one, releasing themselves from their individualistic perspective, yield their individual authority to the caller, and submit to the cooperative rhythm of the group for success. In the role of a puller, asserting individual strength—even if it seems like pulling hard is what is needed for the jumper to be tossed high into the air—is contrary to the efficacy of *nalukataq*. A good puller listens intently to the caller—whose role is watching the blanket and the jumper and making group decisions based on their observations and expertise—and becomes one with the other pullers and the walrus skin blanket.



**Figure 1**  
**Nalukataq: The caller is directing pullers, their hand feeling the movement of the blanket. The jumper is tossed straight up into the air from a walrus skin blanket in a balanced orientation. Illustration by Dylan Paisaq Crosby, courtesy of Aqqaluk Trust.**



**Figure 2**  
**Nalukataq: The pullers are pulling unevenly and the jumper is tossed into the air in an unbalanced orientation. Illustration by Dylan Paisaq Crosby, courtesy of Aqqaluk Trust.**

Once everyone is pulling in sync, then the blanket moves up and down like a diaphragm breathing, and it feels effortless and harmonious. The jumper can then be safely tossed up into the air (Figure 1) and they are able to focus on making their observations to aid community decision-making practices and activities (or just have fun in contemporary events).

The example of the *nalukataq* is useful in understanding the ways that research with community partners can become unbalanced, distort the purpose of research, and even become harmful if researchers don't adopt a CH perspective. In this article, we will use *nalukataq* as a grounding metaphor to describe the need for cultural humility as preparation and practice in socially just CER.

## CULTURAL HUMILITY AS A FRAMEWORK FOR CER

Cultural humility is distinct from cultural competence. Cultural competency is becoming acquainted with facts about another culture in order to be able to interact with people from that culture effectively. Cultural humility, on the other hand, "incorporates a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique, to redressing the power imbalances in the [community-researcher] dynamic, and to developing mutually beneficial and non-paternalistic [research] and advocacy partnerships with communities" (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998, p. 117). In other words, cultural humility is the internal work necessary to interact with other cultures in an equitable, respectful, and meaningful way. We argue that developing a CH perspective is a necessary precondition for socially just CER.

In this section, we use edited excerpts from transcripts of conversations we had as a CER team discussing our research and the work needed for socially just CER. This was a writing method

that we developed with our community partner, Corina Qaaḡraq Kramer, to ensure that we centered her ideas and voice throughout our definition of CH.

## A Framework for Cultural Humility

Kramer, our main caller, emphasized how a CH perspective to research addresses the question of “*Who holds the power?*” Researchers must adopt a culturally humble approach to planning the goals for their projects, which demands that they submit and listen to Inuit communities. A CH perspective puts the onus on researchers to carefully consider how their positionality shifts across contexts and recognize the historical problems between academics and Indigenous communities that persist to this day, such as ignoring, minimizing, or manipulating Indigenous communities’ expertise, knowledges, and goals.

The NANA regional Elders provide guidance for Iñupiat to incorporate humility into their life practices, such as “never think that you are better than anyone else” and “never embellish” (NANA, 2016, p. 35). We extend their wisdom toward CER activities using the cooperative strategies of *nalukataq* as a guide to a developing CH perspective: listen to the caller, set your feet, pull equally, and stay in sync.

### Listening to the caller: Respecting and submitting to community leadership

The caller represents community members who will direct the planning and actions. *Listening to the caller* cuts across all of the other actions to establish trust, respect, and expectations between communities and researchers during CER. Listening with a CH perspective charges researchers, as pullers, to invest time and resources to understand how they are reflective of a violent history and relationships with Inuit communities. If researchers invest the time necessary to build relationships, that’s a sign of *honor*. Researchers need to build in time for the community, to listen to and understand one another and collaboratively vision, plan and execute the project. Even community members, such as Kramer and Itchuaqiyag, must speak to Elders and their community before they can speak for or about the community.

If pullers do not listen to the caller, pullers put the success of *nalukataq* as well as the community (the jumper) at risk (Figure 2). Not listening to the caller ignores the safety and needs of the jumper. Investing the time for listening to the community’s true needs and perspectives equips researchers to design communication and research strategies that recognize Indigenous sovereignty. Moreover, risks from misusing a community partner’s social capital are harmful and disrespectful (Itchuaqiyag et al., 2023). Kramer shared a story of a community member involved in gathering qualitative data for a research project:

One woman was asked to partner on a food study where researchers wanted a community research assistant who would ask her community questions. Of course, the researcher had to submit their interview questions to the IRB in advance, and after it was approved by the IRB and interviews were scheduled, the woman was then given the chance to review the questions. She told me, “This is embarrassing. This is not even worded how we talk to each other up here.” So, she quit, even though it paid very well. This is what happens when researchers don’t ask us—like really ask us—about what to do in our own communities. (personal communication, September 26,

2022)

A CH perspective is important in cross-cultural contexts, especially with consideration to differences in positionality, privilege, and power (Walton et al., 2019). For example, researchers must actively avoid dialogue that (re)centers researchers’ plans and ambitions over community goals. Instead, a CH perspective helps researchers to redirect misguided energy put into microaggressions, such as “listening to respond/waiting to speak,” toward listening to understand one another. Kramer highlighted the painful reality of how “Inuit have been steamrolled in every which way, even in conversation. We’re used to it now, but that doesn’t make it okay. It’s not normal for researchers to come to us and let *us* lead” (personal communication, October 31, 2022). Research conversations can be manipulated to achieve the researchers’ desired outcomes and it leaves community partners disappointed. But listening to the caller means actively responding to the caller’s guidance. In practice, we suggest the following to develop a CH perspective while listening to the caller:

- Prepare yourself for listening and pay attention to your internal dialogue.
  - \* What are your motivations based on?
  - \* Are you preparing a response that leads the discussion back to your own goals?
- Remember that communication styles vary across cultures.
  - \* What “soft nos” and non-verbal cues related to comprehension and consent should you be aware of?
  - \* How can you confirm that “yes” is being communicated, especially with regards to comprehension and consent?
  - \* What assumptions are you making about meaning and are they appropriate to the context?
- Restate the meaning back for clarification and application.
  - \* How can you assure that everyone understands what community “callers” say, especially in relation to cross-cultural contexts?
  - \* What are context-appropriate ways to say, “Let me see if I got this right. So, what you’re saying is ...”?

### Setting your feet: Knowing yourself and adjusting to community needs

To embody a CH perspective, pullers must set their feet while staying agile. Researchers must set an active stance, ready to create socially just relationships and innovative, collaborative outcomes toward community goals. As new “pullers” for the community, researchers can no longer rely solely on their existing CV. To the community, you are just another puller. A CH perspective while setting one’s feet involves an ethic of knowing and communicating yourself transparently and acknowledges the others’ strengths and knowledges. As other TPC researchers (Bloom-Pojar & Barker, 2020; Del Hierro et al., 2019) have argued and modeled, researchers must invest the time to set their active stance properly, so they can recognize and adapt and adjust to community needs.

Arctic researchers want to connect with Arctic Indigenous communities but have continued to fail in their efforts to build meaningful-to-community connections as the IARPC report emphasized. Setting your feet with a CH perspective helps to build trust because it prepares researchers to be willing to pivot and respond to community direction. Community partners, as callers, need to be able to name the risks and other problems within a project. Despite researcher’s relatively high positionality, privilege,



and power in academic contexts, they do not have the experience or expertise to be the callers in community contexts. They are pullers.

Investing the time to know yourself sets in motion researcher's capacity to listen, learn, and adjust to the community's knowledges, skills, and self-determined goals related to the project. Setting your feet with a CH perspective helps researchers carefully consider the community's margin of maneuverability (Walton et al., 2019) in research contexts, which promotes safely communicating difficult, but necessary correctives. Researchers are often bound by academic institutional structures themselves, which affects their own margin of maneuverability to set their feet ready for socially-just, community-led research. Kramer lamented, "I keep wondering why researchers *neglect* to connect with communities in meaningful ways" (personal communication, October 03, 2022).

We offer the following suggestions to adopt a CH perspective as researchers set their feet:

- Name and respect one another's margins of maneuverability.
- How might relative positionality, privilege, and power affect everyone's ability to act in a given context and time?
- Be willing to adjust to community feedback.
  - \* Are you using your training and skills to help meet the community's true needs? Or does your research only partially meet their needs?
  - \* What innovation is possible from the inclusion of diverse perspectives in research?
  - \* What knowledges and skills do you need to learn so you can adjust to community needs?

## **Pulling equally: Accepting your role and avoiding manipulation of the project**

*Nalukataq* requires that everybody pulls equally to successfully hoist the jumper. If researchers as pullers listen to the caller and set their feet appropriately, they can understand and accept their role in the project. Pulling equally illuminates how a CH perspective in CER is embodied. Clay et al. (2022) argued that research is an embodied practice, especially so within the realm of collaborative research. They highlight how team members bring together their individual lived experiences to help make sense of, and contribute to, the group's research experience and goals. However, this embodiment must be done carefully. Simmons and Amidon (2019) have discussed how "embodiment and identity" are a primary vector in tensions related to CER. Researchers must make sure to carefully consider how and why they are pulling with the community, or else they risk perpetuating harms, such as manipulating the direction of the project toward their own convenience rather than the community's goals.

Due to the problematic history of extractive research that has systematically excluded communities from leadership and other meaningful roles in the research process, pulling *equally* could be restated as pulling *equitably*. This shift in terms highlights the need for reparative work when it comes to the harms that mainstream, colonial, white-supremacist research practices have caused. Kramer explained:

I'm continually catching myself and thinking through the different ways we all, even us Natives, continue to have colonized thinking. When working with researchers, my role is often as their trainer and mentor in working with our people in respectful ways. But I

often wonder, *why do I have to do this work on top of everything else?* At the same time, I find that it can bring a psychological transference of power that I've found healing and systematically corrective. The whole idea is that the Western-trained scientist/professor/practitioner acknowledges and actively demonstrates that the local knowledge-keeper is an *equal* in the work and a *superior* on the land. (personal communication, December 15, 2022).

Equitable "pulling" takes time to achieve together because a community's capacity to pull may change. As Kramer (personal communication, October 26, 2022) explained, "Researchers must understand that a community's capacity, and even willingness, to make decisions about participating in a project and what benefits it should bring to the community takes time, especially because of research fatigue and just being extremely busy surviving up here." Researchers must understand the capacity of communities is not static, increasing, decreasing, and shifting day to day. Community capacity can both increase and decrease. A CH perspective while pulling equitably helps with the careful maintenance, attention, and patience necessary for innovative and equitable CER. Participation in a project should help transform the community's capacity to effectively perform and participate in future projects. To help researchers pull equitably, we suggest the following prompts to guide your developing CH perspective:

- Consider how historical power relationships exist in and affect CER.
  - \* How might prior experiences with researchers and institutions affect the ability of communities to trust researchers and how can you change that?
  - \* How can you remain transparent with the community about your motivations and needs to avoid potentially manipulating the direction of the project?
- Remember that community partners are experts in their own communities and are essential to successful CER.
  - \* What ways are you actively incorporating community partners in all phases and aspects of the research process?
  - \* How are you incorporating community feedback into your research and communication design?
- Design tangible benefits for the community with the community.
  - \* What does the community actually need and at what timescale?
  - \* How can you include multiple, complementary community benefits into your research design?

## **Staying in sync: Maintaining connections and trust**

A CH perspective demands that researchers stay in sync with the community in similar ways that pullers must stay in sync with the caller and one another to successfully propel the jumper. If the pullers and the caller are not in sync, the blanket will not rhythmically move up and down and the jumper will not be able to jump safely. However, even if their rhythm falls out of sync, in the spirit of *nalukataq*, it can be restored through listening to the caller, setting one's feet anew, and pulling together. Simmons and Amidon (2019) discussed how researchers and partners should remain aware of and flexible to CER's iterative process to enhance its success. The highest potential of a CER project is reached when the cadence of the partners, activities, goals, and the community all align.

A CH cadence involves evaluating a project and partnership regularly to catch issues early so that necessary adjustments are made in a timely manner. A community's capacity and needs change over time, and similarly so do partner roles and project goals. A CH perspective is an important component of evaluation and helps create space for honest feedback. Through listening to feedback humbly, trust is shared and maintained and the project's trajectory toward success is refined. Kramer (personal communication, October 31, 22) recalled receiving feedback from a village Elder that was both hard and important to hear:

In my previous work, I traveled to the villages to present and receive community feedback on a project we had been working on for a while in the region. In my last village of the project, their community's eldest Elder was there and listened gracefully. He was close to 90 and very 'old school.' He was a whaling captain and is revered in the community. He was sitting the whole time and listened attentively to all the community comments. At the very end of the meeting, he had his family members help him to stand up—because when he speaks, he's going to stand up—and he says, 'I've listened to you talk all about whatever you're doing here.' And then he simply said, 'Almost.' And that was it. Basically, he was telling us that he recognized what we had been working really hard to do. But it was still just *almost*.

Staying in sync throughout a project means being willing to receive and respond to community and partner feedback. Much like being willing and able to listen and respond to the caller or the movement of the jumper in *nalukataq* to assure safety and success, researchers, and the funders that support their research, must similarly remain nimble through adopting and practicing a CH perspective. Kramer explained why staying in sync with the community matters so much:

You start off with this idea and even if you sit and listen, even if you work hard together and try to grasp what the community is trying to say about its needs, you still might miss the mark. You still might be almost. What we need to do to prevent that almost from taking over is to continue to go back and ask the community, "Is this right?" Even deep into the project. It's hard to do in practice, because when you're applying for big grants, you have to be very specific about the different things you're going to accomplish and how and when you're going to accomplish them. You have to already know who you're going to hire, their specific qualifications, and how much it's going to cost. It's really hard to stop and say, "Actually, we need to totally rethink this." It's easier to say, "It's too late now" and keep going. But now you have a five-year project starting at almost. Think of its trajectory. This almost affects the hopeful impacts at the community level; it's actually a failure. You end up just checking boxes on a grant, saying you did this, this, this, and this, but the intention of what you tried to do in the first place isn't there because you started with almost.

To help researchers stay in sync with community partners in CER, we suggest the following prompts to guide developing a CH perspective:

- Maintain and adjust spaces for honest feedback at all stages of the research process.

- \* How have you designed iteration into your research evaluation process?
- \* Have there been any changes in the community's or researcher's situation, e.g., immediate needs, personnel, institutional contexts that might impact the safety of honest communication?
- Welcome critique with a good spirit.
  - \* How can you honor the labor involved in giving critique? Be ready to be wrong and adjust.
  - \* How did you prepare the community to give critique and expect that pivots are inherent to research. How does your response to critique reveal your respect for the community?
  - \* Incorporate feedback into the project's design in meaningful ways.
  - \* How does accountability to the community affect the project and your credibility with the community?

## CONCLUSION

TPC, because of its focus on equipping people and organizations to act in socially just ways, is well-positioned to lead other fields toward reducing oppressive outcomes in research practices, such as CER. In other words, Arctic research needs TPC to help make Arctic CER more equitable. For example, in the Rematriation Project, we designed technical communication—in the form of CER protocols such as a memorandum of understanding (MOU)—to codify Inuit leadership and a commitment to Inuit self-determination behind all of our project's activities. These protocols were designed to be transferable to other projects that Aqqaluk Trust may undertake with future research partners and directly address a community need beyond the digital archiving goals of the Rematriation Project.

We'd like to point out that the terms of the Rematriation Project MOU required a CH perspective to enact. The MOU demanded that project activities "help develop local capacities to a point where seeking outside assistance for future digital archiving and maintenance is optional rather than necessary." This demand built an exit for researcher participation into the research design as community capacities increase. In other words, this clause builds in a "thank you; bah bye" into the project from the jump—something that likely takes a CH perspective to accept as a scholar whose expertise is often positioned in research as "necessary." Further, the MOU refined what is meant by equity in CER leadership:

The performance of this Project is based on equity in light of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. The painful history of extractive research and community exploitation requires that the partnership take an active stance in rebalancing power between Indigenous communities and academic institutions. Therefore, decision-making processes need to be intentional with the final decision-making power ultimately residing with Aqqaluk Trust, on behalf of the Community.

This demand clearly places the project authority with the community "caller" and positions academic researchers as "pullers" who must listen to the caller as a requirement of the partnership. This is, as we have discussed, a radical departure from mainstream research practices that position academic researchers, and their goals, as the driving force in CER. A CH perspective is necessary to make that shift and truly enact a socially just CER process.

As our CH framework suggests, researchers should gain the necessary skills *prior to* engaging with a community. *Listening to*

the caller respects and submits to community leadership. Listening to community “callers” involves taking pause to consider as a “puller” how not to center academic-oriented plans and ideas and instead actively respond to community leadership. *Setting your feet* is about establishing honest connections with a community that seeks to understand the community’s self-determined goals, expert knowledges, and margin of maneuverability. This mutual understanding through connection can help researchers consider the limits of their own expertise in the scope of the community’s goals. Once researchers have developed a preliminary foundation of trust to “pull” with and for the community, they must continue to actively understand and accept their role in the project. *Pulling equally* is about working toward equity and reparation. Researchers pull equitably by accepting their connection to a history of extraction and mistrust with regards to research, so they can avoid the mistakes of this past and design tangible benefits with and for the community. Finally, these CH perspectives only work if researchers *stay in sync* with the community and that they extend their relationship long past the life of the research and grants.

We hope that we have explained the importance of embodying and pursuing a CH perspective in preparation for socially just CER. We want to emphasize that if researchers neglect to embody a CH perspective when engaging marginalized communities, they may put the community at risk and reinforce extractive research relationships that lead to harm and further mistrust. To work together toward relationships built on trust, we designed the CH framework by listening and following the regional Elders wisdom: “in humility is strength.” A CH framework is first and foremost the prerequisites necessary for designing proactive communication that builds and maintains trust through connections—truly just connections—between communities and researchers. *Nalukataq* embodies the Iñupiat Iłitqusiat. These values, knowledges, and practices are necessary in addressing the weakness of white-settler, colonialist research. “Humility is strength” equips researchers to recognize the strength in listening to and being led by communities.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyag is a tribal member of the Noorvik Native Community in NW Alaska and is an assistant professor of professional and technical writing at Virginia Tech. Her research combines her academic background in both the humanities and physical sciences and currently centers on community-driven goals, such as advocating for equitable Arctic research practices, creating accessible online databases of Inuit knowledges, developing computational linguistics techniques to assist with Inupiatun language revitalization, and developing natural language processing techniques to process ecological and cultural data from Inuit narratives.

Chris A. Lindgren is an Assistant Professor of Technical Communication at Virginia Tech and Chair of the SIG on the Writing and Rhetoric of Code. His research develops critical thinking and approaches to coding and computation, data, and

accessible web content strategies. On the Rematriation Project, he has been developing a tool for Native Alaskan communities to decide the best archival software for their needs, as well as design a curriculum for their self-determined data literacies and archival practices. Adjacently, he has been developing a critical methodology for data practitioners to understand the rhetoric of their quantitative data work.

Corina Qaagraq Kramer is an Inupiaq community leader and advocate for Indigenous culture and youth. Corina is the Director of Operations for Aqqaluk Trust in Kotzebue, Alaska, where she develops regional, state, and national partnerships for language and culture work. With over 15 years of experience in village outreach, organization, and collaboration, and 25 years of youth leadership and mentorship, Corina is a determined, self-educated, well-connected, and strong leader who brings people together to make positive change. Corina serves as a Siamit Faculty member and the Della Keats Fellowship Community Director at the Harvard Center for Global Health Delivery.

# Beyond Policy: What Plants and Communities Can Teach Us About Sustainable Changemaking

Lehua Ledbetter  
The University of Rhode Island

Alexandria Neelis  
National Young Farmers Coalition

## ABSTRACT

In this community insight paper, we share conversations that took place over the course of two years that we believe shed light on the informal and less-recognized ways that humans forge trust as they design communication to help each other survive as communities in times of scarcity. We hope that this paper will legitimize the communication pathways and resource exchange that we believe make for a sustainable food system centered around abundance rather than deficit. In doing so, we also hope to start a greater conversation on how communities build trust and communication nimbly and quickly in times of crisis as policymaking often lags behind the needs of the community. As we saw during the COVID-19 food crisis, ad hoc communities fill the gaps that policymakers (such as the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)) can't when infrastructures fail. We take inspiration from the plants around us, farmers, scientists, community members, and the individuals and mutual aid groups that came together during the food crisis to build trust and dialogue as the first (and often most responsive) step towards sustainable food systems.

## CCS Concepts

Human-centered computing

## Keywords

Community outreach, Communication design, Policy, Food systems

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## INTRODUCTION

This is how it all begins: It's a ninety-degree day at Moonrose Farm in Cranston, Rhode Island. As workshares, we (Lex and Lehua) help care for the farm and harvest and process vegetables in exchange for a share of the farm's bounty. The farm sits on rented land at the top of a hill. This morning we meet the farmers at the entrance to the farm and review the plan for the day: sitting in the back of the truck, we look at the handwritten harvest list together, splitting up tasks and forming teams to complete the work ahead. We are tasked with collecting the ripe fruit from the ground, dusting off the dirt, and putting them into the green containers for the market. We walk between the rows to the husk cherry plants at the southern end of the farm and kneel down to collect what is needed for the market and the CSA boxes. The outer husk of the cherry, which resembles that of a tomatillo, forms a thin, papery wrapper around the fruit. When ripe the wrapper dries and turns yellow in color. The cherry within is a drop of honey-colored candy with notes of sweet yuzu and caramel. The husk cherry season is brief, and we collect the fruit as one of the last offerings before the growing season is over.

*Lex: Laying in the soil under the husk cherry plant, I look up at the sky through the stocky vines of wide leaves. Some of the best husk cherries are found here, underneath the plant. They are the fruits that the plant dropped at the perfect moment of ripeness after they were warmed and sweetened by the sun. I gather them in my hand. Ten for the bucket, three for me. Husk cherries are my favorite food. They are about the size of a marble, deep yellow, and taste like sunshine. Using my fingertip, I push aside a spider to pluck a cluster of fallen husk cherries from the debris of crunchy leaves and moist soil. Somewhere on the other side of the plant, I can hear my friend, Lehua musing over the day. Unwrapping a husk cherry and popping it into my mouth, I close my eyes and focus my ears on her voice; gentle and unhurried, it blends into the sounds of insects chirping and leaves brushing across each other. The sun feels good on my legs and the earthy scent of soil calms me. In this moment, I can sense that I am a part of the synergy of the farm. A warm breeze moves the leaves above me and for a moment, sunlight dapples across my face. I can hear the language of plants and am gifted a*





**Figure 1: Harvesting husk cherries at Moonrose Farm in Cranston, RI.**

*moment of understanding.*

*Lehua: As I crouch under the branches of the husk cherry I can hear Lex opening the papery wrapper of a husk cherry. I can't see her over the thick branches, but as I hear the crunch of the wrappers, I know she is nearby, enjoying the treasured fruit as much as she is harvesting them. The August sky is searing but the plants offer some shade. I take some respite from the sun for a few moments, unwrap a husk cherry, and taste the treasured honey and caramel flavors. I am thankful to these plants for the respite.*

*The husk cherries:*

*roots in the dry soil*

*reaching for water- and finding it*

*just there*

*with the nematodes*

*with the white threads of mycelium*

*with the sand and stone*

*with the earthworms*

*with the roots of neighbors*

*held by soil enriched by farming bodies*

*a sound- a small weight lifted*

*fruit drops to the ground- confetti seeds suspended in protective sweetness*

*a moth stirs- brown wings against blue sky*

*the brim of a hat on the horizon*

*the reciprocity of growth and gather*

LEHUA: Lex, thank you for talking with me today. I want to share a little more about who we are with our audience before we begin our conversation. Lex is a Land Advocacy Fellow at National Young Farmers Coalition, Former AmeriCorps Vista at Farm Fresh Rhode Island, and Former Temporary Program Technician for farm service agency USDA. She has worked extensively as a workshare for local farms and in Rhode Island's local food service industry. She has generously offered to share her experiences and knowledge with us today and tell us about how she has helped create a network of communication to guide the community towards a more sustainable and synergistic food system. I am an associate professor of writing and rhetoric at the University of Rhode Island, and I have worked for several years as a workshare at Moonrose Farm in Cranston, Rhode Island and Rehoboth, Massachusetts, where I met Lex and became involved in the Rhode Island food scene. Lex, can you tell us more of your story<sup>1</sup> and how you became invested in the local food system?

LEX: I became interested in food the first time I went to a farmer's market in Providence when I was 21. It was 2011 and I had just moved back to Rhode Island. I was very much on my own and starting to define myself. I felt drawn to the bustle of the market and the deep satisfaction it brought me and my roommates to go there and buy produce grown right in our home state by people we thought were "cool." It also fit in with the images we had of ourselves as baristas at a hip coffee shop that was very involved with sustainable coffee farming and directly sourcing coffees from farmers around the world. The farmers markets and cafe job converged and started to shape a vague understanding that there is more to food than grocery stores and there is more to farming than massive farms in rural areas. My day-to-day experiences at the cafe selecting coffee beans from faraway places were a constant reminder that all farms, no matter where or what size, all have actual people working on them—something that can be forgotten when most of the food we have access to comes from a large-scale food industrial complex.

Around this time, a lot of my friends were serving tables and cooking in restaurants in Providence and were becoming connected to the idea that food could be sourced from within our communities. I saw tons of benefits on health and heart interacting with food this way from how connected we felt to the ingredients we sourced from the market, how much we treasured the produce, fish, and meat we had that came from people and places. As much as it impacted me and my friends, seeing guests glow from the food they were served was yet more evidence that that food is a vessel for connection.

It feels different when there is trust and relationship built into the food, unlike food from the grocery store. Questions that had kept coming up at work, at farmers markets, and within my friends' restaurant industry jobs became more defined when you and I were at Moonrose Farm together: Why are small farms seemingly undervalued?

<sup>1</sup> This writing is based on many conversations that took place over the course of two years both on and off of the farm where we served as volunteers (2020–2022). We draw from Gonzales et al's (2021) storytelling methods; they argue that stories in technical communication serve as survival strategies central to building and honoring community.

Why does this carrot I just pulled right from the ground taste so much better than the ones I get at the grocery store? Why aren't the farmers I know able to pay higher wages on their farms despite growing and selling something so necessary to every person's survival? Why is it that when I go to a grocery store, there are so many stops between where my food comes from in the ground? Why are my ingredients usually grown or caught or raised far away from me and my kitchen? I realized I could dig deeper into those questions.

In 2014, I enrolled at University of Rhode Island in the Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems major. While earning my degree, I worked many different jobs having to do with food. Two stand out that were especially formative: my time as a SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as "food stamps") advisor at the URI Feinstein Hunger Center helping people navigate the SNAP certification process, and as a Research and Evaluation fellow at the Rhode Island Food Policy Council systematically investigating various metrics of Rhode Island's food system to inform policy makers. The disparities created by the industrial food complex in America taking the community out of food has caused us to operate on a deficit-based model for food usage.<sup>2</sup> All these experiences make it obvious to me that bringing community back into food is beneficial for human health and the health of the planet, but how to do it? Learning from various facets of the food system—and the assets that they bring through their individual connections to the earth and communities—brought me to a deeper understanding of the complexity of feeding people.

LEHUA: Lex, the way that you talk about your relationships between your studies, the communities that you are part of, and the organizations in which you've advocated for farms and communities makes me think of Beronda Montgomery's work on the communication pathways of plants and their symbiotic relationships with surrounding bacteria and mycelium. It seems that there is much for us to learn from this model in the field of technical and professional communication in particular, especially when it comes to reciprocity, community-based work, and tactical communication that push at the boundaries of policy. Dr. Beronda Montgomery is Foundation Professor of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology and Molecular Biology and Microbiology at Michigan State University. In her book *Lessons From Plants*, Montgomery (2021) discussed the ways in which plants actually choose to respond collaboratively to environmental cues:

As we've seen with other kinds of strategies intended to gain access to resources, plants can choose either individual or collaborative responses. This is the case with nitrogen availability, as well. Many plants respond to limited nitrogen availability by forming synergistic relationships with nitrogen-fixing bacteria . . . this symbiotic interaction involves a bilateral exchange that is beneficial to both partners. (p. 62).

<sup>2</sup> According to Green and Haines (2016), poor and minority communities in particular, which lack access to financial capital, see investments "often higher when invested outside rather than inside the community" (p. 228) due to perceived financial risks and deficits. Resulting "food deserts" leave myriad repercussions for the communities involved, from access to affordable fresh food to the ability to experience food as a community-generated natural resource and environmental capital.



**Figure 2: Carrots growing together at Moonrose Farm in Cranston, RI.**

Although the plants and fungal networks that make up the building blocks for our world can collaborate and work symbiotically to gain access to resources, we humans haven't always followed suit. Our resources and capital (not just financial capital) are controlled by policies put into place by the few who hold power. In a democracy, we typically think that changemaking relies on policy, too. Although deeply and fundamentally flawed in practice, democracy vaguely works by people voting and legislators honoring those votes by creating policy that serves what the people are asking for. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic exhibited that people often need changes to happen faster than the cogs of democracy will allow. When a necessity like food is involved, the urgency is exacerbated. The pandemic brought to light a growing mistrust between the government and people around food as grocery store shelves became bare. The fragility of the national food system became apparent and people began to worry, leading to panic-driven behavior. The model here is quite the opposite of Montgomery's description of mycelial networks that work to support and help each other thrive. What would the pandemic's food issues have looked like if we had more resilient systems based in abundance and care? What does community driven change look like, especially during times like this when policy seems to be inadequate? Lex, can you say more about how you learned to forge informal channels of communication and why they are important?

LEX: I think that learning how to value and make informal channels of communication comes from having to figure out a lot of what I wanted by myself without a lot of direction through my teens and

early 20s. The experience of early independence made me question “the way things work” at a young age.

LEHUA: I’m interested in what you mean by “the way things work.” In the field of technical communication, we call that instructional discourse.<sup>3</sup> If instructional discourse can be shaped by our societal values, then interrogating those values can help us generate new knowledge about the way things work: new pathways of communicating how-to in networks and communities that may not have had access to the information prior that circumvent official channels. We refer to this phenomenon as tactical technical communication.<sup>4</sup>

LEX: Yes! That description sounds like exactly what happened. I rarely accept things at face value: I was and am always asking why and trying to get down to the bottom of things that people just accepted as “the way it is” even if that means figuring it out myself through adventure and/or research. Being on my own early on encouraged me to use modes of communication that were available to me as a young person and to build a network based deeply on trust and shared values because of the learned perception that many systems in place for navigating the world are not helpful or reliable.

LEX: Social media is one of the informal forms of communication that I think I got to be very comfortable with when I was younger and again later on during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social media is a significant and often accurate form of public participation and backchannel communication, as well as trust-building. This has been shown repeatedly in emergency situations such as the Black Lives Matter protests and uprisings that happened in 2020. These events were highly documented on social media and there were even situations where vital information about safety was reaching people in dangerous situations. There is countless evidence<sup>5</sup> supporting social media as an important crisis communication tool. In 2001 during the 9/11 crisis, wikis created by citizens were used to collect info on missing people. Reuter and Kaufhold (2017) even noted that the United States Government was monitoring social media during events such as Hurricane Issac in 2012 and the 2010 Port-au-Prince hurricane in Haiti to gain information on the status of damages. In 2020, we watched people process their new situations as their lives were upended. Many people engaged with social media during lockdown to maintain connections and to find out the latest health recommendations. The increase in social media use is partially why related happenings during that summer such as BLM (Black Lives Matter) protests were so widely documented. People already engaging with social media saw first-hand live documentation of police brutality towards people of color and the ensuing protests unfold right in the palms of their hands.

LEX: The complete foil to social media is the jargon of government documents, especially at the USDA.

<sup>3</sup> See Ledbetter (2018).

<sup>4</sup> We’re drawing from Miles Kimball’s (2006) definition of tactical technical communication here, in which he describes instances in which “users have appropriated technology to increase their freedom of agency and their involvement in shared cultural narratives about technology, as members of these cultural groups form communities to create and share their own technical documentation” (p. 68). Kimball also has said that “we also need to broaden our field of view to account for technical communication as a practice extending beyond and between organizations” (p. 69), and we believe this holds true in our example as well. See also: Kimball (2017), Edenfield et al. (2019), and Edenfield and Ledbetter (2019).

<sup>5</sup> See Reuter and Kaufhold (2017); Potts (2013).

Much of the information on how the USDA works is shrouded in overly complicated, overly specific language. It is gatekeeping and ambiguous. I had a short stint working at USDA’s Farm Service Agency in Rhode Island’s only county office, and even I struggled to fully understand many of the pages that came across my desk despite having graduated from a blue-ribbon high school, having achieved a bachelor’s degree, and having already engaged with federal policy in meaningful ways. This kind of communication can serve as a barrier to access.

LEHUA: Right. As Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyay (2021) has reminded us, “Good intentions do not equal good methods” (p. 35). Speaking of barriers, was there ever a time when you felt that an officially mandated policy and the communication that happened around the policy acted as a barrier to connecting food to the community?

LEX: I found myself working at a non-profit food hub in Rhode Island during the onset of the 2020 COVID 19 pandemic. This food hub’s online ordering platform is unique because farmers are able to log into their own account on this platform and list what they have for sale within their own reasonable production limits. Then, wholesale accounts such as restaurants and food businesses order and the farmers fill the orders by bringing their products to the food hub’s warehouse facilities. The food hub then delivers to the customers with a small fleet of trucks. The COVID-19 pandemic put immediate and undue pressure on grocery store and other existing foodways which caused the food hub to open ordering to not only wholesale accounts, but also to individuals as well. This was enacted overnight. This emergency decision immediately had its own challenges: often on order day the food hub would sell out almost every farmer’s listed inventory in forty-five minutes to an hour. Despite these challenges, the overall goal of developing an “online farmer’s market” that maintained markets for farmers while also serving as a food delivery program was met. Customers did not have to risk exposure to COVID-19 to get food.

During this time, I had been working again with SNAP recipients. When the pandemic hit, the scarcity of food was overwhelming. The Rhode Island Public Health Institute estimates that one in eight Rhode Islanders are food insecure or lack adequate access to nutritious food. Not all, but many, food insecure households receive SNAP benefits to help pay for food. SNAP recipients are able to use their snap benefits in the form of an EBT card. Just like an electronic debit card, it’s connected to their account funds and they’re able to swipe that at most major grocery stores. In April 2019, the USDA began a pilot program to accept SNAP Online. Almost all states are participating in the pilot program now; however, at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were only a handful and Rhode Island was not one of them. In the states that were part of the pilot program, SNAP benefits were accepted online at Wal-Marts and through Amazon.<sup>6</sup> At the food hub, SNAP recipients called me daily wondering where to get food when the grocery store shelves were empty. To help the many community members calling, I called my organization’s contacts at USDA to try to get the pilot program released in Rhode Island with conversations also happening that detailed the need for it to be released nationally—impossible to do with a slow-moving policy-making system that requires several tiers of voting and decision making.

<sup>6</sup> United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (USDA) (2022) Supplemental Nutrition Access Program Online Purchasing Pilot.



The USDA did not step in to assist with online food access for SNAP recipients during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic despite already having an online program in place for over a year.

SNAP benefits are highly-regulated and the USDA seeks to have great control over what SNAP recipients buy with their snap benefits, even during a food shortage crisis. USDA's policies around SNAP largely assume that SNAP recipients will commit fraud by purchasing things not deemed legal to use SNAP on such as alcohol, cigarettes, soaps, paper products, household supplies, vitamins, or medicines, or assumes that other types of fraud will happen such as selling or trading SNAP benefit. SNAP fraud (according to a 2019 study done by the USDA) occurs in only 0.9% of the SNAP program. That means that 99% of SNAP benefits are not fraud. But this number still concerns the USDA and benefits are highly regulated. So, the technology to launch an online EBT program exists but the regulatory process has not been sufficient or sophisticated enough for the USDA to do that yet.

Imagine for a moment that we live under a government that assumes we have the knowledge and the resources to keep ourselves and each other healthy. What would being here look like? What would feeding the most marginalized groups look like? The gap between the online EBT program being available and feeding people using SNAP benefits during the pandemic was left to be filled by community members such as myself. Very quickly—within days of experiencing lockdown at the food hub—we were able to create and enact a system that accepted SNAP benefits, took advantage of the existing Bonus Bucks<sup>7</sup> program, and protect SNAP recipients from having to risk exposure to get one of the most basic necessities: food. Putting community above policy means being resilient, adapting, and quickly pivoting to be able to serve the community—forging connections just like a fungal network.

LEHUA: I think there are lessons to be learned here for technical and professional communication, too. When it comes to the studies that we design with our communities—the community outreach work that we academics do—we should be able to adapt and quickly pivot to be able to serve the community, in a language that is accessible to everyone, even when institutional barriers prevent this. We teach our students to fit into organizations, but in practice, many students will live in a world where organizations will not have the capacity to fully support their survival, as we saw in 2020. They will use their technical communication skills for their communities in the form of mutual aid and trust-building, and we need to prepare them for this.

LEX: Yes, trust-building is fundamental to community building and should certainly be used to inform decision making. Relevant to this is the trust-based decision-making I was a part of at the food hub. Around the same time as the online SNAP program was taking off at the food hub, generous funders awarded the food hub with a sum of money to be given out to organizations helping food insecure households across the state. Each organization was vetted to the same criteria by a small team of members of the food hub. The criteria prioritized organizations who had active projects getting food from farmers to BIPOC communities in need and organizations who were well known in the city for increasing community resilience to poverty and food insecurity.

<sup>7</sup> Bonus Bucks is a USDA program that allows buying power to increase when using SNAP at farmers markets.

The organizations that were vetted were by word of mouth, social media, or organizations that fit the criteria who the food hub had previously worked with. These streams were found to be the most reliable as the level of trust was built already—a quantitative vetting process was unnecessary and funds could be dispersed quickly. This level of trust is not possible at a nation-wide level with our current decision-making structure. Federal funds are controlled to the dollar and an individual such as a farmer or aid recipient must justify the spending of federal funds to the cent to assuage taxpayers and political stakeholders.

If you expect to use the policy arena to create meaningful change, keep in mind that democracy works best when it's closest to the people. Mark Winnie (2009) has told us in his book, *Closing the Food Gap*,

the farther away the decision makers are from those whose lives are affected by their decisions, the slower will be the change that occurs...an informed and activated citizenry, one that speaks for the grass roots first and foremost, is necessary to secure lasting change in this country. (p.150)

For decisions to be community led, the processes must be at an even smaller scale that allows trust between community members to matter, and they must prioritize those who need help the most. In acute crisis situations that are impacting communities in their own specific ways, relying on trust-based decision making is certainly appropriate and necessary.

LEHUA: I remember, in 2020, the ways that the community had to come together to make sure that people could still find food: the community refrigerators that were set up in neighborhoods and coffee shops and restaurants redirected their food supply to individuals as groceries. Community members relied on trust—on ethos—built within our networks and communicated through informal channels of communication for survival. Like you said, trust had not been established on a nationwide level, and the failure of the USDA to write and enact policy that would give SNAP recipients a rapid and safe way to access food was exacerbating the problem. One of the local coffee shops in my neighborhood took their surplus of milk, eggs, and bread, and posted their availability on Instagram for residents. They stopped serving coffee and became an important supply of basic food necessities. Most importantly, this quick change wasn't driven by policy. Policy couldn't keep up with the needs of the community. It seems like during the food crisis, we community members took it upon ourselves to build trust amongst each other and pool our strengths and resources to make sure we could survive the supply chain issues that lead to the pandemic food crisis. Unfortunately, regulatory agencies didn't take advantage of the opportunity to build trust with the community, and the problems persist three years later.

LEHUA: Lex, you've been a bridge between coalitions, organizations, farms, the public, and the USDA. How do you foresee getting more young people of color into county office jobs and advocating for creating opportunities for BIPOC/socially disadvantaged folks to be in positions to make changes in regards to the food system?

LEX: As with many systemic cultural changes, the answer is that pressure to change needs to come from all sides, at every level, all the time. I think first and foremost, the way we support our BIPOC (Black Indigenous People of Color) community members

is to give BIPOC arable land. For free. To keep. As well as access to generational knowledge that comes with the land. And other reparations they themselves have defined. If this sounds radical to you, you aren't paying attention to the disparities created by having an agricultural system, and therefore a food system, that originated through exploiting black bodies and dispossessing Indigenous communities of land and culture. Some of these disparities we have touched on in this discussion but there are many more. A food system that intentionally includes BIPOC and addresses social disparity will be something new in this country entirely. Communication plays a huge part in this work; it's finally possible to start doing work on dismantling some of these systems because of using rapid, modern, informal methods of communication such as what we mentioned in our discussion about social media and in using trust as an important decision-making tool.

As far as getting more people of color into decision-making roles, Leah Penniman's (2018) piece *Farming While Black* has informed us that

Transforming an organization toward power sharing means first ensuring that everyone in the organization understands how power is distributed, how decisions are made, and how they can increase their decision making power. Make training and mentorship available, along with clear steps for advancement open to everyone in the organization, including program participants. Too often, those with the least decision-making influence are people of color. White people are responsible for creating space so that people of color can lead. (p. 307)

LEHUA: It seems that tactical technical communication can play a big role here in the form of informal procedural discourse, or how communities learn to dismantle oppressive food systems. So far you have taught us that backchannel communication and social media play a big role in assembling nimble responses to crises amongst community members when policies have failed. How do we nurture and focus on relationship building for more effective communication that starts from the community and leads to policy-level change?

LEX: One thing I can say about forging communication lines is to talk to the people in your network and in your community first. Reflecting on all that has happened and all we've touched on in this conversation, I think another big take-away is that community starts with the relationships we build with our friends, neighbors, family members...it starts with regular people just living their regular day-to-day lives. There are highly skilled people around you who know more than you, and you can access their knowledge by starting a conversation that is based on curiosity and respect. When you start to view your community as a network rich with resources, you realize everything you need is around you, like the fungal networks on tree roots. Fungal mycelium threads connect tree roots and spread resources like water, nitrogen, carbon, and minerals; they move resources around so that each tree is healthy. Human communities can work like this too when the community members' perspective is supported in shifting to one of abundance.

LEHUA: As we wrap up our story, I'm going to list some of our major takeaways here as an offer to our readers before we leave them with our ending scene. I think these are important points to consider for all changemakers who are interested in working with and for communities. These aren't steadfast rules; instead, we hope our readers will see them as guidelines to consider as they move

forward in their work with communication design and sustainable food systems. We propose the following guidelines for researchers, community members, and practitioners:

- Legitimize and recognize informal backchannel communication, which often takes place social media platforms, as key to community survival, especially during times of crisis;
- Challenge high-level policy-keeping systems, bearing in mind that their distance from community members can function as a form of gatekeeping and may be shaped by privilege and unequal access to resources;
- Understand that policy-level change may not be the only or most desirable outcome of communication design in community outreach work, despite good intentions;
- Engage your community members with curiosity and respect when establishing new lines of communication;
- Consider that as educators we are not only preparing students to communicate within organizations, but we are also preparing them to communicate tactically for their survival in a world that will be shaped by disasters like the 2020 food crisis;
- Advocate for systemic changes that place BIPOC folk in positions of decision-making power;
- Work towards forging lasting connections that are built on mutual respect and synergy.

*We end our conversation in a small coffee shop in Providence, Rhode Island, where Lex once worked as a barista. The voices of other people in the shop conversing intermingle with the sounds of the espresso machine. These sounds are particularly welcome as the communal space of the coffee shop had been closed for almost three years due to the pandemic. It's once more a gathering place for community—a place for community roots to grow and seek nutrients and friendly neighbors. We look over our photos from past years of working at the farm and reminisce about the frosty mornings deep into the end of the growing season and how those plants went directly to the community fridge in Providence. We recall Robin Kimmerer (2015), who has stated: "We are bound in a covenant of reciprocity, a pact of mutual responsibility to sustain those who sustain us. And so the empty bowl is filled." (p. 382).*

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Young Farmers Coalition, former AmeriCorps Vista at Farm Fresh Rhode Island, and former Temporary Program Technician for the United States Department of Agriculture. She received her degree in Sustainable Agriculture at the University of Rhode Island.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lehua Ledbetter is Associate Professor of Professional and Public Writing at the University of Rhode Island. Her research areas include technical and professional communication, cultural rhetorics, and feminist rhetorical theory. She received her doctoral degree in Rhetoric and Writing at Michigan State University.

Alexandria Neelis is a Land Advocacy Fellow at the National

# Community-Engaged User Experience Pedagogy: Stories, Emergent Strategy, and Possibilities

Soyeon Lee  
University of Texas at El Paso  
slee15@utep.edu

Heather Noel Turner  
Santa Clara University  
hturner@scu.edu

Emma J. Rose  
University of Washington Tacoma  
ejrose@uw.edu

## ABSTRACT

In this article, we discuss the unique challenges of Community-Engaged User Experience (CEUX) by using storytelling and present a framework of emergent patterns (brown, 2017) to make visible labor, practice, and messiness of the process of building, maintaining, and renewing partnerships with community members and partners. We share three models for CEUX engagements: one-to-many, many-to-many, and one-to-plural. Within the models, we detail the structure of each CEUX engagement, what students did, and the affordances and constraints of each model. In addition, we share thoughts or voices from the community partners or collaborators or students engaged in the projects. We conclude by connecting the models to the elements of Emergent Strategy in the section From Patterns to Possibilities where we call on fellow instructors and community partners to embrace abundance-oriented questions.

## CCS Concepts

Human-centered computing

## Keywords

User experience, Community-engaged, Pedagogy, Emergent strategy

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## INTRODUCTION

Telling stories is how we find community as teachers. In this article, we discuss the unique challenges of Community-Engaged User Experience (CEUX) by using storytelling and present a framework of emergent patterns (brown, 2017) to make visible labor, practice, and complexity of the process of building, maintaining, and renewing partnerships with community members and partners.

As a main area of focus in communication design, UX is a rhetorically rich and complex space for practitioners and a growing focus for Technical and Professional Communication (TPC) instructors (Rose & Tenenberg, 2017; Turner & Rose, 2022) and students (Crane & Cargile Cook, 2022; Lauer & Brumberger, 2016). If practicing UX is complex, teaching it is even more so. UX pedagogy includes context-specific variables such as time, cost, and resource constraints, collaboration with users, and negotiating with partners/clients (Chong, 2012). While many current TPC instructors feel they lack the preparation to teach UX (Chong, 2017; Turner & Rose, 2022), many TPC instructors do teach UX and of those quite a few involve community-engaged practices in their UX pedagogy (Turner & Rose, 2022).

Working with community partners can be a rich, fulfilling, and complex site for students to learn about UX. We have chosen the term Community-Engaged User Experience (CEUX) to describe a novel approach to pedagogy that works in collaboration with community organizations and partners while simultaneously providing students with experience in learning UX methods and practices. CEUX provides an opportunity for students to experience practice-based struggles (Chong, 2012; Rose & Tenenberg, 2017; Scott, 2008). It combines deep understanding of users, needs, values, and abilities with goals and objectives of community stakeholders (Batova, 2021). Community-engaged work requires building and maintaining trusted, coalitional, reciprocal relationships (Baniya et al., 2022; Faber, 2002; Walton et al., 2019) and foregrounding explicit values (Walton et al., 2015). In order to fully engage in the

complexity of UX work, we believe that it is necessary to work on what might be referred to as “real world” projects, that is, projects that are authentic, include multiple stakeholders, with entangled goals, and a lack of simple solutions. Community engagement does not inherently ensure that stakeholders are oriented to social justice. However, CEUX seeks to push back on an extractive, capitalist notion of UX that privileges capital and attention hijacking. CEUX seeks to take into account the variegated needs of communities and people in addition to the needs of organizations while providing students with opportunities to develop skills and dispositions to help prepare them for future work in UX (Rose et al., 2020).

Applying coalitional practice to UX pedagogy through partnerships involves specific labor, challenges, tensions, and dilemmas. However, concrete teaching practices of CEUX are rarely made visible. In our article, we start by providing background on community-engaged pedagogy in TPC and explaining why UX is a unique, promising, and challenging space. Second, we explore Emergent Strategy and why it is a compelling methodology for CEUX. Third, we present details on how we developed a model inspired by Emergent Strategy and our conversations with each other, our partners, and other colleagues in the field. Fourth, we present the model that includes three relational patterns. The first is one-to-many which highlights a relationship between one partner in multiple classes and multiple student groups. The second pattern, many-to-many, highlights multiple partners with multiple groups of students in the same class. The third pattern, one-to-plural highlights a relationship between one partner with student groups working with their own communities. In each of the models, we detail the structure of the engagement, share details about what students did, and provide excerpts of conversations from students or partners or collaborators involved in the engagement. We conclude by connecting the models to the elements of Emergent Strategy in the last section entitled From Patterns to Possibilities where we call on fellow instructors and community partners to embrace abundance-oriented questions.

## EMERGENT STRATEGY AS A METHODOLOGY FOR CEUX

In this section, we first define Emergent Strategy, provide background on community-engaged pedagogy in TPC, and explain why UX is a unique, promising, and challenging space. We also articulate why Emergent Strategy is a helpful methodology for UX pedagogy CEUX.

### What is Emergent Strategy?

Emergent Strategy, defined by adrienne maree brown (2017) as an adaptive framework, extends Black science fiction writer Octavia Butler’s “relational leadership” to “practices” and “tools” that can bring transformative change (p. 23). brown uses the term *emergence* to highlight “the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions” (Obolensky, 2014, as cited in brown, 2017, p. 13) that can create change. This emergence framework is contrastive to capitalist notions, such as independence, “constant growth, violent competition, and critical mass” (p. 14), which are mostly linear and non-iterative. We conceptualize diverse relations tangled around CEUX or what brown (2017) called elements (p. 50). brown (2017) has described Emergent Strategy as composed of six elements:

- fractal;
- adaptive;
- interdependence and decentralization;
- non-linear and iterative;
- resilience and transformative justice;
- creating more possibilities (p. 50).

brown uses scalar perspectives that zoom in and out locally, regionally, and globally to investigate relations between and within elements. These scalar perspectives and practices can be adopted to describe the distributed agency, activities, and work of CEUX instructors, students, community partners, and other stakeholders in ecological, interdependent, and decentralized relationships. In this relationship, “building alignment” among stakeholders is more important than “selling ideas” (p. 80). In this alignment, agents in CEUX who work with community partners attend to and practice interdependence and complexity.

### Why Apply Emergent Strategy to UX?

TPC literature has consistently documented oppressive mechanisms in technology and design (e.g., Gonzales’s (2022) discussion of monolingual interface design) and material consequences on users (e.g., Dorpenyo’s (2019) discussion of discrimination of voters in Ghana). Based on their lived experiences as practitioners, UX designers, researchers, and activists have critiqued the ways UX embeds white supremacy culture at its ideological level and perpetuates the status quo. For example, Founder and CEO Vivianne Castillo (2018) discussed the hypocrisy of self-proclaimed “advocates for the user” who champion empathetic, human-centered work with “our inability to discuss, acknowledge and absolve the effects of unchecked white privilege and male privilege within our leadership, organizations, conferences, and research” (para. 3). As a result, UX co-opts a sense of altruism as a shield against critique, because user advocates do what is necessary for the good of the user. Product designer Amrutha Palaniyappan (2020) cataloged the interconnected histories of racial bias and user-centered design and the harmful results when default users were assumed white, cisgendered male, and able-bodied: “racially biased products are created unintentionally as a by-product of years and years of systemic racism and practices that are influenced by inherent biases—and that’s the problem” (para. 9). When UX creates products and services under the guise of deployment in a value-neutral vacuum, users and nonusers suffer. Design director Jesse Weaver (2020) identified issues of a predominantly white workforce assuming anyone can design for anyone because UX “has some special ability to objectively understand another person” regardless of positionality and lived experience (para. 9). Centralizing and hoarding power as problem-namers and problem-solvers exacerbates inequality and stratification (Buzon, 2020).

Lone designers and researchers cannot address systematic oppression on behalf of users. At the same time, industry methodologies like Agile and Lean do not directly address these problems and instead guide UX processes to reach maximum efficiency, profit, and value (“eliminate waste”). As evidenced by the CCCC Black Technical and Professional Communication Position Statement with Resource Guide (McKoy et al., 2020), approaches to the design and communication of technology are not neutral or objective. Instead, TPC researchers and teachers are called to apply frameworks, methods, and methodologies that decenter white supremacist logics and engage Black experiences:

User experience design from the perspective of Black TPC taps into Molefi K. Asante's concept of Afrocentricity by placing the suppressed histories and experiences of the Black Diaspora at the center of evaluating the social, economic, and political aspects of design. These perspectives are driven by practitioners (rather than scholars) of technical and professional communication who push against the marginalization of Black lived experiences in design thinking. Their perspectives encourage us to consider design as it positively impacts and emerges from the needs of the Black community. (McKoy et al., 2020)

Because TPC has embraced a justice-oriented stance (Haas & Eble, 2018; Walton et al., 2019) and UX is part of the field, then we argue the way we do UX in TPC is with awareness and acknowledgement of such logics. Rooted in Black thought, practice, and leadership, an Emergent Strategy methodology can directly address problems and guide CEUX processes to value connected and interdependent relationships and structure opportunities for transformative justice.

## How is Emergent Strategy a Helpful Methodology for Understanding CEUX?

Just as Emergent Strategy is valuable for practicing UX, it is also valuable for engaging in CEUX. If we take our role as instructors to be facilitators of learning experiences rather than gatekeepers of knowledge, Emergent Strategy reminds us that our practices are not universal, but smaller pieces of a never-ending project focused on justice that is both decentralized and interdependent on human relations. As detailed in the sections below, we all engage in teaching UX with community partners, but we do so in ways that are particular to our relationships and are enabled and constrained by our institutional contexts, our positionalities, and our emerging knowledges. Even though our pedagogies might be particular, they are recognizable and familiar to each other. We notice our practices reflected in each other's practices.

An Emergent Strategy methodology applies brown's "adaptive framework" to doing CEUX, so that sets of methods and principles are constantly changing within and across contexts and environments. While the term methodology can be defined as a "theoretical approach to the practice of something, complete with its own set of methods and principles" (Still & Crane, 2017, p. 43), the term *methodology* in this article indicates what Spinuzzi (2005) has identified as an "understanding of *knowledge by doing*" (p. 163) or an approach grounded in lived experience or "personal experience" to "more deeply engage the limitations and potentials of what we think we know" (Lockett et al., 2021, p. 27). We make this distinction to clarify that theories and practices in our work are porous to each other and mediate between philosophies and actions. For example, Heather taught *Emergent Strategy* as a design methodology to students across multiple UX projects and courses, but Authors 1 and 3 were practicing elements of Emergent Strategy before reading brown's work. Soyeon was using the metaphor of a nautilus shell to represent the related but different design work her students did in class, which converges with brown's concept of fractals. Emma was reading *Emergent Strategy* in relationship to social justice work, but later came to recognize how it was connected and could expand ideas of teaching UX. These are brief snapshots of the convergences that are made possible by Emergent Strategy as a methodology that understands by doing.

## FROM STORIES TO PATTERNS: HOW THIS PROJECT EMERGED

We want to tell the story of how this project came to be and how the three of us, as colleagues, collaborators, and authors, came to find ourselves drawn to the questions that this article is articulating.

Over the past several years, we have become engaged in each other's work around the topic of UX pedagogy through attending online workshops, reading each other's work, and discussing topics on Twitter or over email. The types of questions that engaged colleagues ask each other: "can you tell me more about what you mean about how you are using this term?" or "have you thought about expanding the work in that way?" and "what do you do in these contexts, because this is what I do?" What emerged from these conversations was an awareness of the critical role of community-engaged partnerships and how that intersected with how we teach UX and how we all approached this work in different but related ways. These emerging conversations lead us to propose a workshop for the ATTW 2022 conference titled "Co-designing Community-Engaged UX Pedagogy: Acknowledge, Assemble, Amplify, Advocate." The goal of the workshop was to bring together instructors to create dialog across a wide range of experiences to learn from each other and engage in two main questions: 1. How do we meaningfully, ethically, and respectfully engage community partners?; 2. How can we design UX courses and assignments that highlight community assets?

In order to share our perspectives with workshop attendees, we told each other stories about our institutions, our student populations, and ourselves. These stories helped us recognize the self-similar patterns of our work and how they emerge and adapt across scales. We developed the three models that we present in this article as a place to engage in scenario-based activities with our attendees. The visual models served as an iteration of our early meetings (this time with over 50 attendees instead of us three)—a starting point for articulating the patterns that repeated across each practice and acted as a prompt for sharing stories. From the attendees' responses, we were able to iterate and elaborate on the models. We each wrote a narrative and then read and annotated each other's narratives to identify connections, tensions, elaborations, and areas where more information was needed. These narratives appear in the next section Emergent Patterns in CEUX. Then, we go on to make connections between the stories and present them in the section From Patterns to Possibilities. Even this retelling is flattening the highly iterative nature of building these models and narratives together as we continue to identify the fractal nature of the work we are doing separately and together.

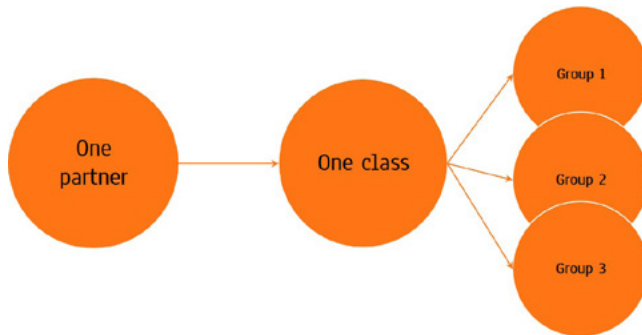
## EMERGENT PATTERNS IN CEUX

In this section, we share three emergent patterns supported by vignettes about experiences with CEUX pedagogies. The one-to-many pattern shares how one community organization may partner with many classes, many student groups, and/or across many terms. Next, the many-to-many pattern features one class that works with multiple partners. Last, the one-to-plural pattern explains multiple student groups that work with one community partner and center plural values by working with their own communities they advocate for. These patterns allow us to explore complexities, rather than flatten them.



## One-to-Many

In this section, Heather writes about the one-to-many model she employs in her teaching of community-based UX courses.



**Figure 1. One-to-many.** In this model, all groups work on the same task or on related but separate tasks or on different tasks.

The one-to-many pattern (see Figure 1) may feature one community organization in partnership with many classes, many student groups, and/or many terms. For example, a community organization partnered with my UX course, three other courses in my department, an honor's student for their thesis research, and later sections of the UX course taught by other instructors. These are just the interactions that are the most proximal to me—the organization works in tandem with the law school and frequently partners across colleges and units on campus.

## Institutional Context

This course is offered at a private, predominantly white, small liberal arts college in California's Silicon Valley. The course fulfills a general education requirement for "experiential learning for social justice," which is based on the institution's designation as a Jesuit college. As part of the general education requirement, the course must include a community partnership and be designed to meet university-wide learning goals for social justice.

## Partners

Before defining the elements of Emergent Strategy, brown (2017) outlined principles that are foundational to working for change in the world: "Focus on critical connections more than critical mass" and "There is a conversation in the room that only these people at this moment can have. Find it" (p. 41). I located and established a community partnership by applying brown's principles: talking to my colleagues who already did such work in their courses. An organization that came up repeatedly across class levels and subjects was the Northern California Innocence Project (NCIP). This Bay Area chapter of a national nonprofit organization works to exonerate wrongly incarcerated individuals. When researching with a similar social justice organization, Jones (2016) noted that such an organization "lends itself to an investigation of the humanistic implications of technical and professional communication. Because the...impact of a system of laws and regulations, processes and procedures, and values and beliefs on individuals and groups of individuals..." (p. 299). The NCIP frequently involved other university units in their work—not just by partnering but by frequently presenting information about their cases, mentoring law students at their law clinics, and by hosting events on campus. After attending a few of their university events, where they showcased some of the work students had done for

them (communicating the scientific reasoning of DNA evidence to legislators), I reached out to the director of communications, Lori. We became very quick friends, not because of work, which I credit to Lori and to my friends and academic mentors who taught me that the basis of change work is trust (Green, 2021), family (Browdy et al., 2021), and care for each other (Nur, 2022). Lori and I shared meals, exchanged recommendations for makeup and jewelry, and commiserated about our personal lives.

One of the things that excited me about my community contact and the organization writ large is that they were already doing so much so effectively. It's always a challenge for me to shift students from a deficit-based approach (critique, replace) to an asset-based approach (Durá, 2018; Gonzales, 2022). The organization had so much content, a defined strategic approach, plenty of data, and success. My students would learn so much just from reading their website and listening to our partners.

## Role

When working with communities, it is critical to me to solicit goals, projects, and deliverables from my partnership with the organization, what brown (2017) has referred to as interdependence and decentralization (p. 83). As a researcher and teacher of TPC with a focus on UX, my role with the NCIP was as a liaison—for project requirements, assets, and communications. I would meet with Lori based on her schedule and needs, listen to her updates about the many different projects the NCIP communications team was doing, and ask her what she needed to continue to be successful. As a cisgender white woman on the unceded territory of the Ohlone, Muckma Ohlone, and Tamien people, my interactions with Lori mirror how I research and teach with my positionality in mind: I focus on the knowledge that I don't know—the community and institutional histories, the failures between institutions and communities, the colonial project, the geographies, the populations, and even the cities and streets. Frequently I ask myself, "How can I get out of the way of successful work happening already? How can I funnel the resources I have away from me?"

To answer some of these questions for myself and with my students, I taught Emergent Strategy as a design methodology, and turned to local organizations like Oakland City Hall's Civic Design Lab (n.d.), neighboring institutions like Stanford's Legal Design Lab (n.d.), and UX practitioner groups like the Design Justice Network (n.d.) and HmntyCtrrd (n.d.). To plan and scaffold supportive learning experiences that reassured students when faced with uncertainty around the exact shape of our projects, I intentionally adapted my role from instructor-only to project manager, which subsequently adapted my partner and students' responsibilities. As a result, students and myself negotiated material realities including limited contact and communication with organizations. I found myself doing more facilitation than lecturing, more project managing than lesson planning, more designing than grading.

I spent most of my time defining and refining the scope of work, creating timelines and due dates, supporting my student teams to meet those expectations. At times, I also conducted research and designed with students, whether that is modeling processes or augmenting deliverables with my own work. Last, I collaborated with students to assemble class work into an implementation packet for the client handoff.

## What Students did

Design that works in the world requires understanding multiple

contexts: the perspectives of different communities, historical and cultural backgrounds, legal constraints, resources, the technical or process issues individuals face, and our own position in the world. I designed my course with the goal that students would learn to:

- Understand how personal/societal experiences of privilege and oppression have a role in writing and design;
- Structure opportunities for reciprocity with community partners, organizations, local stakeholders, and peers;
- Apply design-based approaches (e.g., ethical listening, participatory design, content strategy) with community partners toward collaboratively generated rhetorical goals;
- Design content (media and alphabetic) using a variety of information sources including community partners, primary research, and secondary sources;
- Articulate the rationale of their rhetorical choices and a personal methodology for working toward social change;
- Engage in advocacy work in their own organizations and communities.

Students used participatory research methods as tools for a sustained project with our partner. Components of our project included but were not limited to: content strategy and creation, project management and strategic planning, human-centered design and usability testing, and information design (see Table 1). Students worked in interdependent teams based on domain areas of UX (Information Architecture team, Content Strategy team, Visual Design team, User Research team), some students chose to “float” across teams. We spent time with our community partners and engaged in critical and liminal reflections, as well as generated research-based texts and products.

**Table 1**  
**Overview of Learning Tasks**

Timeline	Purpose	Example activities and assignments
Weeks 1-3	Acknowledgement: Identify capacity, resources, assets, relations, opportunities, constraints	Assigning the client’s website and social media as “readings,” student surveys, content audits or inventories, asset maps, listening sessions, 6-word positionality statements
Weeks 4-5	Amplification: Sustaining and increasing existing capacity of organization, students, user needs, and our own	Individual pitches, opportunity workshop, card sorting, appreciative interviews
Weeks 6-7	Assessment and Assembly: Structuring opportunities for reciprocity, gathering, co-design	Affinity groups, jigsaw method, pattern libraries, prototyping, first click/tap testing

Weeks 8-10	Advocacy: Supporting growth and sustainability—now, in immediate future, long term	Implementation packet, sustainability plan, presentations, celebrations with organization, individual methodology
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Although the quarter ended, the collaboration with the organization continued in different ways within my purview and beyond—some students decided to continue researching and designing with the organization as part of their senior thesis work. In the following quarters, I continued to meet with Lori and other instructors as they built on and expanded the work my students did. The organization implemented some of our work.

## Affordances and Constraints

This model acknowledges the labor of instructors and staff to create and sustain collaborations within a college/department and also makes that labor apparent to students and administrators. Because an instructor might solicit the expertise and experience of other instructors who do community-engaged work, this model creates opportunities for instructor-to-instructor support and dialogue through sharing or co-authoring materials, troubleshooting, and validating experiences. Similarly, this model organically assembles students across disparate classes into a relationship where they are building on the UX work that came before them and future thinking of the UX work that will come after in future courses, independent study projects, and internships. Last, this model experiences the affordance of sustained engagement with a partner organization across courses, terms, and students because of the frequently overlapping experiences and organic growth. However, this affordance may also be a constraint for community partners who may need an administrator/centralized liaison to understand partner capacity limits and manage growth and university engagements. This model also requires comfort with flexibility and adaptability on both the instructor and students’ parts as timelines and products and communications with partners are more in flux.

## Conversation Excerpts from Stakeholders<sup>1</sup>

Mara Strong, former student and current UX writer for Wish.com, reflected on her extended UX work with the NCIP beyond my course:

I chose to work with NCIP not because I saw a lack or need in their organization to create content. Quite the opposite. They are constantly creating content to exonerate, educate, and reform, furthering their mission to protect the rights of the innocent. At the same time, I was introduced to adrienne marie brown’s Emergent Strategy and saw a connection between brown’s framework for social organization and content strategy. The real-word applications are boundless...While emergent content strategy promotes and fosters change, this change does not take the rapid iterative journey that other methodologies like Scrum or an Agile method. It’s a holistic approach to the creation, management, and publishing of usable content. What unifies all who implement an emergent

<sup>1</sup> Based on a community partner invitation form Emma created we made a new form titled “Invitation to participate: Reflecting on our work together” that invited our stakeholders, including students, community partners, and collaboratorsto share their post-project reflections.



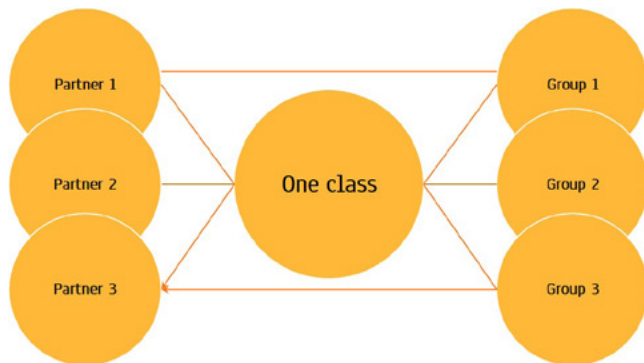
content strategy is their participation in the struggle for social justice, an effort that may never completely be achieved (something which has caused many an internal conflict to accept). Their intentions do not lie in creating the best product to go-to-market as fast as possible. They are guided by the mentality that their contributions, from seemingly inconsequential microcopy to an overall brand identity, are aimed toward the good, and the betterment of society as a whole as it aligns with an organization's greater mission to achieve justice. It prioritizes the unique stories and experiences of the individuals it aims to serve, which in turn will benefit us all. (M. Strong, personal communication, December 29, 2022)

Mara's reflection here illustrates the fractal nature of CEUX; meaningful relationships with community organizations were built by repeatedly working with Emergent Strategy and the NCIP over and over again, at different scales (in class, beyond class).

## Many-to-Many

In this section, Emma writes about the many-to-many model she engages in her teaching of community-based UX courses.

The many-to-many pattern (Figure 2) features one class that engages multiple partners. Each student team works on a unique project with a community partner. I use this model in several courses that I teach; here I discuss its use in an undergraduate Usability Testing and Research course from Spring 2022. Each student team works directly with a client and conducts a usability study on a system or service.



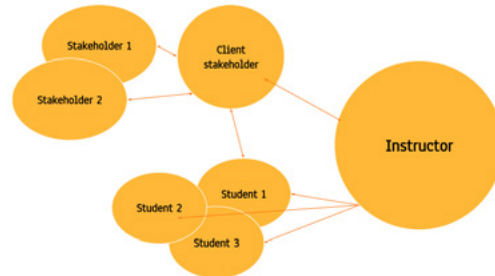
**Figure 2. Many-to-many. In this model, one class hosts multiple partners who each work with one group of students.**

## Institutional Context

This course, offered at a regional university in the Pacific Northwest of the United States with a Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, is designated by the university both as a service learning and research course. The student population is diverse across race, ethnicity, ability, economic backgrounds, and political viewpoints. The students enrolled are a mix of technical communication majors/minors or others interested in usability or UX.

## Partners

The many-to-many model represents a repeating set of structures and each node contains a complex web of human relations. How clients become clients is not straightforward, as their formation is serendipitous and sometimes intentional. I have approached people, or they have approached me, or social media has been a conduit, but more likely, there is a beautiful randomness to many of these relationships.



**Figure 3. Zooming in on any one client reveals webs of human relations.**

When I zoom in a bit closer on one project from Spring 2022, I focus on one, the Pierce County Auditor's Office, a government agency with many responsibilities, but a primary one is providing access and information about voting (see Figure 3). The auditor, Julie Anderson, reached out to me after hearing of my work in the community. As the course progressed, secondary stakeholders from the auditor's office were involved as subject matter experts and provided feedback to the team. I also see the three students who participated in this project: hardworking, enthusiastic about UX, complicated lives with jobs, families, and other obligations.

## Role

For my role in the class, I reflect on my positionality and its impact on my relations with students and clients. I am a white, cisgendered, woman with tenure in the academy which confers privilege and authority in some, but not all, settings. I have an embodied understanding of how UX is done in practice due to my industry experience. In relation to the client, I manage the majority of the client relations and act as a type of project manager and vet student communications with the client. While managing these relationships and setting expectations can be time-consuming, it is crucial to the project's success. In relation to students, my role is coach or guide as they develop emerging skills related to writing, communication, and research. While the students communicate directly with the client during visits and email, I am always in the conversation to monitor and support where necessary. I review any email communication for the client before students have the OK to send it out. I have developed this practice over time due to previous missteps or miscommunication between students and clients. It is labor that might feel overly matriarchal to students at times but is done with the intention to honor and preserve the ongoing relationship and respect the labor of the community partner. It is also done to model professionalism with these interactions while simultaneously acknowledging that models of workplace professionalism are steeped in white supremacy culture (Gray, 2019).

## What Students did

In this class, the following student learning objectives are the focus of the class:

- Define and describe usability, why it is important, and how to evaluate a product's usability;
- Design and conduct a usability study including identifying research questions and appropriate methods;
- Analyze usability data to identify problems and make recommendations;
- Communicate in writing and in speech a variety of documents and genres key to a study, including a study kit, recommendation report and presentation of findings;
- Demonstrate teamwork and collaborative skills by working as part of a team to successfully conduct applied research and communicate the results with a variety of audiences.

When I revisit these objectives, what is not surfaced here is how this course is designed to engage community partners. While those aspects of the course are so clear to me, and taken for granted, surfacing the community aspect of the course in the learning objectives would be a worthwhile revision for students.

As part of the course, students do the following:

1. Choose a projects/client to work with from my vetted list;
2. Draft and revise a research proposal that identifies audience, research questions, and study goals;
3. Collaborate with the client through meetings or memos to ask questions, gather feedback, and learn about the domain;
4. Create a test design kit (Rose, 2023) which includes all of the research procedures and materials for the study;
5. Conduct a study with 5-7 participants;
6. Develop and present a report that details the study findings.

## Affordances and Constraints

For affordances, the model provides me as the instructor with a pedagogical space to highlight the complexity, or messiness, of this work, what we refer to as the practice-level struggles of UX (Chong, 2012, Rose & Tenenberg, 2017; Scott, 2008). This means having students work directly with the client to understand their needs, the organization, and the product they are testing. Having multiple projects allows students to choose a topic connected to their interests. Students work within diverse teams and directly with the client to design and run a study and report the results, which more often than not, is bad news about the usability. In addition to working within their own teams, students can observe how other teams approach client work and recognize the multitude of possible ways to enact methods, manage relationships, and articulate research findings. The affordances simultaneously whisper the constraints, namely my time and labor as an instructor. Not only do I need to find partners, but I must also manage expectations and the relationship between the students and the clients. Further, the risk embedded in CEUX work is that the results will not meet the client's needs which can feel risky for instructors and students. Further, if the clients are not invested in the relationship, or the products they are building are not sufficiently ready for testing, students can feel left out, or worse, exploited. These constraints loop back to the labor I do as an instructor to find appropriate clients and projects.

## Conversation Excerpts from Stakeholders

As part of ongoing work on the project, I asked the two students who continue to be involved with the community partner about their experience. Specifically, we discussed their choice to connect the project to scholarly literature in the field. When they presented the work to the client, the students situated it within the idea of civic websites as technologies of disenfranchisement by retelling the legacy of literacy tests of Black Voters in the US (Jones & Williams, 2018).

One student, Croix Stone, a senior majoring in business and minoring in technical communication said:

The topic, in particular, I just found to be immensely interesting, and how clearly the voting literacy tests were implemented purposefully like this was purposeful action. But when looking back at it from an objective point of view. I feel like we all kind of saw a similarity, not, as in Pierce County didn't want their voters to access information, but more so like they weren't making it for them, and I feel like that's kind of just what hit us. We were trying to find something moving to put into words what we were seeing actively, and having this in our minds. (C. Stone, personal communication, December 16, 2022)

Another student, Candy Santos, a senior majoring in technical communication, said:

Even though this [the Jones and Williams article] was from a previous class, it really stuck out with me because when they say history repeats itself, it doesn't have to mean exactly how it is, but just some common similarities. A lot of the research articles that we read in school are very dry, but this one was very impactful, because this is something that I relate to due to the fact I can't vote. Why would you do that to people who literally will most likely live here for the rest of their lives, pay taxes, and do all things that help this country's economy but they're still not given the right to vote? So, I really felt that one. Voter suppression is still happening to this day, even though it's from 1890, it's still happening to voters with disabilities, immigrants, and a lot of other underrepresented groups. (C. Santos, personal communication, December 16, 2022)

I was struck with how this community-engaged project was a form of praxis for these students that brought together the ability to develop new research skills, make a key connection to scholarly reading, and synthesize these ideas and concepts and use them to conceptualize the research findings in a way that was compelling and memorable for the client.

The primary stakeholder who initiated the project, Julie Anderson, Auditor of Pierce County, shared about her experience of working with the students.

I was also very impressed that the students appeared to be genuinely engaged in the subject matter [of voting] and interested in improving elections and usability. So it was nice to feel their care and concern that their motives weren't just academic. Their motives were community based and wanting to make systems better for people,

and I loved that. It made it feel like a real partnership.  
(J. Anderson, personal communication, January 5, 2023)

She also went on to talk about how the usability study itself helped her and the other stakeholders in the organization see the site in a new light.

So many of our assumptions [about the website] were incorrect and so it's just absolutely critical to have an independent, third party, professional review of stuff, and seeing it from the consumer's eyes rather than our own. I knew that intellectually, but it was startling when we got the results. I was just like, "oh, man!"

Finally, in our conversation we talked about the ability to connect our class with others in local government and beyond. When asked to suggest other entities might be a good partner, Ms. Andersen said:

Again, checking our assumptions and not letting our own bright ideas of reality and how users experience it. I'm thinking of course where people engaged with the court system: complicated! They have transformed themselves digitally in the COVID age and they are keeping much of it, and I think they may be ready for the next step, which is the usability and talk about the justice mission!

This for me highlighted the interconnected nature of these engagements and how the start of one relationship can lead to a variety of others. Working with the court system had not been something on my radar but now seems like such a great opportunity to work together.

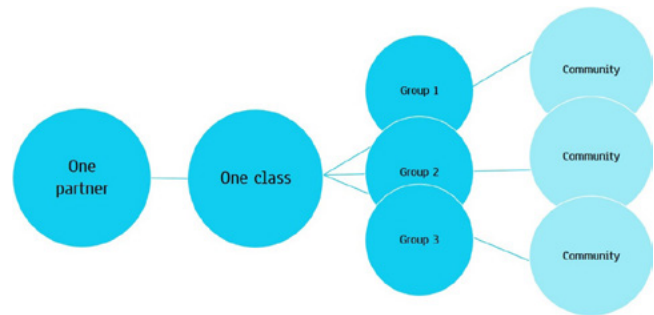
The many-to-many model is a model that has shifting dynamics and can be challenging to manage. The section above just addresses one of the projects and relationships within the class. I could tell five more stories about this one class alone.

In the next section, we discuss another model for enacting relationships with communities.

## One-to-Plural

In this section, Soyeon writes about the one-to-plural model she employs in her teaching of community-based UX courses.

Like the many-to-many and one-to-many models, the one-to-plural model is based on the complexity of human relations. While this model is particularly similar to the one-to-many model in that it engages one community partner with multiple student groups, the one-to-plural model is focused on highlighting the complexity of the material environments of students. The model one-to-plural refers to an approach to teaching UX situated within the relations of power and grounded in students' knowledge of communities and experiences of living in plural worlds (see Figure 4). This model aims to highlight activist UX agendas that center values of marginalized communities.



**Figure 4. One-to-plural. In this model, one class hosts one partner, and each group of students works with students' chosen community group to/for which they belong/advocate.**

This model started from my lived experiences in teaching TPC in a two-year college located in an urban metropolitan area in a southwestern state. This model was further developed and iterated as I adopted practical applications I took from Johnathon Mauk's (2003) work that emphasized the situatedness of students and "a sense of *where*" (p. 369) in writing pedagogy. This model was also helped by design theories that foregrounded plurality (Escobar, 2018; Fry, 2010), which emphasized interrelatedness of humans and nonhumans and the impossibility of "the separation of the autonomous individual from the community" (Escobar, 2018, p. xxvii).

In spring 2021, I integrated a UX research project in the last module, based on a partnership with West Houston Assistance Ministries (WHAM), a local nonprofit organization, in an online synchronous technical and business writing course. In this project, students presented themselves as advocates of their communities and did fieldwork to bring the lived experiences of underrepresented users in their communities and promote web or mobile accessibility of the community partner. By recruiting the user in their own communities with/for which they identified and advocate, student teams were guided to work as communication designers for marginalized users instead of erasing their identities, histories, contexts, and material environments. I had them work on small ethnographic fieldwork assignments toward their UX research project. Students investigated the community partner's communication goal and examined public-facing channels (Facebook, Twitter, and the official website) that occurred over the past three months. The director of the Development and Communications department of WHAM visited an online class meeting and shared the fact sheets of their website, such as average page views, time on sites, and number of returning/new users.

## Institutional Context

This institution, located in one of the most diverse cities in the US, has the largest international student population among two-year institutions (Fact Book 2019-2020). Although 80% of the surveyed two-year colleges in the US in the year of 2018–2019 have provided one or more TPC courses (Bivens et al., 2020, p. 200), their TPC curricular and UX pedagogy within TPC courses have yet to be fully visible. As noted, teaching user-centeredness has been a part of TPC courses across institutions although their course

titles often do not explicitly reflect their UX components (Turner & Rose, 2022). This community-engaged UX research component aligned with course student learning outcomes described by the department, particularly, with the two specific outcomes: “analyze the ethical responsibilities” and “develop verbal, visual, and multimedia materials, in individual and/or collaborative projects as appropriate” by doing a qualitative UX research project as a group. The one-to-plural model started with three rationales.

First, integrating community-engaged UX was adopted to enable students to understand the complexity of multiple stakeholders and their research ethics. By integrating ethnographic research methods, this CEUX component aimed to offer opportunities for students to experience the complexity of fieldwork and research ethics. Second, I designed the community-engaged module to further amplify students and stakeholders’ assets in doing UX research. I encouraged students to offer languages (e.g., Arabic, Spanish, Urdu, Vietnamese) and mediums (e.g., face-to-face, phone, audio or video recording, or note taking only) that could make test participants feel comfortable and agentive. I shared my language diversity statements in the assignment prompt to guide students to consider creating a usability test script in a multilingual format.

Lastly, this model with a focus on plural values helped students connect their daily lives with academic spaces. As Mauk (2003) pointed out, for students in two-year colleges, their daily lives on campus are “something to get through” (pp. 372–373). Mauk (2003) emphasized that teachers should acknowledge students’ lives across places and help them build a “third space,” a concept he borrowed from Edward Soja, which refers to a “junction between academic spaces...and students’ daily lives” (p. 380). I applied this point to my CEUX component by recognizing students’ multidimensional spaces, by adapting traditional UX research methods to “student ontology” (Mauk, 2003, p. 380) and environments (e.g., adjusting the number of prototype testings, finding usability test participants in their communities, engaging multilingual environments in doing UX research) (see Table 2).

## Partners

I found my community organization partner by working with the then on-campus makerspace program director. In 2020, I built a partnership with the on-campus makerspace for my writing classes, and I leveraged this relationship to approach local nonprofits for creating partnerships. During the early COVID period in 2020, this makerspace offered face shields to local community organizations and had strong partnerships with nonprofits. Through this makerspace, I was introduced to staff members of WHAM, who worked for vulnerable populations particularly during the pandemic by operating a food pantry and employment services. The on-campus makerspace director connected me to the communications department director of WHAM with whom he had already built trust.

## Role

I am an international/transnational Asian/American, immigrant settler, cisgender woman, who looks dissimilar to the people who hold dominant power in technology industries and in higher education. In many cases, it takes more time for me to build ethos (as an English instructor or as a TPC instructor or as a UX instructor) and relationships with outside stakeholders. However, using my prior connections with an on-campus institute, I created

enriched environments for students and stakeholders in this TPC course.

## What Students did

Student groups were guided to work either on offering recommendations for the community partner’s website and its usability (web usability) or on creating the community partner’s mobile-optimized website (mobile usability). Main reading materials included Carol Barnum (2010)’s *Usability Testing Essentials*, Usability in Civic Life’s (n.d.) “Civic Design Bibliography,” and Ditte Hvas Mortensen’s (n.d.) “Conducting Ethical User Research.”

**Table 2**  
**Ethnographic Research and UX Pedagogy**

Critical Factor	Ethnographic approaches to engaging plural values	UX pedagogy at the intersection of TPC and students’ lives
<b>Purpose</b>	Understand how human beings construct social life as “part object and part subject” (O’Reilly, 2012, p. 6).	Understand the user’s needs in contexts and “dynamic user environments” (Still & Crane, 2017, p. 34)
<b>Process</b>	Trace social life as “the interaction of structure and agency” (O’Reilly, 2012, p. 6)	Engage users early and throughout the design process (Still & Crane, 2017, p. 45)
<b>Positionality</b>	Examine insiders’ perspectives in communities	Conceptualize specific marginalized user groups rather than generic user groups

Based on these ethnographic approaches to UX research, students did the following:

- Learned about the communication goals of the community partner;
- Conducted preliminary research and worked on creating an empathy map and user persona;
- Created tasks and prepared test materials including consent forms;
- Analyzed collected stories, interview transcripts, and observation logs;
- Created low-fidelity prototypes (paper prototypes);
- Received feedback from peers and community members;
- Created high-fidelity prototypes (PowerPoint prototypes);
- Presented their final slide deck presentations to the community partner.

## Affordances and Constraints

My attempt to engage students' plural values was focused on cultivating dispositions in which they research their users with ethical approaches and center user experience of marginalized communities. Rather than assuming a neutral positionality or doing a traditional research sampling as researchers, student groups were given the opportunity to create their user personae or tasks for usability testing with an understanding of their material environments. In this module, the community partner's engagement was not fully participatory because the community partner was not equally involved throughout student research processes, given the partner's prioritized tasks. Nevertheless, I perceive this asymmetrical participation as an embodied coalitional action that recognizes the complexity of business and technical writing contexts and real-world environments. Another constraint is that full iterative cycles I was trained to do in UX research and design were not entirely integrated due to the time constraint of a five-week module, student circumstances, and the participation level the community organization chose. Students, particularly international students, and community members around students were severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to these situations, students and I tried to be resourceful to integrate feedback on prototypes from peer students.

## Conversation Excerpts from Stakeholders

Based on my previous partnership with the on-campus makerspace named IDEASstudio and design thinking staff members, I co-worked with Director of West Houston Institute Jordan Carswell, the then director of the makerspace program, to create an empathy mapping workshop. In his reflections on collaboration with my TPC course, Jordan emphasized the double-sided aspects of making user personae and empathy maps ("Personae can stand in early and help. But they can be dangerous to rely on.") and described the importance of creating empathy maps with the community partner in a different way. He elaborated on the importance of finding a good "fit" with the community partner and of integrating empathy mapping not just for "what we traditionally think of as design" but as a genuine process.

I felt like we needed to find somebody who maybe had a real organization that had a very specific need, and so you're able to focus on how you want them to be involved... You don't get the reasons behind what they're [community partners/clients] doing sometimes, or what you find sometimes is that they have other issues or problems. If they focus on the task, but they came to you with what you miss, then maybe this is not a good fit. The things that they want to do, they're going to really solve their problem. (J. Carswell, personal communication, November 10, 2022)

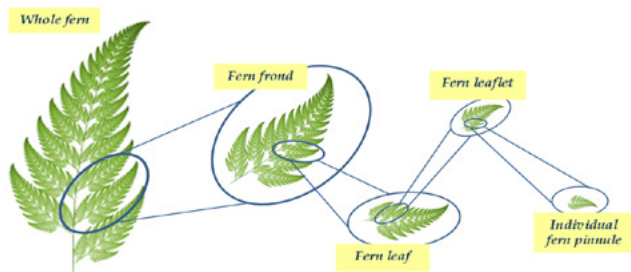
Jordan's reflection on collaboration helps me understand that coalitional practices in UX pedagogy are not in the binary of academy/community but in "small actions and connections" (brown, 2017, p. 3). In this collaboration, community partners, collaborators, instructors, and students are in line with each other to invest time and commitment to finding practical matters and fits, and building this alignment takes more time and is prioritized than problem-solving.

## FROM PATTERNS TO POSSIBILITIES

In this section, we share the theoretical and practical implications of the patterns from the three models discussed above by revisiting some of the key elements of Emergent Strategy. We acknowledge that the elements are intertwined and cannot be separated from each other, and we recognize our work showing up in different ways within and across these elements. We conclude by discussing the possibilities of this work for future CEUX projects.

### Fractal

Within the three models, we return to the concept of fractals, defined as "a never-ending pattern" created by "repeating a simple process over and over in an ongoing feedback loop" (brown, 2017, p. 51). Consider the fern (Figure 5). The patterns are evident from the whole fern to the individual fern pinnule and repeat regardless of size. The fractal elements in our stories remind us that the things we notice in each of our classes and across our models are often repeating in different ways across space and time. First, human relations fortify all of the work we do in CEUX, whether it is with our students, the participants in the design process, our community partners, our campus collaborators, and with each other. Nurturing the relationships between and among the individuals and groups in these stories illustrates how the relationships between people are the structure and support for any collaboration. Second, respecting the assets and material conditions of community partners is repeated in CEUX. Our stories show that instructors deemphasize their role as sole experts; rather instructors display a nuanced understanding of the context of community-engaged UX courses. UX can be taught in an acontextual way where students learn about content, methods and deliverables. However, a more rote way of teaching UX can flatten its complexity. CEUX is different. It opens up possibilities for students and partners to explore the breadth and depth of UX in different ways that explore the messiness of the practice and highlight the local material conditions. The stories we have shared about our own practices teach us that instructors guide students to integrate an understanding of the context where community partners are located and develop their own interests among different projects (Model 1), different partners (Model 2), and different communities (Model 3) as they are learning UX.



**Figure 5. Fractals appear in fern leaves.** From “Julian Wilson explains the nature of a Fractal using an example from nature,” by Julian Wilson, 2017 (<https://fractalwork.com/julian-wilson-explains-the-nature-of-a-fractal-using-an-example-from-nature/>). Copyright 2017 by Julian Wilson. Reprinted with permission.

## Adaptive

While fractals discuss repetitions across contexts, adaptation can be described as “the process of changing to fit some purpose or situation” (brown, 2017, p. 67). Adaptation in CEUX emerges across our stories as locations (Silicon Valley, Pacific Northwest, a southwestern state) and institutional contexts (a small liberal arts college, a regional college, a community college) affect how we teach UX. While all authors understand their pedagogical resources, partners, and collaborators through local conditions, embracing random encounters and prioritizing diverse relations built on trust, their adaptation is intentional and purposeful. For example, extended UX work and “organic growth” processes that can be observed in the one-to-many model and the many-to-many model were not explicitly visible and intentionally designed in the one-to-plural model stories. Students often finish their degrees in this institution within a two-year timeframe or plan to move to a four-year college or another institution. They are more likely to be occupied with other priorities and are often physically distant from the campus. In certain conditions, extended relationships between students and community partners are observed in CEUX, but those connections are not always possible, appropriate, or intended when CEUX embraces adaptation. Rather than relying on the binary of community partners (outsiders) and classrooms (insiders), we might, like in the one-to-plural model, recognize the ways students are already members of their own communities. More importantly, this adaptation is different from capitalist or extractive localization strategies. Each CEUX story attends to the locale’s temporality and historicity. While UX pedagogy narratives align with pedagogical approaches in spatial contexts and configurations, it is also important to note that those narratives carefully recognize and echo temporal and historical materiality of the lives of students and organization workers who often preceded instructors and UX knowledge. For example, in model 1, Heather sought a partnership through her colleague’s established relationships. By leveraging her colleague’s existing knowledge about the work of the organization, Heather was able to frame her partner organization as experts already doing

excellent UX work that students could learn from.

## Interdependence and Decentralization

As an element, interdependence specifically refers to “mutual dependence between things” while decentralization is the “dispersion or distribution of functions or powers” (brown, 2017, p. 83). The instructor’s role as a facilitator is also noted across stories. As shown in fractals, teachers’ authorities are purposefully de-emphasized while managing partnerships such as communication flows (emails between students and organization workers) and empowering students to negotiate and take ownership of task and project assignment. It should be noted that relationality emerges as one of the key aspects, and this relationality is often decentered instead of being dyadic or hierarchical. For instance, Model 1 started community partnerships through multiple actors (e.g., colleagues, communication directors) and communication events (e.g., university events) while Model 2 shaped partnerships through various channels (e.g., social media, recommendations, networks). Like Model 1 and 2, Model 3 also collaborated with multiple partners (e.g., nonprofit workers, on-campus makerspace director, and design thinking staff members) beyond the dyad of university and community. In CEUX, cross-functional UX collaboration shows up in ways that deemphasize product ownership and embrace interdependence. For example, in Model 1, students floated across decentralized affinity groups (e.g., information architecture, user research, content strategy, visual design) but depended on consistent updates, feedback, and sharing across groups to create deliverables for the partner organization.

## Non-linear and Iterative

Across our stories and beyond, we understand that all relationships and projects are non-linear and iterative and that there is no such thing as done—whether that is a design, a lesson, or relationship. Gonzales (2022) has argued that even though researchers leave at the self-determined ends of their projects, “there is no end date... we impact the communities that trust us with their time, energy, and labor; and this impact extends beyond the parameters set by Western notions of time and space” (p. 165). The nonlinear and iterative pattern helps locate our efforts in the “pace and pathways of change” (brown, 2017, p. 103). For example, non-linear and iterative patterns allow us to recognize the possibilities of work beyond us (instructors) as central facilitators. All of our stories illustrate sustained human relations between students, partners, and their communities that exist outside of the purview of our classrooms and our terms. This allows us to value and discern the role of discreet, transactional educational moments without romanticizing extended, multi-term projects. As instructors, when we embrace a nonlinear and iterative pattern, “we can do, be, and create whatever we want to see, knowing ours is one effort in the midst of many, and the multitude is where our power lies” (brown, 2017, p. 116). The process of creating these models and sharing our stories with each other as authors and other instructors reminds of the inherently iterative nature of both CEUX and teaching. Each of us is making changes and iterations based on what we have learned from each other as part of this collaboration.

## Takeaways: Creating More Possibilities

The models of CEUX, one-to-many, many-to-many, and one-to-plural, commonly move towards extended relations. In brown’s words, creating more possibilities is one of the Emergent Strategy elements, in which people shape the future “towards abundance”



(p. 155). We understand that our models are limited to a small number of locations, institutions, and contexts. These three models, however, help us learn that CEUX starts from already existing expertises and knowledges outside of and within classrooms and works to “hold complexity” (brown, 2017, p. 190) among different stakeholders.

Heather’s one-to-many model showcases what happens when instructors of record are not the sole beacons of knowledge—about UX, about collaboration, and about people. Partner organizations are acknowledged as experts. Students learn from their assets and assemble their own relationships beyond the instructor. Project deliverables are designed with amplification, rather than tech-centric solutions, in mind. The work of the course is no longer the work of the course, but one contribution in a decentralized and interdependent collaboration across courses, terms, students, and organizations.

In Emma’s many-to-many model, the relationships that emerge between community partners, students, and the university started from a pragmatic focus but have evolved and shifted into opening up all kinds of possibilities. Ones where relationships form and transform over time. To where students start to recognize their ability to have influence in small ways and connect it to broader themes that they care about. They were able to make these connections and notice that design is not value neutral and has material and political impacts on the world around them and that whether or not it is intentional, design can be complicit within systems of oppression. There are abundant possibilities for how this connection of people in the room; the client, the students, and I lead to a spark that now can have ripples of influence in the world.

While embracing justice-oriented approaches in enacting and distributing research practices and outcomes in CEUX pedagogy, we realize the term participation or participatory in UX pedagogy is demystified in the contexts of local environments. For example, in Model 3, while CEUX pedagogy respects students’ community advocacy and the partner nonprofit’s assets, it recognizes the material realities of the students and the community partner, impacted by the pandemic. Model 3’s approaches revise idealized participatory models into a more resourceful way for UX pedagogy, in which multiple stakeholders increase the complexity of fieldwork and relations, and thus each stakeholder participates to the extent they are able or wish to do.

Gathering three models and stories, we recognize that each relation is divergent for possibilities within the model and across models. Possibilities can be created when we are open to contradictions and plural worlds with abundance-based mindsets. The three models are not necessarily representative. We welcome and encourage others to create their own models. Future CEUX projects teaching can start from an abundance-oriented question: What is my “chaotic fertile reality”? (brown, 2017, p. 157).

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Soyeon Lee is Assistant Professor of Rhetoric and Writing Studies at the University of Texas at El Paso. Her research interests



include user experience studies, transnational environmental communication, and community-based approaches to technical writing. Her scholarship has appeared in *Composition Forum*, *Reflections: A Journal of Community-Engaged Writing and Rhetoric*, *Journal of Rhetoric*, *Professional Communication*, and *Globalization*, and *Technical Communication Quarterly*.

Heather Noel Turner is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Santa Clara University (SCU). Her research interests include User Experience (UX), pedagogy, design methodologies, and rhetorical approaches for data visualization. At SCU, Dr. Turner serves as founder and director of the User Experience Research and Writing Lab.

Emma J. Rose is Associate Professor in the School of Interdisciplinary Arts & Sciences at the University of Washington Tacoma. Her research focuses on human-centered design, participatory and inclusive methods, and UX pedagogy.

# Story of a Community-Based Writing Resource - and a Call to Engage

Ann M Blakeslee  
Eastern Michigan University  
ablakesle@emich.edu

David Boeving  
Eastern Michigan University  
davidboeving@gmail.com

Kristine M. Gatchel  
Eastern Michigan University  
kgatche1@emich.edu

Brent Miller  
Eastern Michigan University  
brent.allen.miller@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

This article tells the story of YpsiWrites, a community writing resource that provides support, resources, and programs for all writers. It shows how ideas from adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy* (2017) provide a generative framework for community-engaged initiatives. It uses this framework to examine the work of YpsiWrites, and, in doing so, illustrates the value of the framework for planning, carrying out, and assessing community-engaged work (CEW). The authors share responses to questions they posed to stakeholders, along with themes from those responses, which paint a more nuanced picture of the nature and potential of this work. They conclude with a call to engage and an invitation for others to use these questions as a heuristic in pursuing their own, unique community-engaged work.

## CCS Concepts

Social and professional topics

## Keywords

Community-engaged work, Emergent strategy, Community writing, Community writing resource, Collaboration, Connectedness

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Technical communication has made tremendous strides toward enacting a social justice agenda. At the 2023 Association of Teachers of Technical Writing conference, speakers in the keynote session, titled, "What excites you about technical communication right now," emphasized that our actions need to reflect our values. These speakers, many of whom were younger scholars in the field, also argued for action-oriented commitments. They stressed prioritizing communities and defining this work based on the self-determined needs of those communities. Two important themes that ran through this session were accountability and commitment. They stressed that we need to be accountable to ourselves, our disciplinary colleagues, our fields, our institutions, and, most importantly, our communities and their members. This article shares the story of an action-oriented, community-based enterprise that seeks to be responsive to the needs of a diverse community by elevating the voices of all its members and by enacting values of social justice and equity.

This story also, we hope, reflects our commitment to being held accountable, and as we tell it, we draw on adrienne maree brown's emergent strategy (2017), which offers guidance both for creating community-based initiatives and for carrying out this work in ways that are purposeful, responsive to the community, collaborative, ethical, and ultimately sustainable. The foundational concepts of emergent strategy, which are rooted in relationships and stress qualities such as interdependence, adaptability, imagination, and humility, provide guideposts for doing community-engaged work in ways that are socially just and that, ideally, lead to a better world. brown wrote, "Emergent strategy is how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for" (p. 3). She also said, "It's a philosophy for how to be in harmony and love, in and with the world" (p. 24).

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<sup>1</sup> The authors wish to acknowledge and thank the additional stakeholders who generously gave their time to respond to the questions we posed and who, in doing so, contributed their voices and significant insights to this work. This includes, alphabetically, Jeffrey Austin, Yen Azzaro, Jeanine DeLay, Mary Garboden, and Sarah Rigg.

Grounding our story in this framework, we conclude with a call for others to engage in community-engaged work by using the questions we posed to aid in considering their own unique initiatives.

## THE STORY OF A COMMUNITY-BASED WRITING RESOURCE

In 2019, after assessing community interest, the Eastern Michigan University (EMU) Office of Campus & Community Writing (<http://www.emich.edu/ccw>), in collaboration with the Ypsilanti District Library and 826michigan, a non-profit organization that supports under-resourced students with their writing, started a community writing center, YpsiWrites (<http://www.ypsiwrites.com/>). Located in the city of Ypsilanti, Michigan, YpsiWrites' original vision was to extend into the community the work already being done on Eastern's campus to support writers. The initial vision for YpsiWrites was modest; however, its scope quickly expanded, evolving into what we now call a community writing resource, the intent of which is to promote, support, and celebrate writers of all ages and skill levels through writing-focused workshops, events, resources, and activities. YpsiWrites focuses on all types and genres of writing. Its tagline, established at its founding, is Everyone's a Writer, and everything it does is based on a strengths- and assets-based perspective. All of YpsiWrites' support and programs are powered by trained volunteers and free to any community member, even those outside of Ypsilanti.

In addition to its foundational belief that everyone's a writer, YpsiWrites believes all writing matters. Its mission is to make all members of the community, regardless of age or ability, feel welcomed, empowered, and supported at every stage of their writing journey. Its core pillars are community, advocacy, inclusivity, and support. YpsiWrites also believes diversity, equity, and inclusion are critical to achieving its mission. Since the time of YpsiWrites' founding, there have been significant national changes in issues related to race, equity, and inclusion. The Black Lives Matter movement, the public murder of George Floyd, continued examples of police profiling and brutality, issues of white privilege, objections to the teaching of critical race theory, book banning, and the health inequities that became more visible during the pandemic have all brought to the forefront the importance of continuing and deepening our national conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion. Additionally, recent decisions and legislation impacting transgender youth, women's reproductive rights, DEI initiatives, and the rights of LBGTQIA2S+ individuals, both at national and state levels, have amplified the need for all individuals within communities to have opportunities to both express their own and to hear the feelings and perspectives of others on these significant issues.

YpsiWrites believes and professes that writing has the power to create change and to promote equity. Write for Change has been its theme for the past two years. It values the languages, intersecting identities, and lived experiences of all writers and believes a multiplicity of voices enriches the community. The coordinators of YpsiWrites believe it is our responsibility to cultivate a welcoming and inviting space where we support and respond to all writers' needs and where we actively engage in inclusive practices. By cultivating a community writing resource designed to provide free support and resources to individuals of all ages, YpsiWrites seeks to provide equal opportunity for growth and success to all writers. Working together in inclusive and accessible spaces, we have found, provides writers with meaningful opportunities to

build new relationships with individuals they may not have met before, which we believe has the power to challenge biases, forge new understandings, and create a more connected community.

YpsiWrites, now in its fourth year, has cultivated a vibrant and established community of writers of all ages, interests, and abilities. To provide a few examples, as of early 2022, it had engaged more than 100 volunteers and reached more than 600 youth and adults with its workshops. More recently, between 2022 and 2023, it supported 90 writers through asynchronous and synchronous virtual writing support sessions. Additionally, the YpsiWrites Writers Room, which was started in winter 2022 to provide a space for community members to write and share their writing, had over 100 writers sign up to participate in its initial six sessions. Annually, YpsiWrites also takes pride in honoring area writers by selecting up to 12 writers, published or unpublished and of all ages and genres, to be Writers of Ypsilanti (<https://www.ypsiwrites.com/writers-of-ypsilanti>). These distinguished writers are nominated by community members and demonstrate why writing matters. And in 2022, YpsiWrites also published its first open-access book, *Write Outside: Investigations of the Living Land* ([https://www.dropbox.com/s/4flocktmkhowmya/YW\\_WritingOutside.pdf?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/4flocktmkhowmya/YW_WritingOutside.pdf?dl=0)), which encourages people of all ages to engage with nature from both outdoor and indoor vantage points through seasonal writing prompts. These prompts were created and illustrated by YpsiWrites' volunteer, Lisa Eddy, during the COVID-19 pandemic. YpsiWrites also recently began carrying out an environmental scan for the purpose of developing a strategic plan. Eight stakeholder groups are being surveyed, and members of these groups will also be invited to participate in interviews and/or focus groups. The stakeholders include our frontline collaborators; core leadership team members; partners; patrons; donors; volunteers; Writers of Ypsilanti; and other organizations, individuals, and groups that may have an interest in, but have not yet participated with YpsiWrites. The interviews shared in this article are a part of this environmental scan.

A more detailed list of YpsiWrites' programs and partnerships can be found in the Appendix. Thus far, YpsiWrites' founders have written two reports documenting its programs and services: The first covered from 2020 through summer 2021 ([https://drive.google.com/file/d/1349N6RX4PpV0zEG83dTGEUXzwUH\\_aqpN/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1349N6RX4PpV0zEG83dTGEUXzwUH_aqpN/view)), and the second covered from fall 2021 through summer 2022 (<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Bo2CKGGAOjAz8aJ67Rv5ns4IoGdzm-f8/view>). We also have spoken about YpsiWrites at conferences and have published two papers: "Extending Literacy Work Beyond Our Buildings" (Calabro et al., 2021), in which we describe, with our collaborators, the creation of YpsiWrites, and "Building a Community Literacy Network" (<chrome-extension://efaidnbmnmmnibpceajpcgleclefindmkaj/https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1206&context=communityliteracy>), which applies an emergent strategy lens to both the partnerships that constituted and the activities of this network, which includes YpsiWrites. YpsiWrites' programs have also been featured in numerous publications and venues, including *MLive*, *Concentrate Media* and *On the Ground Ypsi*, *The Eastern Echo*, *Fox 2 News Detroit*, *Click on Detroit*, *Washtenaw Jewish News*, *Current*, *VoyageMichigan*, Detroit's WXYX-Channel 7, the Mental Health Agenda Cable Television Program, and NPR affiliate WEMU. These articles and interviews can be accessed through links on this spreadsheet ([https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1V7GI\\_Py7EdTwWgi2jFu2J7spOIz3-os4-9QXvOxAc/](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1V7GI_Py7EdTwWgi2jFu2J7spOIz3-os4-9QXvOxAc/)

[edit?usp=sharing](#)).

YpsiWrites, perhaps most significantly, has also built relationships with a number of schools and community organizations. These have included the Ypsilanti Community Schools; the Washtenaw County Health Department; several Ypsilanti churches; Upward Bound; the city of Ypsilanti; area mental health organizations, including the National Alliance on Mental Health; intermediate school districts; the Girl Scouts; Washtenaw Literacy; Ann Arbor Center for Independent Living; University of Michigan's Museum of Art and University Musical Society; Washtenaw County Juvenile Court; an area ethics association; the art center in Ypsilanti; several offices and programs at Eastern Michigan University; and several youth-focused initiatives concerned with creating educational and career opportunities for under-served youth.

Reflecting on the successes and challenges of YpsiWrites is something we do regularly. We also strive to be deliberate in continuing to discover, learn, and ideate, both through and about this work. In the article, "Building a Community Literacy Network," Austin et al. (2020) talked about making a shift in how we think about assessment (p. 108). The authors argued that instead of using assessment to prove something, we instead use it "as a way of paying attention to something" (p. 108). The authors drew in this discussion on adrienne maree brown's idea that "What we pay attention to grows" (2017).

We devote the remainder of this article to this activity of paying attention. We first present the ideas and tenets of emergent strategy that have been helpful to us in defining and carrying out the work of YpsiWrites, focusing, in particular, on values, trust, ethics, and relationships, and also on brown's tenets of fractals, adaptation, resilience, interdependence, nonlinearity, and imagination. brown's notion and framework have been instrumental in making YpsiWrites cohesive and inclusive and in helping us continue to develop meaningful resources and programs. We also share responses, and themes that emerged in those responses, from questions we developed that are connected to the emergent strategy framework, some loosely and some more directly. We posed these questions to eight stakeholders of YpsiWrites, whom we selected because of their involvement with YpsiWrites, their commitment to its mission, and their involvement with other community initiatives.<sup>2</sup> These included two coordinators for YpsiWrites, David Boeving and Brent Miller<sup>3</sup>; a children's author, Debbie Taylor, who has been a Writer of Ypsilanti, workshop facilitator for YpsiWrites, and patron; a local graphic recorder and community activist, Yen Azzaro, who has also been a Writer of Ypsilanti, a volunteer, and a patron; an area journalist, Sarah Rigg, who writes community-focused features and is another Writer of Ypsilanti and YpsiWrites patron; a librarian, Mary Garboden, who has collaborated with YpsiWrites since before its founding; the director of an area non-profit focused on fostering ethics conversations among secondary

<sup>2</sup> We posed these questions to the stakeholders via email. These email interviews are one part of an IRB-approved environmental scan begun by YpsiWrites in spring 2023. The IRB-approval is through Eastern Michigan University, UHRSC-FY23-23-152 – YpsiWrites Environmental Scan. All of the stakeholders gave us permission to use their names.

<sup>3</sup> Boeving and Miller are also co-authors of this article because of their formal roles with YpsiWrites and their efforts in helping to create and carry out the environmental scan. They were also asked to respond to these questions due to their leadership and significant involvement in YpsiWrites' programs and community outreach. Boeving leads the YpsiWrites' Write for Mental Wellness initiative, and Miller facilitates the YpsiWrites Writers Room and coordinates volunteers to represent YpsiWrites at community events. Miller has also played a significant role in the Love Letters to Ypsilanti campaign for the city of Ypsilanti's bicentennial celebration.

students, Jeanine DeLay, who also is a patron; and an educator, Jeffrey Austin, who has directed and who helps establish secondary writing centers. Finally, we conclude with a call to action to encourage and guide others who may be interested in creating their own community-engaged programs. We share our questions as heuristics for imagining and beginning to articulate, even in the small ways brown discussed, potential values and plans for such programs.

## A FRAMEWORK AND SOME QUESTIONS

In the 2020 article in *Community Literacy Journal*, mentioned above, Austin et al. described the Washtenaw County Literacy Network (WCLN), the purpose of which, they said, was to "shift conversations and practices surrounding literacy and literacy inequalities" (2020, p. 97). YpsiWrites was part of the network they described, as were 826michigan and the Ypsilanti District Library, YpsiWrites' founding partners. Additionally, there were two university writing centers, a secondary school, a secondary writing center, and other connected entities. In describing this literacy network, the authors used adrienne maree brown's emergent strategy, about which they said, "We read our network through a lens of emergent strategy, a relational approach to social change we learned about through the writings of adrienne maree brown, a doula, women's rights activist, and Black feminist from Detroit" (p. 100). Emergent strategy, the authors noted, "helps networks like the WCLN navigate change in thoughtful and sustainable ways" (p. 97). It does this through a grounding in the values for such work as well as through relationships that are lasting, ethical, and trusting. Emergent strategy is also predicated on small actions that eventually result in something larger. In characterizing this notion of working from small to large, brown wrote, "What we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system" (53). This perspective makes this work seem doable rather than daunting.

brown also identified and described six tenets for emergent strategy. The first of these is fractals, which, brown said, "Are infinitely complex patterns that are self-similar across different scales. They are created by repeating a simple process over and over in an ongoing feedback loop" (p. 51). In addition to emphasizing the importance of patterns, brown also stressed the centrality of relationships in this work. Another tenet, therefore, is interdependence, which emphasizes our mutual reliance on one another as well as the "distribution of functions or power" (p. 83). Interdependence, in this sense, speaks to the importance of collaborating with, listening attentively to, and being responsive to the needs of those in the communities in which we work; it is counter to the competitive individualism and ideation that sometimes characterizes our work, especially in educational realms (Jeffrey Austin, personal communication, June 20, 2023).

A third tenet of emergent strategy, adaptability, is one we have found to be particularly significant for YpsiWrites, especially in navigating the pandemic. brown talked about the need for leaders to be adaptive (p. 21), and she spoke of wanting "a future where we are curious, interested, visionary, and adaptive" (p. 58). Intentionality and purpose are important aspects of adaptation, which brown defined as "the process of changing to fit some purpose or situations: the *process* [authors' emphasis] of adapting" (p. 67).

The remaining three tenets of emergent strategy are resilience,

nonlinearity, and being imaginative and creating possibilities. Resilience, brown said, is our ability to recover and transform and comes from building relationships and trust (p. 50). It's "an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change" (again, for this work, the pandemic certainly comes to mind) (p. 123). Nonlinearity has to do with pathways of change, which, according to brown, are never linear (pp. 50, 105). brown also stressed that change is constant, likening it to water (pp. 41–42). Finally, brown said the tenet of being imaginative and creating more possibilities "is my favorite aspect of emergent strategy—this is where we shape tomorrow towards abundance" (p. 155). Here she advocated for "collaborative ideation" as a process for "birthing new ideas" (p. 42), and she said that collaboration that is meaningful, "Both relies on and deepens relationship" (p. 159). Additionally, "The stronger the bond between the people or groups in collaboration, the more possibility you can hold" (p. 159). Collaboration and common purposes strengthen the potential of imagination in this work.

While its founders have reflected a good deal on the work of YpsiWrites and on the ideas and tenets of emergent strategy and how they inform this work, we have also become interested in hearing how others, both in and outside of the community, think about YpsiWrites, and how they themselves might view and connect these ideas to it. This is the paying attention to that was described in Austin et al. (2020) and mentioned earlier. It also is why we decided to embark on an environmental scan for YpsiWrites. As one of our entry points for this scan, we developed several questions, all of which are connected in some way to emergent strategy. The initial questions are focused on the values, importance, and likely outcomes of the work. The remaining questions draw even more directly on brown's ideas; in particular, the tenets of emergent strategy and her ideas about imagining better futures and identifying "the most elegant next steps" (2017, p. 220). Here are the questions we posed:

- What about community-engaged work do you find important, and why?
- What has been the value of this work for you personally and/or for others (individuals, organizations) with whom you're connected?
- What do you consider to be the most important or significant outcome(s) (actual or potential) of community-engaged work?
- What values do you believe are driving this work?
- Which of these components of emergent strategy resonate with you in relation to this kind of work, and why? [The definitions included here are derived from *Emergent Strategy* (2017).]
  - \* Fractal – relationships between large and small; small is good; the large is a reflection of the small
  - \* Interdependence – connectedness and mutual dependence
  - \* Resilience – sticking power
  - \* Adaptable – changeable; nimble; fluid; intentional change to survive
  - \* Nonlinear – emergence is not a predetermined path; be like water
  - \* Imaginative – dreaming beyond what is
- What future(s) can you imagine for or from this work?
- What is one small change you believe we could make that would have a big impact?

In the remainder of this article, we share the responses our stakeholders gave to these questions, and we identify themes

that emerged in their responses. These themes, which include connection, collaboration, community, trust, humility, inspiration, joy, responsiveness, access, equity, and vulnerability, to name a few, tell a more nuanced story about YpsiWrites, and about community-engaged work more generally, from the perspectives of those who work, partner, and participate with it.

## What About Community-Engaged Work Do You Find Important, and Why?

We asked this initial question to learn what different stakeholders might identify as being important about this work. Since brown contended that "What we pay attention to grows" (p. 19), learning what our stakeholders viewed as important, we believed, could be instructive for us. While several themes emerged, the stakeholders, first and foremost, identified connection, community, and collaboration as being especially significant. David Boeving, a clinical social worker and poet who leads the writing for mental wellness initiative for YpsiWrites, said the connections formed in this work bring together people of different backgrounds and perspectives and can be transformative. They said these connections can both change us and also model what collaboration and progress can look like in this work:

Community-engaged work allows for transformative connections because people from different backgrounds are brought together. When we are vulnerable and learn together, we're changed in the process. The connections we build when learning together are vital to healthy communities, and those connections can model across communities what collaboration and progress can look like. (personal communication, May 24, 2023)

Along similar lines, Brent Miller, who coordinates community outreach for YpsiWrites and was named a Writer of Ypsilanti in 2021, said, "Those of us who do community-engaged work act as connectors . . . to resources, services, and also to ideas" (personal communication, May 29, 2023). He shared, "There have been several times when I'm behind the YpsiWrites' table at a community event and the conversation with a community member morphs from 'here is who we are and what we offer' to 'wow, what I'm hearing you say reminds me of this other organization/person/service—you might want to check them out as well.'" Miller said that these interactions and connections build trust with community members: "It shows we're listening . . . and we're offering more than just the resources we set out on the table." Trusting relationships are foundational in emergent strategy, and they certainly have been foundational for YpsiWrites.

For those of us in university roles, additional implications emerge: Rather than being isolated from the community and/or acting like experts who know how to solve all of a community's problems, stakeholder responses suggested the importance of listening attentively, being open and receptive, and also, we would add, having humility. Miller defined humility in this work as "the sense of recognizing your own biases and points of view and accepting that sometimes those may be in conflict with . . . what your community says its goals are" (personal communication, May 29, 2023). Miller also stressed that we ourselves are members of the community when we engage in this work: "We're showing up not just as representatives of our organization, but as engaged community members." In her response, Sarah Rigg, an area journalist who writes community-focused features, said,

What's the point of doing work FOR a community unless you're doing it WITH them? Coming into a community as an outsider and imposing your own agenda never works. Humbly coming to the people who have lived experience and asking them what the community needs is the only way to do effective work. (personal communication, June 5, 2023)

Similarly, Mary Garboden, a branch director for the Ypsilanti District Library, cautioned that “Community-serving organizations and initiatives risk becoming echo chambers if they aren't actually engaging *with* [authors' emphasis] community” (personal communication, June 13, 2023). The “for” and “with” distinction in these responses seems especially significant, particularly in relation to approaching this work both as engaged community members and with humility, which is also consistent with the ideals expressed in relation to emergent strategy.

David Boeving stressed that this work is also vital in cultivating healthy communities, and another stakeholder, Yen Azzaro, a community-activist whose title is Illustrator and Graphic Recorder Director of Visual Storytelling, The Foresight Lab<sup>4</sup>, said, “Community-engaged work is important because it is the fiber that strengthens the community. It invites partnership and offers new ways of ideating” (personal communication, May 31, 2023). The sense of this work as creative and generative emerged in several of the responses as did the idea of the importance of small, another idea also emphasized by brown. Azzaro, who also was a 2020 Writer of Ypsilanti, said, “It helps me hone in on the small, daily task that builds toward the big outcome we're striving for.” She also said the commitments we form in this work help to keep us all accountable: “Most of all, it keeps me accountable because I care about the people I'm collaborating with or serving.”

What runs through so many of these responses is the idea of what this work can accomplish and how transformative it can be—how we can all learn together and be changed by it, and how it can enhance our communities and make them both stronger and healthier. Local children's author and advocate, Debbie Taylor, expressed that this work, “Shows the importance of engaging with community, not as recipients or beneficiaries of programming, but as potential *generators* of programming and engagement” (personal communication, June 2, 2023). Taylor also stressed being “respectful [of] and responsive to the needs of the community without being patronizing”—that idea again of engaging *with* rather than thinking of what we're doing as being *for* the community. Her comment also suggested again the importance of humility.

Referring to YpsiWrites, Taylor claimed that this work has “laid the groundwork for future collaborations and generational engagement.”

## What has been the Value of This Work for You Personally and/or for Others (Individuals, Organizations) with Whom You're Connected?

We posed this second question (and the one that follows) because emergent strategy emphasizes the outcomes achieved through

4 The Foresight Lab, as described on its LinkedIn page, “is a social change creative agency made up of educators, creative agents, policy innovators, international diplomats, social entrepreneurs, and non-profit leaders working to build the New Regenerative Economy” (<https://www.linkedin.com/company/the-foresight-lab/about/>).

our work with communities. We also wanted to begin getting a sense of the different ways in which stakeholders experience value from the work of YpsiWrites. The themes that emerged from this question included connection, community, inspiration, and even joy. Author Debbie Taylor described the value of the work, first, in relation to herself. She said, “YpsiWrites is a community with which I interact, [receive] support, and from which I draw strength” (personal communication). Taylor, who was named a Writer of Ypsilanti in 2021, said this experience “was encouraging and inspiring and also propelled me to more deeply engage with the Ypsilanti community.” In her response to this question, she also talked about initiatives at her church that were inspired by YpsiWrites: “Installation of Little Free Library at our church, the Brown Chapel AME Church, . . . and the weekly distribution of free books after Sunday services and during special programs were seeded/and or watered by YpsiWrites.” In 2023, Brown Chapel also started a youth essay contest connected to its Brotherhood Banquet, “to emphasize the importance of writing and the value of various forms of writing.” Taylor also shared how YpsiWrites' participation in Men's Day and other programs, “Clearly impacted the attendees who gathered information, but certainly impacted them in ways we will never witness.” Taylor's responses called our attention to activities and outcomes we were not aware of and also suggested outcomes we may never even see or hear about.

Others addressed the value of YpsiWrites' work during the pandemic. When businesses were closed, YpsiWrites quickly transitioned to provide virtual programming, which ended up having a significant reach and being very successful. Librarian Mary Garboden described how YpsiWrites and the library collaborated to develop programs that really mattered to the community; how we “develop[ed] structures that also allow us to add new programs quickly when interest and needs arise” (personal communication, June 13, 2023). She said, “While we had to shut down all in-person operations for quite some time, we learned new ways of presenting programs virtually . . . [and] were able to reach new users.” Journalist Sarah Rigg added that “YpsiWrites seems to have its finger on the pulse of what the community wants and needs from a community writing nonprofit” (personal communication, June 5, 2023).

Yen Azzaro's response to this question also focused on the pandemic. She described how YpsiWrites provided a sense of community and connection during that time: “During the time of Covid isolation, collaborative work offered a shape to the day that didn't exist because of my freelance, creative practice. It held me to long-term goals and offered camaraderie when we couldn't be together. That was priceless” (personal communication, May 31, 2023). David Boeving also discussed the connection and community, as well as hope, fostered by YpsiWrites during, and even now as we continue to move beyond COVID:

After graduating (and on this side of the COVID-19 pandemic) my sense of community has remained strong while the real ways in which community occurs feel obliterated. I used to go to a lot of poetry readings, for example, and I think it's been years now since I last attended one. With YpsiWrites, I feel . . . connected to not only my fellow volunteers but also the community members who engage in our programming. YpsiWrites gives me hope because of how personally and socially transformative our programming is—and how that programming can demonstrate . . . the power of



community work. (personal communication, May 24, 2023)

YpsiWrites received feedback from many patrons during the pandemic that our programs helped them feel connected, provided opportunities to express what they were experiencing and feeling, and also offered them hope. As David expressed, there is a sense of power in that. These responses also demonstrate how the work of YpsiWrites has been transformative, both for individuals as well as for the larger community.

According to YpsiWrites staff member Brent Miller, a kind of magic happens when people come together in a creative, safe, and supportive space and experience writing as a social activity:

At every workshop, community event, and celebration, I've been so touched by the collective contributions of individuals. When the environment feels safe, supportive, and encouraging, magic happens. YpsiWrites has created spaces that ignite the creative spark and temper that spark into a consistent, ever-burning flame. This is so important because so many of us—I'd argue *most* of us—have felt silenced or squashed or “less than” when it comes to our writing, but also to our creative potential in general. YpsiWrites is undoing the decades of negative reinforcement our community has experienced and encouraging folks to think of writing as a social activity, rather than solely a solitary one. (personal communication, May 29, 2023)

The work of YpsiWrites is not only *in* and *with* but also *about* the community, and it builds community. It decenters expertise and distributes it across the community so that it can be shared by and benefit everyone. In these communal writing spaces, writers learn from and grow in relation to one another. Miller spoke of a magic that happens and of YpsiWrites sparking creativity and creating a space where it can flourish. It has become a nonjudgmental space where individuals can become confident in their written expression of ideas and where they can find their voices—and safely share their perspectives, ideas, and creations. Our patrons have come to truly appreciate this about YpsiWrites.

## What Do You Consider to be the Most Important or Significant Outcomes (Actual or Potential) of Community-Engaged Work?

With this third question, we were curious to hear what different stakeholders perceive to be the most important outcomes of this work. Again, emergent strategy places emphasis on the outcomes that can be achieved through community-engaged work, and what we learned was that our stakeholders' perceptions of these outcomes varied. For example, Brent Miller talked about empowerment and confidence as significant outcomes of YpsiWrites' work. He said, “I hope patrons feel empowered after engaging with us. Because writing takes so many different forms, this empowerment translates to successful job applications, published poems, and hopefully a confidence in one's own abilities as a writer. I'm sure that that confidence transfers to all aspects of our patrons' lives” (personal communication, May 29, 2023). Miller's comments underscored how this work is about, for, and with our patrons so they benefit from the programs, resources, and support YpsiWrites provides.

Also thinking about patrons, Debbie Taylor identified three positive

outcomes from the work of YpsiWrites. She said, first, our programs “serve as an entry point for individuals as well as organizations. Once a person has the foot in the YpsiWrites' door, they are more likely to explore other programs and resources. Your work has been a sturdy bridge for many writers” (personal communication, June 2, 2023). Second, she said this work, “affirms the value of writers and the importance of writing.” Finally, and perhaps most significantly, “Your programs are a source of—or facilitate *joy* for participants.” Librarian Mary Garboden also identified three outcomes. These, she said, have to do with awareness, usage, and community benefit: “When somebody has a writing need and knows that YpsiWrites is a free resource for them, I know that our work is important and accessible” (personal communication, June 13, 2023). Her second outcome, she said, occurs, “When we see our community members making use of the programs and services we've developed in concert with them.” And the third, community benefits, happen when, “The work we are doing helps to build stronger communities and continues to draw from a grassroots base.”

David Boevig, the social worker and poet who leads YpsiWrites' mental wellness initiative, talked about trust and vulnerability in their response to this question. They said, “I think the strengthening of trust and vulnerability within a community is by far the most significant outcome of community-engaged work” (personal communication, May 24, 2023). Sarah Rigg addressed the mental wellness work in her response, saying, “Writing has great therapeutic benefits, and YpsiWrites acknowledges that generally speaking but also through specific mental-health programming” (personal communication, June 5, 2023). Finally, for graphic recorder and community activist Yen Azzaro, the most important outcome of this work is the impact it has on youth:

For me, the most significant outcomes are the ones that affect our youth and young adults in a positive way. I've collaborated on multiple grant and community projects including traditional mediums like mural-painting and untraditional mediums like public performance art. Students get to know one another, learn about families and friends, sometimes even banter on political and social justice issues. Regardless of the time spent together, there is always the melancholy moment when the project is over and the good-byes are met with tears and hopeful wishes to gather again. We're left with matching t-shirts, photos, and the legacy of the physical art, or the memory of the ephemeral art we've created. From this, I hope the students experience what is possible when we collaborate with intent and heart. (personal communication, May 31, 2023)

Azzaro's hope is for youth to remember and continue experiencing this potential as they/we all collectively imagine a better world. Jeanine DeLay, who founded and directs a non-profit focused on engaging youth in ethical conversations<sup>5</sup>, also discussed beneficial outcomes in relation to youth. The outcomes she addressed, which focused primarily on her own organization, were to promote civic engagement and advance democratic principles. DeLay is attempting to do with ethics what YpsiWrites hopes to do with writing—make it accessible for and valued by all. Doing so can prepare our youth for their futures and strengthen our communities.

<sup>5</sup> As expressed on its website, “A2Ethics is an all-volunteer, nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting ethics and philosophy initiatives through events, education and civic partnerships in local communities. . . . And in our role as social connectors—we are developing and expanding an ‘ethics network’ of organizations and individuals supportive of our mission” ([a2ethics.org/about](http://a2ethics.org/about)).

## What Values Do You Believe are Driving This Work?

In addition to asking stakeholders what they found valuable in and what they considered the most important outcomes of this work, we were also curious about the values they believe drive the work. YpsiWrites strives to closely align its mission with the work it does and to make the values and principles that guide its work transparent. brown talks in *Emergent Strategy* about bringing our values into our daily decision making and living every day with purpose (p. 54). The tagline established when YpsiWrites was founded is Everyone's a Writer, and we also often say Writing Matters. Outreach Coordinator Brent Miller said, "I think YpsiWrites' values—Everyone is a Writer and Writing Matters—are present in everything we do. Those values," he added, "resonate in every workshop, writing guide, and event we host." He also said, "I believe we value the individual's voice and the individual's right to choose what support works best for them. We don't prescribe, we provide options; we don't lecture, we ask questions. It's up to individuals to decide on their own how they engage with us and our work." In other words, YpsiWrites values the agency and autonomy of writers and invites writers to engage in ways they find comfortable and useful. This, we believe, is why patrons find YpsiWrites' events to be safe spaces, and why they are so willing to engage and share. It becomes their space!

Other significant values that define this work, as discussed in the introduction, are access, equity, and inclusion. David Boeving noted, "This work is driven by values like community, equity, collaboration, growth, and wellness." Others also identified community and inclusivity as values. For example, librarian Mary Garboden said, "I see community and inclusivity as core values of the work YpsiWrites does. We firmly believe, as one year's theme illustrated, that 'Everyone's a Writer.'" YpsiWrites, as mentioned previously, takes an assets-based approach in its work and honors the strengths and individual voices of writers. Garboden continued, "Our base is big—the entire Ypsilanti community—and we work towards an inclusive model that makes YpsiWrites accessible for all."

Finally, there is also a sense of joy and passion that get connected to the work YpsiWrites does. Yen Azzaro talked about it in terms of, "Pure commitment and love of writing," and Debbie Taylor said, "I believe community, caring, curiosity, and faith drive the work of YpsiWrites." Jeanine DeLay talked about how community-engaged groups like YpsiWrites and her organization, A2Ethics, "Attempt to create a community within a community."

She also spoke of the value and notion of "civic friendship" in connecting these and other similar organizations. She said, "We are a civic association that is seeking to bring residents and citizens together to talk about ethical issues [writing in the case of YpsiWrites] and how they impact our community and us." In *Emergent Strategy*, brown said, "We would organize with the perspective that there is wisdom and experience and amazing stories in the communities we love, and instead of starting up new ideas/organizations all the time, we would want to listen, support, collaborate, merge, and grow through fusion, not competition" (2017, p. 10). That fusion, and the openness that fosters it, is at the heart of the transformation of which we've spoken.

## Which of the Tenets of Emergent Strategy Resonate with You in Relation to

## This Kind of Work, and Why?

Our next question connected directly to emergent strategy, focusing on its key tenets of fractals, interdependence, resilience, adaptation, nonlinearity, and creating possibilities. The responses to this question varied. Here, we reflect on each tenet.

*Fractal.* Only one of the stakeholders, for example, said that fractal came to mind. For Jeanne DeLay, fractal connected to the notion of scale, which she associated with different perspectives organization might adopt. She said, "Oftentimes organizations . . . attempt to scale. It's like the go big or go home [idea]. Many nonprofits are attempting to grow their programs . . . in part to get funding and for sustainability. Donors love the idea of scale" (personal communication, June 6, 2023). DeLay said her organization does not follow that idea, and she presented an alternative:

We're more interested in scaling across, and that simply means . . . we can go city to city in Michigan. . . . One can have a Detroit slam, an Ann Arbor slam, an Ypsi slam. . . . So we scale across. . . . We're more interested in participatory and deliberative democracy rather than large-scale . . . programs on ethics. The central point I'm trying to make here is that these are small scale. (personal communication, June 6, 2023)

The perspective DeLay expressed is one YpsiWrites shares. It also speaks to brown's advice in *Emergent Strategy* to focus on the small.

*Interdependence.* The second tenet, interdependence, was mentioned by more of the stakeholders. This tenet speaks to the themes of connectedness and collaboration that run across the responses to a number of the questions. Debbie Taylor said this tenet resonated for her because YpsiWrites has many "visible and invisible symbiotic relationships" (personal communication, June 2, 2023). Mary Garboden, our library partner, also addressed how not all connections are visible. She described her choice of this tenet saying, "It's dangerously easy to focus on INdependence [Garboden's emphasis], prioritizing my own needs and not considering [the] impact of my actions on others. This motivates many harmful behaviors on levels both individual and systemic" (personal communication, June 13, 2023). In contrast, she emphasized that, "Focusing on interdependence allows us to highlight the contributions we can each offer to our communities, how our futures are tied together, and how not all connections are plainly visible." She concluded with an apt analogy that reminded us of the rich, nature-based analogies brown uses in explaining emergent strategy: "The work of YpsiWrites reminds me of mycorrhizae, the complex underground networks of roots and fungi that connect trees to each other, allowing them to communicate between each other and giving the forest some aspects of being a single organism."

Jeanne DeLay also mentioned interdependence since it characterizes her organization's relationship with YpsiWrites. She said, "I don't think there's any question that we gravitate toward organizations like YpsiWrites and organizations that have similar overall missions. That is how we really built A2Ethics" (personal communication, June 6, 2023). The function of relationships in building community-focused organizations, and ultimately more just societies, is a central idea in emergent strategy, and one we certainly have experienced in our work. DeLay talked about "working with civic friends" and regarding YpsiWrites as one of those. She also explained that interdependence is "Why we call



ourselves a philosophy network; we are social weavers, and we try to socially promote other organizations, like YpsiWrites.”

*Resilience and Adaptability.* Because of the pandemic, and YpsiWrites’ response to it, the tenets of resilience and adaptability were also talked about by the stakeholders. Adaptability was probably the tenet most often connected to YpsiWrites, due in large part to our response to COVID but also for other reasons. For example, Yen Azzaro said, “I see YpsiWrites as an agile Adaptable animal. It rises up to meet the moment, not in only a trendy way, but in a timely, prompt [way] that speaks to and asks writers to think about what’s happening around them, consider what can shift, and touch someone through words” (personal communication, May 31, 2023). We were struck by her description of our responsiveness as, “rising up to meet the moment.” Azzaro’s comments also addressed how change can and does happen through writing. Addressing YpsiWrites’ response to the pandemic, she said,

During COVID, I was surprised to feel the effervescence of an YpsiWrites Zoom gathering, full of hope and positivity. Attendees of all ages were asked to answer prompts which were enthusiastically shared. But even after those Zooms, I saw the partnerships and events YpsiWrites had popping up in all areas of the community. It’s this agility that keeps us excited and freshly awaiting what will come out next. (personal communication, May 31, 2023)

YpsiWrites’ programs are created in response to needs and interests expressed by the community or that we identify. Brent Miller described this aspect of how YpsiWrites functions. He said, “Often teams are assembled in response to a specific request or partnership” (personal communication, May 29, 2023). Miller used the term nimble to describe YpsiWrites and noted that “Staff and volunteers are asked to help with a variety of different projects over the course of their time with the organization.” The community work in which YpsiWrites engages is thus both original and intentional.

YpsiWrites’ adaptability was also addressed by Debbie Taylor and Sarah Rigg, both of whom spoke about our response during and as we have shifted out of the pandemic. Taylor said,

I have witnessed your organization respond to forces beyond our control (pandemic, funding issues, societal issues) with grace, determination, and commitment. Your programs have expanded during covid—and now that we are in a different phase of the pandemic, you have not “contracted.” You appear to be maintaining and expanding our community. (personal communication, June 2, 2023)

Sarah Rigg said, “In terms of adaptability, I like how they started off in person, adapted well to online writing support during COVID-19, and then made really reasoned decisions about returning slowly and safely to in-person events again” (personal communication, June 5, 2023). These responses underscore the importance of both intentionality and a clear mission, along with adherence to that mission. Also, like brown, we view adaptability as essential. Community-engaged work needs to be nimble, as Miller suggested; it also, as the ATTW conference speakers suggested, needs to be community-focused and driven.

*Linearity and Imaginative.* While YpsiWrites has a clear mission, it also has a narrative that is organic, responsive, and constantly evolving, which connects to brown’s final two tenets—linearity and

imaginative. Brent Miller spoke to the former of these when he said the work is, “Nonlinear in that it’s not always clear what the goal post looks like, but it’s clear when we’re doing the right things.” He also said, “It’s been tricky to predetermine where the organization is going and how it will take shape, so we’ve had to chart a wavy path, rather than a straight line” (personal communication, May 29, 2023). brown likens nonlinear to water, which we believe has an affinity with the idea of a wavy path. Again, there’s intentionality, and often directionality, particularly in relation to what the goals are, but it also meanders. This tension between directionality and nonlinearity can cause dissonance, and navigating this tension can be challenging. It requires always having one’s purpose and mission, which ultimately guide the directions the work takes, front and center. It also requires tolerating uncertainty and change, which are inevitable in this work.

In her discussion of *imaginative*, brown talks about dreaming beyond what one knows. Debbie Taylor said, “Imaginative resonates because you are always taking chances with new programs” (personal communication, June 2, 2023). YpsiWrites’ Outreach Coordinator Brent Miller said this work is “Imaginative because we are almost always ideating” (personal communication, May 29, 2023). Miller described an environment in which, “We exchange ideas readily and try new things because we are curious about how they might impact the organization.” He explained how, “One small idea might blossom into the next game-changing process or event,” which speaks again to the significance of starting small that brown expresses (pp. 41–42). brown also stressed that what we pay attention to grows (p. 158). In a similar vein, Boeving talked about how, “With YpsiWrites, our programming always asks what potential there is for something new, not for the sake of making something new, but for the crucial goals of educating, empowering, and building a maintainable community through lasting and accessible resources” (personal communication, May 24, 2023). What Boeving conveyed is that the ideation Miller talked about is never for its own sake; instead, it’s a response to a community need. It’s the outcome of being attentive to those needs (being community-driven)—and also having clear goals, which in our case include, as Boeving expressed, “educating, empowering, and building a maintainable community through lasting and accessible resources.” Like so many other components of this work, being imaginative entails intentionality; the ideal is to be imaginative in a deliberative way while remaining adaptable and open to possibilities. Again, the ability to tolerate a certain amount of ambiguity and uncertainty is essential.

In being imaginative, those involved in community-engaged work are also often trying to imagine new worlds and to be aspirational. DeLay said,

We are trying to imagine new worlds. And I realize that is very aspirational. We regard our work in some ways like Sisyphus pushing the rock up the mountain, but in the process we are creating a network and infrastructure and ecosystem with other organizations like your own, so when the world says “enough is enough” and is ready to change, we will be there. And that is the future I imagine from this. We all will be there when the world changes because we’ve created an ecosystem and infrastructure to do that—one of constant change. (personal communication, June 6, 2023)

DeLay’s comments captured the synergy that often exists between

the individuals and entities engaged in this kind of work. There is a sense of preparedness and purpose here—a future we all can imagine and work toward. The ideas of the “infrastructure and ecosystem” also reminded us of brown’s fractals and of the analogies she used to visually reinforce these concepts. A wonderful example of this is brown’s description of murmuration to demonstrate the importance of trust. She said, “My dream is a movement with such deep trust that we move as a murmuration, the way groups of starlings billow, dive, spin, dance collectively through the air. . .” (p. 71). brown continued,

Here’s how it works in a murmuration/shoal/swarm: each creature is tuned in to its neighbors, the creatures right around it in the formation. This might be the birds on either side, or the six fish in each direction. There is a right relationship, a right distance between them—too close and they crash, too far away and they can’t feel the micro-adaptations of the other bodies. Each creature is shifting direction, speed, and proximity based on the information of the other creatures’ bodies. There is a deep trust in this. . . . In this way thousands of birds or fish or bees can move together, each empowered with basic rules and a vision to live. Imagine our movements cultivating this type of trust and depth with each other, having strategic flocking in our playbooks. (p. 71)

The world all of this depicts is one of intentional coordination as well as constant change and adaptability, all of it guided by goals and purposes, and by the deep trust brown visually portrays for us. The individuals and entities carrying out this work do so, not in isolation, but in relation to and even in sync with others who share their purposes. Those in configuration with one another work synergistically to enact the change we all envision. DeLay described this synergistic collective as “Quirky and of the ilk of being blown sideways through life!!”

## What Future Can You Imagine For or From This Work?

The final two questions we posed were future-focused and connected to brown’s ideas about imagining and creating our futures and identifying the “next most elegant next steps” (2017, p. 220). The first of these questions prompted our stakeholders to imagine what the future might be or entail for YpsiWrites. Our stakeholders’ responses suggested a number of possibilities for this, including growth and expansion, new collaborative partnerships, future adaptability, stability, potential, and reach. While community-engaged work must be attentive to and situated in the moment, it can also be guided by dreams and imaginings. Debbie Taylor, for example, spoke of imagining “a network of individuals, supported by your programs, that in turn support others” (personal communication, June 2, 2023).

Other visions for YpsiWrites included expanding the communities we reach and serve, and even the ways we reach and serve them. Yen Azzaro talked about our building cross-county and even cross-country relationships (personal communication, May 31, 2023). Debbie Taylor said she could imagine the YpsiWrites model replicated in other communities. Along these lines, Brent Miller said, “I imagine Southeast Michigan Writes as an affiliate organization, founded by YpsiWrites, that facilitates the development of similar writing resource centers across the region” (personal communication, May 29, 2023). Miller also imagined, “A brick-and-mortar space, say ten years from now, that fosters a

thriving writing community in Ypsilanti.” In his imaginings,

Writers from all walks of life step into our studio to get one-on-one support, group support, and offer their own expertise to other community writers. I picture a writers room that offers weekly programming of all sorts, a large gathering space for fundraising events and celebrations, and a permanent staff of a dozen compassionate individuals who believe in the work we’re doing.

Miller said he also imagines, “Collaborative partnerships with local organizations who donate their time to YpsiWrites . . . [and] dozens of volunteers who contribute their energy to making YpsiWrites’ vision of a thriving community of writers a reality.” Mary Garboden said she could, “Imagine an YpsiWrites’ presence in schools, workplaces, organizations, and public places—anywhere people are writing—getting support and developing their writing skills together” (personal communication, June 13, 2023).

Others’ imaginings of YpsiWrites’ futures were rooted in conceptions of its adaptability and responsiveness. David Boeving spoke of the work as being ongoing and ever-changing: “As community needs change, there’s great potential for our work and approaches to change accordingly” (personal communication, May 24, 2023). Boeving spoke of the need for continually assessing this work, especially through feedback from patrons and partners, which they said will make the work “maintainable and important indefinitely.” This need for continual assessment is what is fueling the environmental scan in which we are currently engaging.

## What is One Small Change You Believe We Could Make That Would Have a Big Impact?

Finally, taking our cue from brown, our final question focused on one small change we might make that the stakeholders believed could have a big impact. This question also had a lot to do with imagining the future. As mentioned earlier, brown wrote, “What we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system” (p. 53). brown also claimed, as we have stated several times, that “what we pay attention to grows” (p. 158). And as our education partner Jeffrey Austin reminded us, shifting the focus, especially collectively, can shift the actions we take. But any change we might consider, no matter how small, needs to be situated in and aligned with our values. As Austin said, “Our work for more equitable and just communities cannot be reliant on personal feelings, but, instead, . . . must reside in and on a set of communal values” (personal communication, June 20, 2023).

Some of the responses to this question aligned with needs we have already expressed. Mary Garboden, for example, talked about fostering more participation among teens and young adults: “We need to hear their voices!” (personal communication, June 13, 2023). Debbie Taylor suggested creating a board of teen writers, which YpsiWrites is already doing for its work with writing and mental wellness. Taylor also made several additional suggestions, all of which are aimed at continuing to build a community of writers:

I think you might consider holding an annual “conference” that brings literacy advocates and community writers together for an upbeat, joyous occasion. . . . Perhaps publishing an anthology by any writers in Ypsilanti every year would be impactful. Recognizing teachers of writing

at all levels would be valuable. Also, establish[ing] a writers' exchange with another comparable city in another country. (personal communication, June 2, 2023)

All of these are ideas that would further YpsiWrites' mission. David Boeving added the suggestion of making programs and materials multilingual, which, they suggested, "could significantly extend the reach and outcomes of our efforts" (personal communication, May 24, 2023).

Two of our respondents—Brent Miller and Yen Azzaro—responded in a way that surprised us. Both suggested we ask more of the community and of our partners. Miller stressed that, "We are helpers and, as such, are very quick to offer our time and expertise. However, that kind of help is not sustainable without additional resources," which certainly is the case (personal communication, May 29, 2023). Similarly, Azzaro said, "Funnily enough, I think you can ask more of the community. Dollars, time, ice cream? I don't quite know, but it seems that more asks could be made, and I think people would respond happily!" (personal communication, May 31, 2023). Comments like these suggested that there is community good will on which YpsiWrites can capitalize. Miller even said, "We should be thinking in terms of mutually beneficial relationships and go so far as to identify how our potential contributions can be matched by our partners. Is it a volunteer team that they provide? Is it financial support? A connection to a funder?" This, and all of the stakeholders' responses to this question, suggest the ongoing potential for this work as long as it continues to be grounded in and to advance our mission and values.

## A CALL TO ENGAGE

Building on the call of the ATTW speakers for action-oriented commitments, and in our quest for a safer, more equitable, and just world, we invite our readers to use and/or adapt the questions we posed to our stakeholders to contemplate, imagine, plan, implement—whatever steps and stages you might wish to pursue—your own unique community-engaged projects. We also encourage readers to engage themselves with the ideas in *Emergent Strategy* (2017). Here again are the questions we posed:

1. What about community-engaged work do you find important, and why?
2. What has been the value of this work for you personally and/or for others (individuals, organizations) with whom you're connected?
3. What do you consider to be the most important or significant outcome(s) (actual or potential) of community-engaged work?
4. What values do you believe are or might drive this work?
5. Which of these tenets of emergent strategy resonate with you in relation to this kind of work, and why? [The definitions included here are derived from *Emergent Strategy* (2017).]
  - \* Fractal – relationships between large and small; small is good; the large is a reflection of the small
  - \* Adaptive – changeable; nimble; fluid; intentional change to survive
  - \* Interdependence and Decentralization – connectedness and mutual dependence
  - \* Nonlinear and Iterative – emergence is not a predetermined path; be like water
  - \* Resilience – sticking power; providing space for

mistakes and healing

- \* Imaginative or Creating More Possibilities – dreaming beyond what is
6. What future(s) can you imagine for or from this work?
  7. What is one small change you believe you could make that would have a big impact?

The first question, "What about community-engaged work—or the community-engaged work you might wish to do—do you find important, and why?" is, we believe, an important place to start. It can help with developing a rationale and purpose for the work, which will become foundational. The following three questions can then be used to further develop and to build on that rationale and purpose. These questions can inform articulations of your values, the goals you set for the work, and the outcomes you might seek to achieve with it.

The questions about the tenets of emergent strategy can also be generative in imagining, planning, and developing a community-engaged program. For example, thinking about fractals can help with focusing on the small steps that can eventually contribute to something larger. brown said, "What we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system" (p. 53). This also speaks to the question about the one small change you believe will have a big impact. Focusing also on being adaptive can help with embracing and responding to change. While change is constant, brown stressed that responding to it can be done intentionally—"the process of changing to fit some purpose or situation" (p. 67). According to brown, "Intentional adaptation is the heart of emergent strategy" (p. 69). She said, "How we live and grow and stay purposeful in the face of constant change actually does determine both the quality of our lives, and the impact that we can have when we move into action together" (p. 69). This latter notion underscores the significance of the tenet of interdependence, which focuses our attention on our relationships and interactions with others; community work is never carried out in isolation or solitude. brown's work pointed to the benefits of mutual reliance (p. 83), so another important question to consider is how we can cultivate connectedness and synergy with others, particularly those with whom we share a vision. This also connects to the idea, expressed so aptly by DeLay, of becoming social weavers.

Considering all these questions will also help with becoming sustainable and resilient. brown drew on the Merriam Webster definition of resilience, which is "the ability of something to return to its original shape after it has been pulled, stretched, bent, etc. . . . an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change" ([www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/resilience](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/resilience), as cited in brown, p. 123). She also talked about how there is never a failure, only a lesson, which speaks to the lessons we all learn when we persist, especially in the face of challenges. These challenges, and the nonlinear and iterative nature of this work, as mentioned previously, can be sources of dissonance and make the work seem like a balancing act. Managing this, however, is possible. It simply requires always keeping in focus our purposes and goals, and the values informing our work.

The final question in our list is about the futures we might imagine and dream of for and from this work; it connects to brown's final tenet. Being imaginative, in general, frees individuals to dream. The task here, therefore, is to dream beyond what is and to create those new possibilities to which brown alluded. Even if we are focused on the small, it never hurts to dream big—and better. In fact, one

of our favorite lines in *Emergent Strategy* came near the beginning where brown said, “I suspect that is what many of you are up to, practicing futures together, living into new stories. It is our right and responsibility to create a new world” (2017, p. 19). And with this hope-filled statement, we conclude our story, for now.

To be continued. . . .

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ann M. Blakeslee is Professor of Written Communication and Director of the Office of Campus & Community Writing at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, MI. Blakeslee coordinates the University Writing Center, Writing Across the Curriculum program, Eastern Michigan Writing Project, and YpsiWrites (<http://www.ypsiwrites.com/>), which she helped found. She recently served as chair of the Association for Writing Across the Curriculum and is Associate Publisher for Books for the WAC Clearinghouse. She is also an ATTW Fellow and a recipient of the Society for Technical Communication Ken Rainey Award for Excellence in Research in Technical Communication.

David Boeving (they, them) is a teacher and a therapist. Their interests include grounding practices, rhetoric, and creative writing. David lives in Ypsilanti, Michigan with their spouse, Katie, and their cats, Titan and Henry.

Kristine M. Gatchel is a part-time lecturer for the University Writing Center at Eastern Michigan University, and co-director of programming and partnerships for YpsiWrites. Her interests include supporting writers both on campus and within the larger Ypsilanti community. She is also a lecturer for the Children’s Literature Department and the First-Year Writing program.

Brent Miller, MA, PMP, serves as Director of Volunteers & Community Relations for YpsiWrites where he engages community writers in empowering themselves and others. He also serves as Training Manager at the University of Michigan School of Public Health with the National Center for School Safety. In this role, he manages the conceptualization and development of school safety training products for school-based personnel and their partners. In a previous role he developed English language tests and examiner certification courses for an international audience. He holds an MA in Linguistics from Eastern Michigan University, a PMP certification from the Project Management Institute, and is currently enrolled in a doctoral program in Educational Leadership at Eastern Michigan University.

## APPENDIX

### YPSIWITES PROGRAMS AND PARTNERSHIPS

From fall 2021 to present, YpsiWrites has begun several new collaborations, supported numerous projects, and offered programs focusing on a variety of genres and on bringing together writers from across the community. Here are a few highlights:

- YpsiWrites created writing prompts for the Embracing Our Differences (<https://codmichigan.org/>) billboards and exhibits that came for the first time to Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti in summer 2022.
- In fall 2021, YpsiWrites offered a virtual six-part memoir-writing workshop with memoirist Jeanne Hodesh. More than 30 writers participated.
- In support of the work of the Ypsilanti Bicentennial Commission and its celebration of Ypsilanti’s Bicentennial in 2023, YpsiWrites launched a Love Letters to Ypsilanti (<https://www.secondwavemedia.com/concentrate/features/loveletters0651.aspx>) campaign in summer 2022. The campaign (<https://www.ypsiwrites.com/bicentennial-love-letters-to-ypsilanti>) ran through the city’s official celebration of the bicentennial in August 2023.
- In partnership with the Washtenaw County Health Department and its WishYouKnew Washtenaw health campaign (<https://www.washtenaw.org/2868/wishyouknew-Mental-Health-Campaign>), YpsiWrites has developed writing prompts, worksheets, and workshops to promote positive self-care strategies and mental wellness for individuals of all ages. This program (<https://www.ypsiwrites.com/mental-wellness>) has received extensive press coverage (<https://www.secondwavemedia.com/concentrate/features/mentalhealthwriting0680.aspx>) and is ongoing. New materials are currently being developed that will be incorporated into EMU Introduction to the University classes. YpsiWrites is also collaborating with EMU’s counseling services, its graduate school, and the EMU Office of Residence Life to provide these resources and programs to a broad segment of the student population.
- In January 2022, YpsiWrites held its first book club focused on Natalie Goldberg’s *Writing Down the Bones*.
- In the past two years, YpsiWrites has facilitated workshops focused on a variety of genres, including poetry, children’s books, memoirs, autobiographies, manifestos, letters, journals, promotional documents, blogs, and comics. YpsiWrites’ workshops have also focused on writing about traditions, using writing as a gift, using humor in writing, and finding time and space to write in the midst of life.
- In collaboration with EMU Professor Elisabeth Däumer, a Muriel Rukeyser scholar, YpsiWrites created a magic-themed poetry challenge to support staged readings of Rukeyser’s musical *Houdini* (<https://www.secondwavemedia.com/concentrate/innovationnews/houdinimusical0626.aspx>). In association with this program, and in honor of poetry month (every April), YpsiWrites also offered popular beginner and intermediate poetry writing workshops to community members.
- Every year, YpsiWrites celebrates African American History

Month with a program focused on African-American writers. The title of the 2023 program was Changing Our Hearts through Poetry – Celebrating and Learning from African-American Women Poets. In 2022, the program, titled It All Seemed So Far Away Then, or The Future is Black Women, was in collaboration with the University Musical Society (UMS) as part of the Parable Path A2-Ypsi Community Read with Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*:

- The new YpsiWrites Writers Room (<https://www.secondwavemedia.com/concentrate/features/ypsiwritersroom0626.aspx>) was launched in winter 2022. The Writers Room provides a space for writers of all interests and backgrounds to come together, virtually and/or in person, to write and, if interested, share their writing.
- YpsiWrites published its first book in 2022 - *Write Outside: Investigations of the Land Outside* (<https://www.ypsiwrites.com/writing-resources>).
- Over the past three years, YpsiWrites has also seen a significant increase in the number of writers seeking support from our trained volunteer writing tutors.
- Every year, YpsiWrites also hosts an annual celebration marking its anniversary and celebrating its Writers of Ypsilanti (<https://www.ypsiwrites.com/writers-of-ypsilanti>) for the new year. This is always held in late October in conjunction with the National Day on Writing. Additionally, YpsiWrites has an annual theme. For both 2022 and 2023, that theme has been Write for Change.

# Amplifying Diverse Narratives of Social Support in Online Health Design

Shanna Cameron  
camerons@uwec.edu

## ABSTRACT

This article interrogates the competing narratives present in one online community for Asherman syndrome to highlight how certain stories about infertility/parenthood thrive in online discussions while others are suppressed or silenced. The author argues that employing a research stance centered on reproductive justice creates new possibilities for coalition building across differences in community-engaged research design. As reproductive justice frameworks aim to protect all reproductive freedoms, these methods eschew cohesive narratives and instead prioritize amplifying diverse patient voices. The article concludes with patient recommendations for communication design interventions to improve user experience with social support online.

## CCS Concepts

Human-centered computing

## Keywords

Reproductive justice, Online health communication, Infertility, Social support, Embodiment

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## INTRODUCTION

Researchers in the interconnected and allied fields of technical and professional communication (TPC), rhetoric of health and medicine (RHM), and communication design (CD) have noted the many methodological and ethical challenges that materialize in community-engaged research projects (e.g., Agboka, 2013; Alexander & Edenfield, 2021; Blythe et al., 2008; De Hertogh, 2018; Grabill, 2012; Moore, 2017; Opel, 2017; Scott, 2003; Simmons & Amidon, 2019; Walton et al., 2015). For example, Walton et al. (2015) noted that while community-based or community-engaged research (CER) is “well suited to pursuing empowerment and contextualized understanding [of participant perspectives],” these strengths can also make CER “messy, unpredictable, mutable, contingent, serendipitous, complex, and challenging” (p. 45). Similarly, Simmons and Amidon (2019) described an “ecology of tensions that researchers face when conducting research in communities,” including tensions of “(1) embodiment and identity, (2) access and relationships, (3) interventions and actions, (4) institutions and disciplinarity, (5) intentions and outcomes, and (6) disclosure and write-up” (p. 1). These tensions are often magnified by the fact that the “truly difficult issues are rarely discussed” within our publications (Grabill, 2012, p. 217). Due to the messiness and complexity of CER, both Simmons and Amidon (2019) and Grabill (2012) have argued that a research stance “is the single most important issue to consider when researching in or with communities and needs to be better understood in any conversation about methodology” (Grabill, p. 211). A research stance can help foreground our obligations and commitments as researchers and turn those commitments into thoughtful, ethical research practices, thus transforming our relationships with the communities we work with.

In my own research, I have found that a research stance of reproductive justice has been especially beneficial to understanding online health communities, which often contain narratives that are empowering for some patients but disempowering and even harmful to others (De Hertogh, 2015). Therefore, this article builds on previous scholarship in online health communication

in RHM (De Hertogh, 2015; Jarvis, 2021; Johnson et al., 2020; Yam, 2020), TPC (Avery & Edenfield, 2021; Edenfield et al., 2019; Frost et al., 2021; Holladay, 2017) and medical anthropology/sociology (Davis, 2018; Lee, 2017) by interrogating the diverse, conflicting patient experiences present in an online community for Asherman syndrome, a rare illness that occurs after reproductive surgery. In response to the surgery, the body forms scar tissue that produces many symptoms for patients: pain, infertility, pregnancy complications, and other disorders such as endometriosis (Hooker et al., 2014). Through an analysis of 320 discussion board posts, 84 published narratives, 30 written reflections, and 10 in-depth interviews, as part of a larger IRB-approved autoethnographic study of my experiences as both a patient/member and researcher of the Asherman health communities (IRB #597, University of Memphis), I highlight how certain experiences of infertility and parenthood thrive in online discussions while others are suppressed or silenced. Additionally, I argue that employing an intersectional framework of reproductive justice creates new possibilities for multiple stories to hold space alongside one another in the design of online health spaces. As reproductive justice frameworks aim to protect all reproductive freedoms, these methods eschew cohesive narratives and instead prioritize the amplification of diverse patient voices. By focusing on multiplicity, researchers can “foster spaces for coalition-building” across differences (Yam, 2020, p. 19), providing hope for more inclusive social support online. Before moving to the methods and results of this research, I begin by reviewing recent scholarship in RHM to highlight how frameworks of reproductive justice can help vulnerable patients—particularly those patients dealing with infertility—overcome the stigma, shame, and isolation that often accompany a diagnosis.

## ASHERMAN SYNDROME AND THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF INFERTILITY

“Do you think you’ll try again?” I looked up from the floor to meet the doctor’s gaze. I shrugged, unsure how to answer. Less than a week earlier, I had received an emergency surgery for an ectopic pregnancy that had ruptured in the middle of a family vacation; it was my third failed pregnancy and sixth surgery in less than four years. The truth was, I really wanted another child. I loved being a mom, and I wanted to give my son a sibling. But the surgeries had taken their toll—I was physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted. The doctor spoke firmly but kindly as she reviewed my history: “You may want to consider the risks before you try again. You’re awfully young to have had so many experiences where you could have died.” It was such a simple comment, but it haunted me far beyond our meeting. That comment, more than anything else, jolted me from a continual cycle of surgeries and attempts to conceive that I was repeating without reflecting on my choices. Thus far, medical institutions had encouraged me to “fix” my Asherman syndrome and become “healthy” and fertile again. However, after that final ectopic pregnancy, I realized that I didn’t want to undergo treatment again, even if it meant permanently living with scarring and pain. It had become too costly—materially, physically, and emotionally—to pay for corrective surgeries that had only led to more failed pregnancies. Importantly, after two emergency surgeries, I wanted to make sure I wasn’t causing more unnecessary harm to my body or my family.

While my lived experience is unique and personal, it highlights a few of the complicated decisions that patients living with Asherman syndrome often must make as they choose to continue

or end treatment. First, while Asherman syndrome is caused by reproductive surgery, most commonly a D&C procedure after miscarriage, the disorder cannot be viewed or treated through common office diagnostic tools but only through additional invasive surgeries (Dreisler & Kjer, 2019). These surgeries can be costly, based on insurance coverage, and can often be painful as well. Additionally, patients may be hesitant to undertake additional surgical procedures when they are still processing the traumatic diagnosis of an illness caused by one. Finally, Asherman syndrome often causes subsequent infertility and pregnancy-related issues, such as recurrent miscarriage, ectopic pregnancy, fetal growth restriction, premature delivery, abnormal placentation, and postpartum hemorrhage (Hooker et al., 2014). Therefore, patients’ treatment decisions are often entangled with the intersecting experiences of miscarriage and infertility and the feelings of isolation and stigma that often accompany these experiences. As the World Health Organization (2022) has explained, “around the world, stigma, shame, and guilt emerge as common themes [for miscarriage] ...women who lose their pregnancies are made to feel that they should stay silent about their grief, either because miscarriage and stillbirth are still so common, or because they are perceived to be unavoidable” (para. 2). Patients who experience both miscarriage and subsequent infertility after their diagnosis may experience compounding feelings of shame and stigma for years.

Due to the entangled experiences of miscarriage and infertility, as well as the perceived rare nature of the illness, patients with Asherman syndrome often turn to online health communities to seek out specialized knowledge and social support. As online health information proliferates, scholars in RHM and allied disciplines have increasingly begun to investigate the importance of online networks as crucial spaces of social support for individuals experiencing infertility (Jarvis, 2021; Johnson et al., 2020; Lee, 2017; Novotny & Horn-Walker, 2020). For example, both Johnson et al. (2020) and Jarvis (2021) have found that digital communities can provide safer spaces for social support, where patients can share their experiences while remaining anonymous. Additionally, Lee (2017) discussed how social support not only helps “manage the stress of the infertility experience,” but can also improve clinical outcomes, as “patients’ emotional states can impact their decisions about whether to persevere through the disappointments and setbacks of a long treatment course” (p. 343). Taken together, this scholarship highlights the importance of CER in digital spaces to better understand how patients engage with social support online.

In health contexts, social support has been defined as “interaction in relationships which improves coping, esteem, belonging, and competence through actual or perceived exchanges of physical or psychosocial resources” (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 4). Because social support is complex, researchers often divide this larger category into the smaller categories of informational support and emotional support (Barrera, 2000). Social psychologist Bert Uchino (2004) further divided these two categories into four main components of social support: emotional support, informational support, tangible support, and belonging. In a recent study on the lived experiences of infertility on Instagram, Johnson et al. (2020) found that all four of Uchino’s (2004) components of social support were present. Emotional support and belonging helped members build camaraderie and empathy and increase feelings of self-worth, while informational support helped members combine their lived experiences alongside medical information to provide nuanced



recommendations. Tangible support, shown by members offering to mail unused medications and injection pens to other members without insurance, highlights the importance of material factors to decision making and can increase awareness of the structural barriers that are difficult for patients to overcome as they attempt to receive treatment.

While Johnson et al.'s (2020) article has deepened the knowledge of how social support functions in online health communities, the authors noted that one limitation of their study design was the inability to ascertain whether users felt satisfied with the level of social support they received from the online infertility community on Instagram (p. 341). Indeed, this limitation presents a crucial area for research, as scholars have shown the problems that can occur with infertility narratives that circulate online. As Novotny and Horn-Walker (2020) elaborated:

Too often the success stories of infertility are heard and shared, and they reinforce a cultural norm that infertility can be resolved. These stories fit nicely within a rhetoric of hope that positions biomedicine as a life-changing, and, even perhaps more acutely, a life-creating technology that helps people become parents. Many times, however, patients must undergo several rounds of biomedical treatment, like in vitro fertilization, before even becoming pregnant. These stories of when fertility treatment does not grant immediate success, we find, are too often erased from fertility conversations and, even more, are underserved in terms of being cared for and listened to. (p. 48)

Similarly, Lee (2017), in a cyberethnography of an online infertility forum run by RESOLVE, found that the narrative of “the persistent patient,” where the patient “exhaustively researches treatment options, undergoes multiple cycles of treatment despite repeated failures, and ultimately achieves success (a healthy baby),” is privileged within online communities, while other narratives, such as patients choosing to adopt or remain childfree, are often silenced or disregarded. Lee has argued that this privileging of narratives further marginalizes those participants who are already at the greatest risk of marginalization from the medical community—those who already have less access to the material resources of treatment.

In the Asherman online community, the narrative of the persistent patient can be even more harmful for patients, as persistence often equates to additional surgeries, which are not only expensive but also risky. Therefore, this article extends Johnson et al.'s (2020) and Lee's (2017) scholarship, by specifically searching for experiences in the online discussions that are described by patients as empowering or disempowering as they choose various treatment options or decide to end treatment. By focusing specifically on the multiple and conflicting experiences of patients, I respond to Novotny and Horn-Walker's (2020) call for “broader, less uniform, and more complex notions of infertility...to disrupt\* conflated understandings of infertility as a gendered pathology” (p. 59). In order to hold space for the complexity and multiplicity of the lived experiences of infertility, I found an intersectional framework of reproductive justice especially useful to avoid reinforcing singular narratives of successful outcomes or biomedical progress. Therefore, this project also seeks to extend conversations on social justice in CER more generally, by questioning how researchers can work to include more diverse perspectives in our accounts of online

patient experience. As an important goal of social justice is more equitable access to treatment, this should also include equitable access to social and emotional support in online spaces.

## FRAMEWORKS OF REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

In studies of reproductive health, recent scholarship has called for intersectional reproductive justice (RJ) frameworks in rhetorical studies and TPC to better demonstrate how interlocking systems of oppression work to keep marginalized populations from exercising their reproductive freedoms. As Yam (2020) argued, “existing rhetorical research has focused primarily on reproductive rights, specifically on legal rights and access to abortion. However, as Black feminist activist-scholars point out, securing individuals' rights not to have children is alone insufficient in addressing the compounding systems of oppression that marginalized communities face in their reproductive lives” (p. 19). A reproductive justice framework aims to protect three pillars that encompass reproductive freedom: “The right not to have a child; the right to have a child; and the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments” (Ross & Solinger, 2017, p. 9). Additionally, by focusing on oppressive systems, RJ moves away from narratives that prioritize individual choice and autonomy and toward better understanding the rhetorical practices of individuals who are marginalized based on multiple axes of oppression. For community-engaged researchers, this reprioritization requires moving away from institutionally sanctioned discourse and sites of research and prioritizing the amplification of diverse patient voices as they work to bear and parent children. As Bell (2009) has argued, “the few studies that have undertaken such qualitative exploration have been often biased by the fact that they rely heavily on participants recruited from medical clinics—a sampling process that inherently skews the participant base toward wealthier white women with health insurance” (cited in Lee, 2017). Therefore, a RJ-informed approach can move studies in RHM and TPC toward interventional goals by respectfully including patient stories that do not conform to dominant narratives of reproductive health.

For example, in a recent article bridging TPC and RHM research, Harper (2021) has centered the activist writing practices used by the grassroots organization Moms4Housing to advocate for structural changes to governmental housing policies. By fighting for affordable housing and health care, Moms4Housing advocates use writing to uphold the third pillar of reproductive justice, the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments, as a fundamental right of all parents. Harper has argued that research in TPC “is important to the RJ movement because the genres of written communication used by activists (websites, press releases, social media posts, memos, and position statements) aim to redress oppression, while the written communication strategies of government establishments (regulatory writing) help maintain systems of inequity” (p. 231). Through this study, Harper provided a concrete example that demonstrates how TPC is not neutral or objective; instead, “written communication has the power to harm and help communities, and this is evident in much of the written discourse surrounding reproductive justice” (p. 231). Therefore, Yam and Harper have both called for researchers interested in reproductive justice to prioritize sites of research that help “amplify rhetorical practices of survivance and coalition-building from the margin” (Yam, 2020, p. 21) to demonstrate how power, positionality, and privilege intersect to affect healthcare outcomes.



This article attends to these calls by amplifying the diverse voices of patients in the Asherman online health communities. Reproductive justice is vitally important to living with Asherman syndrome, as patients often must make complicated decisions about when, how, and if they should try to have children. Additionally, while the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* threatens all individuals in the suppression of bodily autonomy, particularly those individuals who choose not to have children, the decision also has far-reaching effects for individuals who wish to have more children. As *Resolve*, the National Infertility Association (2023), has elaborated on their website:

We believe that without the protection of *Roe v. Wade*, state lawmakers now have an open door to introduce far-reaching legislation that will create barriers for people to access medical procedures like IVF or to receive medications that help a patient suffering an ectopic pregnancy or miscarriage. Not only do people have the right to create embryos, but they are the only ones who have the right to determine what happens to their embryos. People also have the right to medical assistance and medications that meet the standard of care including those who experience an ectopic pregnancy or miscarriage, because without that access their lives are at risk. (para. 1)

Additionally, parents who wish to have more children should have access to the medical assistance necessary to build their families; however, only a fraction of those living with infertility live in the fifteen states that offer some form of infertility coverage or work for one of the few employers who offer infertility coverage voluntarily (*Resolve*, 2023). In a survey of 4,712 individuals, one study found that “of those who met the criteria for infertility, < 50% had ever spoken to a doctor, and 81% did not receive treatment” (American Society of Reproductive Medicine [ASRM], 2021, p. 55). This study finds that the most common reason that patients do not receive treatment is due to economic reasons; most individuals who live with infertility must pay extremely high out-of-pocket costs for tubal surgeries, assisted reproductive technologies (such as IVF), surrogacy, or adoption. For example, the median price of one cycle of IVF in the United States is estimated to cost \$19,200, and a full course of treatment usually includes two or more cycles (ASRM, 2021).

Additionally, factors such as race, socioeconomic status, gender identity, sexual orientation, geographic location, and marital status can dramatically impact the infertility experiences of individuals and families. For example, studies have shown that “racial and ethnic minorities, including Black and Hispanic women, experience infertility significantly more than their Caucasian counterparts” (Siegel et al., 2021, p. 347); however, “even in states with comprehensive infertility mandates, infertility care still is used disproportionately by non-Hispanic white women of high socioeconomic and educational status” (ASRM, p. 56). While socioeconomic factors are certainly part of this problem, structural racism and inequities in healthcare also account for this disparity. For example, the American Society for Reproductive Medicine (2021) noted, “Women of color, for example, have reported that some physicians brush off their fertility concerns, assume they can get pregnant easily, emphasize birth control over procreation, and may dissuade them from having children” (p. 57). Additionally, most state insurance laws rely on a definition of infertility that requires “6–12 months of unprotected heterosexual intercourse,”

which excludes many couples and single individuals from mandated infertility coverage (ARSM, p. 57). In order to facilitate reproductive justice outcomes on a wider scale, it is critically important for researchers to investigate these concerns and ensure that diverse patient stories—those that emphasize the basic human right to build a family as well as the right to live childfree—are amplified and circulated.

While increasing access to tangible support such as specific treatments are important to patients living with Asherman syndrome or infertility more generally, it is also equally important for patients to choose when to end treatment and/or choose not to have more children, without feeling there is stigma or shame attached to those decisions. This research finds that the decision to continue or end treatment for Asherman syndrome is often due to a complex array of material, emotional, social, and embodied factors. In many cases, narratives such as the “persistent patient” can not only be unproductive but can also be traumatic and harmful to individuals who have often undergone multiple treatment cycles or who have suffered multiple pregnancy losses in their attempts to build a family. Ultimately, social support viewed from a lens of reproductive justice should account for the many complicated experiences and decisions patients must face in their attempt to continue or end treatment. While this is ultimately a difficult task, this article attempts to broaden researchers’ views of the experiences of living with infertility by emphasizing the differing, and sometimes conflicting, perspectives of individuals seeking treatment for Asherman syndrome to better highlight those experiences that may sometimes be absent from online discussions. In what follows, I first describe the methods of this study before presenting key findings. Finally, I conclude by presenting ways that community-engaged researchers can attempt to intervene to design new spaces that value multiplicity and foster diverse patient perspectives.

## EMBODIED EXPERIENCES OF RESEARCH

Because community-engaged researchers “draw on the practice of working with people to answer questions and solve problems—as opposed to researching ‘on’ people and their problems,” Grabill (2012) has emphasized the importance of slowly building and ethically maintaining relationships throughout the research process (p. 215). My relationship with the Asherman online communities began long before I became a researcher when I was diagnosed with Asherman syndrome in late 2013. Like many other patients, I had never heard of the condition before my diagnosis. Unlike many other patients, I was lucky to receive a diagnosis at all, as a perceived myth in the “rare” nature of the illness often persuades physicians that patients cannot have the condition (March, 2011). Because I had never heard of the syndrome before, I joined an online community to learn more about the illness and my options for treatment. Due to the information posted in the discussion boards, I was able to find a specialist who accepted my insurance, and due to this physician’s expertise, I was able to give birth to my son in January 2015, even though multiple health providers had pronounced that I was permanently infertile. I stayed active within the Asherman online communities until June 2017, when I decided to discontinue treatment due to repeated miscarriages and an ectopic pregnancy. After making the decision to discontinue treatment, it became too difficult to regularly read the stories of community members—these stories were often fraught with deeply

emotional experiences that often triggered my own past feelings of grief, anger, and loss. Occasionally, the stories also prompted feelings of doubt in my decision to discontinue treatment. When reading the success stories of others, I would often question myself, wondering if perhaps I had given up too soon. Ultimately, it was easier to remove my access to social support rather than continue to question my past choices.

Nevertheless, when I began a digital research project in 2019, I knew that I wanted to focus on Asherman syndrome. I knew these communities were completing important rhetorical work and writing health texts that helped patients make crucial health decisions, and I wanted to amplify this work and increase awareness of Asherman syndrome on a larger scale. However, as much RHM research has demonstrated, working simultaneously as both insiders and outsiders within patient communities is a messy and complicated process. It is impossible to demarcate the boundaries of where my identity as a patient ends and my identity as a researcher begins. These entangled experiences as a patient and researcher have increased my commitment to intersectional feminist research methods, which often guided my decisions at times I felt lost. While there are many stories to tell about Asherman syndrome, an intersectional approach helped me better understand the complexities of lived experience to prevent telling singular, cohesive narratives, especially those that echo my own experiences as a cisgender white woman. While I have experienced marginalization and dismissals in medical spaces because I identify as a woman with a rare illness, I have also experienced many privileges in my experiences with medical providers. I have not encountered structural oppressions due to race, sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or disability, and I have been extremely fortunate to possess health insurance covered by an Asherman specialist. While my own story is an embodied part of this research process, it is certainly not the most important story to tell. There are many patients with Asherman syndrome who cannot afford treatment, due to the inaccessibility of insurance coverage and the high costs of infertility treatments. There are many patients living with pain and grief because they cannot travel far distances to visit Asherman specialists. There are many patients whose symptoms continue to be dismissed, due to the structural racism and inequities that continue to persist in healthcare. These stories must be amplified as patients work together for change.

Throughout the research process, I've found that centering the experiences of vulnerable communities means deeply listening to and prioritizing differences, and it often means thinking carefully about the sites of our research. It also means listening to ways that patients may not want to participate, or how they may even be harmed by participation in our projects. For example, De Hertogh (2018) contended that researchers interested in online communication should carefully "consider whether, where, and how to publish" information posted online, even if this information is posted in public forums. The author argued that digital research in vulnerable online communities should utilize three guiding principles, which include building ethical online relationships, understanding public/private boundaries in digital spaces, and considering the ethics of publication (p. 482). In my own project, I attempted to prioritize these concerns through each phase of the process. To build ethical relationships, I reintroduced myself as a researcher to the Asherman online communities, even though I had already been a participating member from 2013–2017. I described some of my hopes for the project as a patient with Asherman syndrome, while emphasizing that I wanted to listen and learn how I could help further members'

own goals. Additionally, as I have described elsewhere (Cameron, 2022), I spent the first year of this project completing a qualitative content analysis of 320 discussion board posts to better understand why patients describe joining the Asherman health communities and their unique goals and concerns. This portion of the project helped me develop a "big picture" understanding (McKee & Porter, 2010) of the needs and interests of group members, which guided the development of my survey and interview questions.

I navigated the next concern, "understanding public/private boundaries" (De Hertogh, 2018), during the survey and interview portion of this project. Following McKee and Porter (2010), I chose not to quote any online discussion board postings without first securing consent from participants. I made this decision due to the sensitive nature of topics discussed online, the stigma often involved with an infertility diagnosis, and because "participants in online forums often perceive their postings as private even when those postings are, technically speaking, publicly available on the web" (McKee & Porter, 2010, p. 157). However, when asking the moderators of the various Asherman online communities to provide feedback on the initial survey questions and informed consent document, one moderator was opposed to posting the survey in their community, particularly due to the question asking for consent to quote from the online discussion boards. This moderator noted that the question itself may concern members of the community who chose not to participate in the project, as they may feel their postings may be quoted at any time, even without their consent. This may lead members to stop posting or leave the group entirely. While the rest of the moderators were positive and supportive of the informed consent document and survey questions, I removed this question from the informed consent document. Because these forums provide critical social support for patients, I decided to only include quotations from surveys and interviews (from individuals who had completed informed consent), as well as patient narratives intentionally published online on the International Asherman Association website or in *The Silent Syndrome* (International Asherman Association, 2017), a patient-authored and published text. Additionally, while I provide basic information about the general location of the source (e.g., whether the quotation was obtained from a survey, interview, or published narrative), I have removed or changed all names throughout this article (even in the case of published narratives), in order to provide an extra layer of anonymity for patients who have chosen to share their experiences.

In order to better consider the ethics of publication (De Hertogh, 2018), I chose to ask participants directly how they would like to receive information and provide feedback throughout the project. As a patient myself, I knew that reading the stories and experiences of others could sometimes come at great emotional cost, and I wanted to give participants a chance to choose whether and how they would like to provide feedback and receive information. While some members wanted to receive updates and provide member checks as the project progressed, many participants chose to share their experiences without receiving future information or updates. Importantly, during this process many members also articulated the ways this project could give back to patient communities. For example, while participants appreciated that publications in academic journals could help spread awareness of Asherman syndrome, they were most enthusiastic about the ways I could gather and synthesize medical literature to help future patients make more meaningful health decisions. As other scholars have already noted (Cushman, 1996; Finer, 2020; Jones, 2016), these suggestions from

community members show how researchers interested in TPC, RHM, and CD are positioned to create many extra-institutional documents that help community members achieve their goals.

Finally, the last portion of the relationship-building process included choosing how to look for and amplify those stories that may be silenced or omitted within online communities using other research methods. Following Lee's (2017) approach, I used cyberethnographic methods to search specifically for tensions and conflicting experiences within the 320 online discussion posts originally gathered as data for this project. As Lee specifically investigated counternarratives that described the decision to discontinue (or take a break from) treatment, I also separated these posts and paid close attention to the responses to these stories to discover how to best create a space for social support for all experiences of infertility. Additionally, as a crucial aspect of Lee's methodological process was analyzing not only the language used within the online forum, but also crucial omissions and silences, I highlighted posts that were met with unusual silences from members of the group. Additionally, this project extends Johnson et al.'s (2020) and Lee's (2017) scholarship by asking participants directly in surveys and interviews to reflect on their satisfaction with the level of social support they received online, as well as changes or improvements they would like to see in online health communities. As a final step, I returned to the 84 published narratives and completed a deep reading of passages coded under the following themes: social support, conflict, decision-making, barriers to decision-making, and health outcomes. This deep reading helped validate that themes described within surveys and interviews were relevant in a larger population of patients, and it also provided additional descriptions and nuance into the benefits and constraints of online social support, as well as the complexities of the decision to continue or end treatment for Asherman syndrome.

## CONFLICTING EXPERIENCES OF INFERTILITY

The online discussion posts, published written narratives, surveys, and interviews all indicate the heavy emotional burden that patients with Asherman syndrome must carry. As Jane demonstrated in her published online narrative:

I was nineteen years old when I had a D&C procedure, due to retained placenta after the birth of my first child. I was not aware of the risk of Asherman's syndrome. I didn't get a menstrual period for a year after having my first child and that prompted me to see a doctor and find out what was going on with my body. It took a year to diagnose that I had Asherman's syndrome. It took a further seven years for my partner and I to have another baby, all the while unsure if we would ever be able to see this come to fruition. We suffered five miscarriages (some I needed to be admitted to the hospital for) and the premature loss of our daughter at eighteen weeks gestation. In addition to all the loss we faced, I had ten surgeries over that time, all linked to Asherman's syndrome. These were repeated hysteroscopy and laparoscopy surgeries. I also suffered two secondary hemorrhages after the birth of our daughter (deceased) and of our son (living). Altogether my partner and I have spent over \$100,000 out of our own pockets. Because of Asherman's I have had to sacrifice financially, emotionally, and physically. The effects have caused so much hurt for myself and my family. Emotionally I have

not recovered, and I battle with depression, anxiety, and PTSD. I wish I never had to go through all of this. I wish I had known the effects of a D&C and I wish I was more informed of the risks involved and offered alternatives.

Jane's story reflects how the emotional toll of Asherman syndrome often lasts years—sometimes decades—for patients as they go through the often-lengthy process of diagnosis and treatment. As Rachel explained, "For many women with Asherman's, the psychological pain is triple-fold: first, the devastating loss of a single pregnancy, then the incomprehensible threat of losing the chance at future pregnancies, and finally the almost complete devaluation of their experiences by their doctors" (International Asherman Association, 2017, *The Silent Syndrome*, p. 37). Additionally, due to residual and/or returning scar tissue, many individuals also may have to contend with additional pregnancy losses as they attempt to conceive after their diagnosis. This recurring pain and grief are more than any person should have to bear.

In addition to the heavy emotions that patients with Asherman syndrome experience, members also discuss the shift in identity that often occurs after a diagnosis. As Amy explained,

On the day I was diagnosed with Asherman's, not only did I question my family's future, but also my identity as a woman. I felt like I failed myself, my husband, and my son because I may not be capable of having any more babies. We all picture how our life is going to be and the roles we will play. Our plan had included parenthood and multiple children. I felt as though I was letting down my family even though I couldn't have prevented Asherman's. It took away what should have been my natural ability as a woman to get pregnant, and I had difficulty adjusting my perception of myself with this new limitation. (International Asherman Association, 2017, *The Silent Syndrome*, p. 120)

Multiple patient stories echoed the feelings of shame experienced after a diagnosis of infertility. Because individuals who identified as women often equated fertility and motherhood as natural processes, they felt a dramatic loss of identity when told that they may not be capable of these processes. Similar to Arduser's (2017) examination of diabetes as an "I am" disease rather than an "I have" disease, patients with Asherman syndrome often fully integrate their illness experiences into their identities (p. 37).

As multiple scholars have noted, these feelings of shame and stigma related to disease and identity may lead individuals to isolate from their in-person support networks, especially when they feel their experiences aren't understood or shared by those closest to them (Jarvis, 2021; Johnson et al., 2020). In this regard, online support networks can be helpful for patients, as they provide a space where patients can gather and share their experiences with others who have experienced similar struggles. Madeline described, "The only thing I thought about and cared about was Asherman's and without the web support group, I do not think I would have coped as well as I did. My husband was a big support. My family, however, did not really understand and in this period, I chatted on the Asherman's support group every day" (International Asherman Association, 2017, *The Silent Syndrome*, p. 192). Similarly, multiple survey participants noted that they joined the Asherman online health community to "feel less alone" as they struggled with their diagnosis. Online spaces of support are especially beneficial for patients with Asherman syndrome, as many members have never

heard of the illness before their diagnosis and have not met anyone offline with the condition.

As patients join the online support groups and share their deeply personal stories, these shared experiences create a sense of solidarity between members. While some members discuss their preference to remain anonymous on the site, multiple participants discuss developing deep friendships with other members in the group, with some continuing to stay in touch after ending their treatment for Asherman syndrome and others choosing to meet and develop in-person friendships. As Lea elaborated, “I joined an online Asherman’s group, and within seconds of posting my introduction to the group, I got a response from a woman in my home city who had experienced four miscarriages, been diagnosed with Asherman’s, and had sought the same type of treatment from the very same doctor. Here immediately was a kindred spirit of circumstance—someone I could meet for tea and talk to” (International Asherman Association, 2017, *The Silent Syndrome*, p. 32). Indeed, the personal relationships forged online were often reported as the most meaningful aspect of their participation in an online health community during surveys and interviews.

Overall, the positive effects of social support for members of the Asherman online communities were clear throughout this project. Even when individuals chose not to fully participate or share their own stories in the community, they described how the act of reading similar experiences and supportive messages helped them feel connected and understood during a deeply difficult time. Blair stated, “The support from these women was and is still invaluable to me. They helped see me through my darkest moments, and I will be eternally grateful to them all” (International Asherman Association, 2017, *The Silent Syndrome*, p. 13). However, while the benefits of social support were evident in this research, there were also multiple tensions described by participants, which implicates a need for an enhanced attention to language, messaging, and silences in online health communities. In particular, the discussion posts, published narratives, surveys, and interviews highlight three areas where conflict and tensions within discussions of social support most often arise. These three areas include (1) messages of hope and grief, (2) the decision to end treatment, and (3) recommendations of healthcare providers. In what follows, I explore each of these themes further before concluding with patient recommendations for improvements within online health platforms. By better understanding the complexities of patients’ experiences with social support, this research seeks to provide additional insights and interventions for TPC researchers and practitioners interested in improving users’ online experiences.

## HOPE AND GRIEF

While hope is typically considered a positive emotion, it was often described as a space of conflict for patients with Asherman syndrome. Some patients found that hope was essential to get through the grief, pain, and daily struggles, while others felt that hope can create unrealistic expectations that can be harmful to members, especially when the outcomes of infertility and IVF are often not positive. For some members, reading success stories and positive outcomes was imperative to begin or continue painful, risky, and sometimes expensive treatments for Asherman syndrome. Additionally, these narratives of hope are important because they stand in contrast to messaging from medical providers, who often tell patients diagnosed with Asherman syndrome that there’s little or no hope and that they must turn to adoption or surrogacy to have

children (March, 2011). For example, Tina, who was diagnosed with Asherman syndrome after experiencing two ectopic pregnancies, described the importance of positive messaging when undergoing a diagnosis:

My diagnosis was extremely devastating. I wasn’t given any information by this doctor on the positive outcomes that can be achieved with proper treatment, so I did my own research, which led me to believe the condition would lead to complete infertility...Thankfully I was able to connect with a woman who had Asherman’s and she directed me to an Asherman Syndrome specialist, and the Asherman’s support group at which point things were able to turn around for me and I was given hope again. The Asherman’s specialist put me at ease and gave me data on the successful outcomes he has been able to achieve for his patients. This is exactly the type of information and care I needed. Doctors need to realize they are dealing with highly vulnerable women and have the ability to completely destroy or give us back hope with their words. Thankfully I found the right doctor in the end. (International Asherman Association, n.d.)

As this narrative demonstrates, messages of hope in online communities not only provide emotional support but may also lead members to make different healthcare decisions, such as choosing different medical providers for treatment. Additionally, reading multiple success stories alongside one another in the same space amplifies this feeling of hope in a way that a singular narrative cannot accomplish alone; in this way, hope seems to accumulate and reverberate through the online narratives and discussion posts.

While many members appreciated messages and stories of hope, as it helped them persevere in their treatment decisions, other members expressed dismay with the overwhelming amount of hopeful and positive messages in the forum. These members carefully observed how a constant stream of hopeful messaging online can contribute to a toxically positive online environment: one that does not take into account the complex nuance of emotions that patients with Asherman syndrome are experiencing after a diagnosis. As Natalie clarified during her interview: “The outcome of joining the group is that I learned that other people exist with Asherman’s, and that there is a vocal subset of them who end up having babies. I know practically nothing about the ones who haven’t had success yet. The only ‘support’ I witness is toxic positivity, such as ‘It’ll happen!’ or ‘It happened to me!’ and ‘Don’t give up!’” Indeed, as Lee (2017) described, messages supporting the notion of the persistent patient—those patients that don’t give up until success is achieved—are pervasive throughout the online discussion boards. While these messages may be helpful for some, they often discourage and may even harm patients who don’t achieve success or choose to discontinue treatments. Most importantly, because the individuals with the most access to infertility treatments are white women with higher socioeconomic status (ASRM, 2021), these messages will most often harm those individuals who are already marginalized due to race, socioeconomic status, gender identity, sexual orientation, or geographic location. For example, in her interview for this project, Natalie reported leaving all Asherman-specific online communities due to the toxic positivity she experienced. Patients like Natalie want to feel as though all experiences in the group matter—not only the success stories. Additionally, they rightly want to feel that the important negative emotions they’re experiencing, such as grief, anger, and fear, are

not being diminished or dismissed.

In fact, multiple patients expressed the need for a balanced approach to hope, one that takes a multitude of experiences into account and rejects a singular notion of what hope entails. As Margaret described in her published narrative online:

Many hold hope up as a great ideal, a noble aspiration—that somehow if you hold onto hope, you’re a stronger person. After grasping hope with clenched fingers for over two years, I now realize that hope is something that you put into an empty place inside. Hope gives the illusion of control. Letting go recognizes this illusion. I don’t have any control over my infertility, whether I have hope or not. The reality is: there is a very slim chance (about 7%) that I will have another child. Hoping that I will have another baby does not increase this chance and letting go of it does not diminish this chance. Being on the other side of the fence, I now believe that it takes more strength to let go of hope yet recognize that hope still exists. (International Asherman Association, n.d.)

As these patient vignettes show, in order to function as useful social support, hope must be carefully communicated in a way that also accepts and embraces the many difficult emotions patients are experiencing. Additionally, hope cannot be given out in every circumstance; the outcomes of assisted reproductive technologies are often not successful, and because each individual body reacts to treatment in different ways, two individuals with AS can receive the same treatment with drastically different outcomes. Therefore, for social support to function effectively for more individuals online, patients describe seeking spaces and moderators that encourage protection from harmful, singular narratives of hope or success.

## THE DECISION TO END TREATMENT

Like hope, the decision to end treatment was personal and embodied for each patient, underscoring the need for multiple perspectives in online communication. As both Lee (2017) and Novotny and Horn-Walker (2020) have noted, medical treatments for infertility are costly, and there is also significant physical and emotional risk that must be factored into decision-making. These risks are also significant to the Asherman health communities, as treatments often require additional surgical procedures, which always incur medical risk and require both physical and emotional healing. Additionally, patients who received treatment for Asherman syndrome and went on to conceive and give birth often noted that it took years—and sometimes multiple miscarriages and/or serious pregnancy complications—before they were able to reach their desired outcomes. Therefore, the decision to continue or end treatment often relies on a complex array of factors, including an individual’s embodied tolerance of risk. As Anna described:

From the site I had learned that I should choose a good and experienced surgeon in order to avoid acquiring additional scarring. I also know now that any surgery will leave scarring and that surgery most often needs to be repeated several times in order to correct the issue. I had read a lot of encouraging stories on the site of women conceiving naturally thereafter and following an almost normal pregnancy and normal natural birth. However, I also listened and heard stories from women who had to struggle and suffer quite traumatically in an attempt to get pregnant. Many of these women had premature

births and postnatal consequences which was a real and scary fact for me to consider. (International Asherman Association, 2017, *The Silent Syndrome*, pp. 191–192).

During analysis, it was clear that many patients wanted to pursue all avenues available to treat Asherman syndrome. As Madeline described previously, these patients often describe their treatment decisions as a battle to be fought and won. Unfortunately, there are many ups and downs in the process of treatment, which patients describe as leading to an additional sense of loss, as healthcare decisions become more about Asherman syndrome and less about their lives and choices as individuals. As Carrie commented:

I feel Asherman’s Syndrome has started to control my life with doctor appointments, what I can eat, medicine I take, money I can or can’t spend, and how my marriage will play out. Nothing is in my control any longer. My life has been taken from me by this awful disease and all I want to do is get it back, but there is no cure, no one treatment that will work for everyone. I ask myself all the time, “When will it be too much? When will we just give up and try to move on with this void in our lives?” (International Asherman Association, 2017, *The Silent Syndrome*, p. 46).

Through an analysis of patient narratives and interviews, it became clear that there was not a single treatment or timeline that could possibly work for every individual. Some individuals wanted to attempt treatment until they received their desired outcome. However, many other patients described the decision to end treatment and the need to move on from thoughts of Asherman syndrome. For some individuals, considering adoption became the right choice, as was the case for Nadine:

It had been three years of pain, uncertainty, and expense. All this with no promise of a baby in sight was too high of a price to pay just to have our baby come out of my body. There were babies coming out of other people’s bodies that were as amazing as any my husband and I could produce. (International Asherman Association, 2017, *The Silent Syndrome*, p. 183).

For others, the material costs of treatment were a real and pressing factor in the decision to continue or end treatment. In surveys and interviews, multiple patients described choosing to end treatment when they were not able to conceive naturally, due to the high out-of-pocket costs associated with IVF, adoption, or surrogacy. Alternatively, some individuals chose to continue surgeries to treat Asherman syndrome because it was the only option covered by insurance. For example, Cathy mentioned her decision to continue treatment for Asherman syndrome as the most cost-effective option:

I see so many of my friends and family members go on to have their second or even third child and we are still fighting this, driving so many miles and spending so much money on just a hope that we might someday come home with a baby. We did give lots of thought to adoption and surrogacy, but we just don’t have the money to fund such things. (International Asherman Association, 2017, *The Silent Syndrome*, p. 45)

As these narratives indicate, patients with Asherman syndrome who wish to have more children often must choose between additional surgeries, IVF, surrogacy, or adoption—all of which are costly options. Often, patients are forced to choose the most affordable

option or the only option available to them through insurance. In some cases, this choice may mean undertaking multiple painful, risky surgeries because their insurance doesn't cover IVF (even when surgeries may ultimately cost insurance companies more than IVF). Due to inconsistent, and often inaccessible, insurance coverage for infertility-related treatments across the globe, the decision to continue or end treatment for Asherman syndrome often relies on the ability to pay for available treatments.

While costs were a significant factor in the decision to end treatment, other patients instead talked more explicitly about the embodied experiences of treatment, including the risks involved in attempting additional surgical procedures and giving birth to a baby with the additional risks of Asherman syndrome. As Eleanor described, "Sometimes I wonder if it may be worth the risk to go through the process again and try for another baby to complete the family we intended to have. In the end, I would never want to do something which could risk my life and ultimately hurt my children and my family" (International Asherman Association, 2017, *The Silent Syndrome*, p. 124). Patients with Asherman syndrome must contend not only with the high material costs of treatment, but also must weigh the emotional cost of treatment, along with the knowledge that treatment may result in additional miscarriages, high-risk pregnancies, and increased risks of complications for both themselves and their child(ren). Therefore, the decision to end treatment is a thoroughly emotional decision. As Carrie described in her published narrative, "It takes strength and courage to stop—to know that you've done enough—that doing more would be hopeless" (International Asherman Association, 2017, *The Silent Syndrome*, p. 234). Eve described how choosing to end treatment allowed her to see herself as a whole person again:

I think what we both regret most is the loss of these past three years. We haven't been living. I suppose we knew that going through it, but it was just so hard with so many unknowns and traumatic situations. We just couldn't live in the moment. Over the past years, I have identified more with my circumstances than with who I truly am. Finally, I am getting it. I am not Asherman's and I am not my losses and I am not what may not be. (International Asherman Association, 2017, *The Silent Syndrome*, p. 246).

Ultimately, while there were themes and commonalities in the decision to end treatment, the final decision is a complex, intricate, and personal one. In order for patients to be able to make a meaningful and embodied choice, they need a full representation of patient experiences and to feel that there is no stigma attached to their decision. As Heidi elaborated in her published narrative:

Nothing in your life can prepare you to fight so hard and then have continued failure with every move you make. It makes you question your faith, your dreams, and life itself. It is at this point that support groups are needed so that you feel that these things are not just happening to you. Many people struggle, which results in some failures, some successes, some loss of hope, and some realizations that you just need to move on. (International Asherman Association, 2017, *The Silent Syndrome*, p. 220)

As Heidi described, for many individuals, the decision to end treatment may come with a welcome acceptance that life holds meaning and purpose outside of Asherman syndrome. By choosing

to end treatment, patients are not giving up, but are instead choosing not to let their illness define their individual worth. These lived experiences, which include the strength of holding space for simultaneous, conflicting emotions such as relief and grief, are equally important to narratives that describe patients having more children after treatment, and they should be prioritized as such in online health spaces. To build coalitions of social support that are inclusive of differences, the narratives we prioritize and stories we tell must resist oversimplified messages that bind hope with success and instead must exemplify the complex, rhetorically rich contexts of health choices. By emphasizing how emotional, messy, and difficult decision-making can be, as these patients have bravely shown, designers and moderators of online health platforms can help more individuals feel included and supported as they make their own embodied choices to continue or end treatment.

## ASHERMAN SPECIALISTS

As medical providers are often inexperienced with Asherman syndrome, one of the highest priorities of the community is helping members find an Asherman specialist for treatment. To accomplish this goal, group members have created a document they call the "A-list" (short for Asherman-list), which is an editable Excel spreadsheet where members can provide their experiences and recommendations with specialists who have successfully treated them. This list of Asherman health specialists often provides patients the best chance for success when it comes to treatment; in fact, receiving referrals for Asherman specialists through the A-list is often cited by patients as one of the greatest benefits of joining the online communities. During interviews, multiple patients reported switching healthcare providers due to A-list recommendations, and many found these specialists to be not only highly knowledgeable and experienced in the treatment of Asherman syndrome, but also empathetic healthcare providers who understood the emotional toll of treatment. As Beatrice noted in her online published narrative, "I had surgery with an A-list surgeon who was recommended from this group. He is an excellent surgeon, but most of all, he was caring, patient, and kind. He knew what I was going through and helped me get on the road to recovery" (International Asherman Association, n.d.). For patients, finding a provider they feel they can trust, who also understands what they're going through, can feel like an immeasurable relief from a heavy emotional burden.

Additionally, the A-list exemplifies the hard work and dedication from previous group members to build embodied knowledge of Asherman syndrome and an awareness of healthcare providers who can properly treat patients with the condition. As many members had never heard of Asherman syndrome before their diagnosis, they often describe feeling overwhelmed and grateful with the wealth of knowledge and recommendations provided in the online forums. Additionally, they often give credit not only to the healthcare providers who attempt to treat Asherman syndrome, but also the founding and contributing members of the group who have added to the accumulation of knowledge on the site. As another patient described in her online published narrative, "If not for the hands of the highly skilled 'A-list' surgeon that finally repaired my 'obliterated' uterine cavity, we wouldn't have any hope at all of another biological child. I am so grateful to him and to the wonderful women of this group for their help in restoring not only my uterus, but my spirit as well" (International Asherman Association, n.d.). By taking the time to gather and share their treatment experiences in one document, patients with Asherman syndrome have built their own unique historical artifact of the



illness, which can now be accessed and used by patients newly diagnosed with the condition. This culture of sharing, as well as the time and dedication it has taken to gather these stories where they can be accessed and used by others, is not lost on new members who join the online communities, and multiple patients describe wishing to leave something behind for future group members, often by sharing their own unique experience or story that may help someone else.

While the A-list healthcare providers have dramatically impacted group members, all A-list doctors who currently provide care for patients are located in Western countries and speak English: this leaves out a significant number of group members who don't have adequate access to these healthcare specialists (Cameron, 2022). Indeed, a significant number of participants who completed the online survey noted that they were unable to access treatment from recommended providers due to multiple barriers. For example, 30% of survey respondents noted that they were unable to seek out care from recommended specialists because their insurance either did not cover the provider or the treatment. Additionally, 20% of respondents noted that they were not able to receive care from recommended specialists because they were too far away. As a patient described in her written reflection for this project:

There are no A-listers in Canada that I could find. If I didn't have the money and support to fly to London during covid and with my employers' agreement to work from abroad, I would not have received what I think is excellent care or in the timelines I wanted treatment given my age.

Indeed, patients are often sensitive to the amount of time, money, and other material resources it takes to receive the recommended treatment for Asherman Syndrome. As another patient described in an interview:

The community was invaluable in its discussion of doctors who came recommended for a hysteroscopy, and I was able to get that and move forward with confidence to organize my surgery abroad. The discussions also made me realize how messed up this is in terms of inequality, with some women going privately for a few surgeries and others not able to afford the best care they deserve (not even for one surgery).

To that end, many members acknowledge the problems inherent with continuing to recommend a rather small group of healthcare providers who can only be accessed by members who are either fortunate enough to live nearby, or who have access to insurance coverage or other material resources that make it possible to travel across states, countries, or continents to receive care.

What's more, participants in this study noted how different online communities handled the sharing of information and the recommendation of healthcare specialists in dramatically different ways. For example, in her written reflection for this project, Jennifer highlighted the ways these recommendations can be detrimental to future patients:

Reddit ended up being a great source of information about how to obtain a diagnosis and proper treatment. I was also recommended a Facebook group and joined after being diagnosed. This group had equally good information; however, the members had a rather cultish obsession with two MDs in the US and were staunchly

opposed to discussion and recommendations of doctors that weren't on their "lists." I was muted for sharing my experience with an MD who followed proper technique and got me scar free and promptly left the group. Overall, I definitely credit my participation in online communities in helping advocate for both my diagnosis and proper treatment. However, I don't think it's fair the Facebook group is so short sighted when it comes to approved physicians. Many members cannot simply travel or afford to go to a doctor across the country, and information regarding physicians across the country should be made widely available.

Later in her written reflection, Jennifer clarified that a moderator on the platform "muted" her by reprimanding her publicly not to share an experience with a "doctor that had not been vetted." After the public reprimand, the moderator deleted Jennifer's post, as if it never existed. Due to this incident, Jennifer immediately left the group. Indeed, two more participants in this project noted their decision to either leave the Facebook group or become less active within this group due to similar concerns. These lived experiences highlight the importance of conducting research in online health communities from an intersectional perspective. While as a researcher it may be possible to tell one story about one online health community, united in their attempts to achieve better care, lived experiences are always more complicated, always messier, than any single narrative can account for. Additionally, as many scholars have noted (Lee, 2017; Martinez, 2019; Novotny & Horn-Walker, 2020; Smith, 1999; Yam, 2020, among others), these singular narratives can often turn into master narratives, which work in insidious ways to harm community members who are already the most vulnerable. Indeed, as this example illustrates, multiple members of the Asherman health communities felt the need to remove themselves (along with their access to crucial social support) from a health platform due to the harm of telling singular stories. Therefore, the final section of this article includes an amplification of various recommendations from members of the Asherman health community regarding the design of online spaces to be more inclusive of differences. This article concludes with a discussion of the various ways researchers can look for a multiplicity of perspectives when conducting community-engaged research with online patient communities.

## DESIGNING INCLUSIVE ONLINE HEALTH FORUMS

In the call for proposals for this special issue, editors Kristen Moore, Timothy Amidon, and Michele Simmons (2022) argued that "communication design needs even more examples of collaboration across differences—examples that illustrate how collaboration can be enacted to materially improve conditions with communities and bend existing designs toward social justice" (para. 1). By researching online health communities, this article finds that employing an intersectional feminist framework, such as the reproductive justice framework described by Harper (2020), Ross and Solinger (2017), and Yam (2020), can help hold space for multiple, conflicting narratives in online health communities to ensure that more participants are able to receive meaningful social and informational support. During this research project, it became clear that social support online needs to take a multifaceted approach to avoid creating harmful dominant narratives, such

as the “persistent patient” (Lee, 2017), and to be more inclusive of members and their different lived experiences. In particular, participants of this research project provided many suggestions regarding the design of online spaces to include multiple, differing perspectives. For example, during interviews, members praised the infertility forums on Reddit, such as r/infertility and r/stilltrying, as spaces that prioritized difference and inclusion. These two forums post careful rules about creating posts that attempt to protect members from additional trauma and help members engage only with the content that is useful or meaningful to their experiences. For example, the r/infertility subreddit has multiple weekly community threads, such as a treatment thread, a loss thread, a foster and adoption thread, a childfree thread, a positive pregnancy results thread, and a chat community thread (dealing with life outside of treatment). If members choose not to post in the relevant weekly threads, they are asked to place necessary content warnings on posts that may trigger other members, such as posts about positive pregnancy tests or living children. By separating the space into different daily or weekly threads, members can engage with the threads that are most applicable to their current support needs, while avoiding the threads that may cause additional trauma or unnecessary harm.

In addition to creating safer spaces online through weekly threads and content warnings, participants also noted some additional features of Reddit that allowed for more meaningful engagement online. For example, members noted that forums on Reddit often create separate spaces where members can exchange tangible support, such as the donation of unused medications for infertility or IVF. These features are often not present on other online community platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, where threads and posts are instead organized chronologically. Additionally, Reddit forums often encourage informational support by creating or linking to Wikis and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) pages. Finally, the infertility subreddits are often more intentionally conscious of language use and how certain terms can be particularly upsetting to members. Both r/infertility and r/stilltrying explicitly ban the use of inappropriate acronyms and language, such as Aunt Flo, Baby Dust (or Sticky Baby Dust), Swimmers, Eggies, or Follies, among others, in favor of medical acronyms and language. As the moderators of r/infertility describe, “Infertility is not cute and is an actual medical diagnosis, therefore cutesy acronyms and euphemisms are strongly discouraged at the preference of the community in favor of adult language and medical terms” (Banned terms, 2022). As the most prominent Asherman health communities currently reside on Facebook, survey and interview participants requested the addition of Asherman-specific communities on Reddit or the development of new online forums thoughtfully created with diversity and inclusion in mind.

In addition to the design of online health spaces, this research also finds that community-engaged researchers can use intersectional feminist approaches during the research design process to make additional space for multiple and different narratives to emerge. For example, following other research on online health communities (Bakke, 2019; Johnson et al., 2020), the initial research plan for this project included a study of only one online platform for Asherman syndrome. While this study attempted to include the greatest number of participants by choosing an Asherman-specific platform with the most members, this study design still would have missed crucial patient narratives. When this research project was expanded to include other Asherman-specific and infertility-

specific platforms, this change resulted in additional participants who had chosen to leave the platform from the original study due to harmful and traumatic experiences. Importantly, these participants describe how their posts were not only silenced through members’ responses (or lack thereof), but were instead completely removed, as if their postings never existed at all. These participants’ lived experiences provide an important caution for future researchers hoping to study social support in online health communities, as these crucial stories would have been missed completely under the original study design. Even when intentionally searching for silences and omissions, by studying one forum only, it would have become much easier to tell a singular narrative, or master narrative, of the lived experiences of Asherman syndrome. As moderators in online communities often have the power to remove individuals from their platforms and delete posts and even entire threads, researchers may not realize what conversations they are missing or who they are dismissing when their projects focus on a single platform.

An intersectional feminist perspective asks researchers to search for a multiplicity of perspectives and center those perspectives that are the most marginalized based on multiple categories of oppression (Alexander & Edenfield, 2021; Harper, 2020; Martinez, 2019; Smith, 1999; Walton et al., 2019; Yam, 2020). These approaches also ask us to look for different ways that hierarchies may tend to form, even when centering communities who are already marginalized. Additionally, as Lee (2017) has demonstrated, this approach also includes looking specifically for silences and other ways that experiences may be oppressed. Furthermore, an intersectional and social justice-oriented approach to research also necessarily includes creating interventions that help participants take action and meet their different individual goals. For this project, I have worked with patients to meet their goals in a few ways. First, using my research on Asherman syndrome, I created an annotated bibliography of current medical resources that can be shared as an editable google doc and posted to Asherman-specific websites and online discussion forums. It is my hope that synthesizing the current medical literature on Asherman syndrome will help patients cite this research in their future encounters with healthcare providers. Second, I have started compiling a new list of recommended Asherman healthcare professionals, which includes healthcare providers who have successfully treated one patient or who have been trained by an A-list specialist. While patients may ultimately choose not to visit these healthcare providers, it is my hope that expanding the network of specialists who treat Asherman syndrome will help patients who cannot travel for treatment or afford A-list doctors achieve better access to care.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Ultimately, I have found that intersectional feminist approaches to research keep the lived experiences of vulnerable patients centered throughout the research process. Centering these lived experiences helps community-engaged researchers better attend to the ethical elements of research, eschew cohesive and singular narratives, and intervene to help patient communities meet their health goals. However, this project has merely begun the important social justice work that needs to be completed in the allied fields of TPC, RHM, and CD. For example, this research project finds that there is much work to do in the intersecting areas of patient experience and user experience design, particularly designing (or

redesigning) online health spaces to reduce stigma and harm for patients. As participants in this project have noted, many popular platforms where patients gather, such as Facebook, organize patient posts chronologically in a singular space and do not allow for the creation of multiple threads to hold space alongside one another. In order to participate in these spaces, patients are exposed to all posts, even those that contain triggering or harmful content they would like to avoid. Indeed, one of the most compelling findings of this project is the suggestion from patients to design online health spaces to prioritize multiple threads and spaces for patients to interact directly with the spaces and threads that are meaningful to them (while also avoiding those threads with disempowering narratives). As suggested by patients in this project, the subreddits *r/infertility* and *r/stilltrying* currently contain the most resources available for patients to meaningfully engage with health information online. Similarly, the online infertility community run by Resolve has also redesigned their online platform to create three separate online spaces: (1) finding a resolution for infertility, (2) living after infertility resolution, and (3) living with childlessness due to infertility. By creating unique and separate spaces within online platforms, these communities hope to reduce individuals' exposure to additional stigma and harm. As such, the affordances and constraints of these online health spaces should be studied further to determine further interventions to increase social support to vulnerable patient populations.

Additionally, while this project attempts to make space for multiple narratives through intersectional frameworks and seeks to better understand how categories of race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, and ability create cumulative and compounding forms of oppression in healthcare, I remain haunted by the fact that this research still does not do enough to engage with some of these oppressions in a meaningful way for patients. Even when moving away from institutionally sanctioned sites of research, as Bell (2009) has recommended, the patients who can access (and therefore discuss) infertility treatments are still often cisgender white women with higher socioeconomic status (ASRM, 2021). Indeed, an intersectional analysis of the Asherman online communities highlights how these communities (and most infertility communities) do not engage enough in discussions of marginalization due to race, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, and geographic location. For example, discussions of race are almost completely absent in the Asherman online communities, even though studies have shown that BIPOC often face additional dismissals and have their symptoms disregarded when they visit infertility specialists (ASRM, 2021). Additionally, there are many patients living with Asherman syndrome in continents where there are no Asherman specialists and a complete lack of awareness of Asherman syndrome in general. While patients in these continents come to the Asherman online communities for health information and social support, it is difficult for them to receive useful healthcare information when traveling to an A-list specialist is almost impossible in these situations. While I still firmly believe that an intersectional feminist approach to research is essential to prioritize, amplify, and intervene in the concerns of patients who have been multiply marginalized, it is my hope that future scholarship will move further to create more accessible and actionable interventions that help all patients achieve better care.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Beginning Fall 2023, Shanna Cameron is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire. Her research interests include feminist theories and practices, digital rhetorics, and the rhetoric of health and medicine. Her work has also appeared in *Technical Communication Quarterly* and the *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*.

# Tracing the Development and Circulation of a Tool for Coalitional Change

Kristen R. Moore  
University at Buffalo  
krmoore@buffalo.edu

Erica M. Stone  
Independent Scholar  
erica.m.stone@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

This experience report describes the origin story and use journey of a visual tool for community engagement and organizational change work. We articulate the tool (i.e., the pyramid) as a theoretical framework and demonstrate how the tool has been used to intervene in organizations, engage coalitions, and mitigate risks as we move towards a more socially just future. It is both all about community-engaged research and also not about it at all: we built it in and with communities and coalitions and we have also brought it to communities and coalitions, adopted it, adapted it, and reinvented uses for it. By tracing its development and circulation, we are both documenting its past and present use cases and offering it up as a tool for others to adopt and adapt.

## CCS Concepts

Computer systems organization

## Keywords

Community-engaged research, Organizational change work, Antiracism, Intersectional feminism

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## INTRODUCTION

As researchers invested in community-engaged research (CER), we hold that any work with communities requires us to build coalitions purposefully with an eye towards social justice. That is, we must “amplify the agency of oppressed people—those who are materially, socially, politically, and/or economically under-resourced” (Jones & Walton, 2018, p. 242). If amplification and centering of the oppressed is one central activity of social justice, coalitional research, then we must necessarily shift our approach to engaging in research, which traditionally centers researchers, scholarly institutions, and the pursuit of novel knowledge.

To begin, we share a theoretical framework for building coalitions and making change in organizations. This framework emerges from a mess of experiences:

- From Erica and Kristen’s years-long conversations about community-engaged work
- From Erica’s research with a community organizing non-profit
- From key scholars, like Sullivan, Simmons, Walton, and Jones
- From Kristen’s research in transportation planning, community-based engineering projects, and urban planning.
- From Kristen and Erica’s separate and shared administrative work
- From the daily work of building coalitions and communities towards anti-racism
- From other bullshit we’re not going to write down

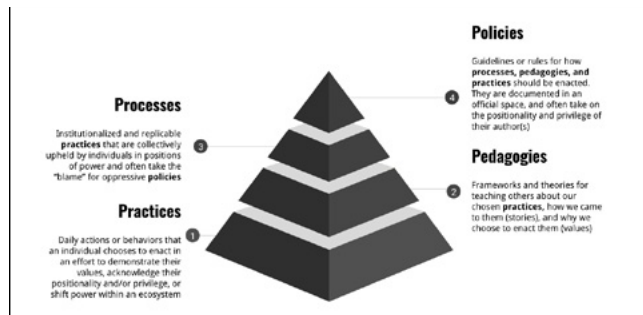
We follow feminists by starting in the middle here and coming clean about the origin of what we’re now calling “the pyramid.” Frameworks like the one we present here often seem to emerge from a static moment, but for us, the pyramid emerged overtime, shifting and traveling across our shared minds and individual experiences. In other words, the framework has a journey, and we’d like to share it with you in the form of an experience report.

This experience report has two distinct purposes: 1) to articulate the pyramid as a theoretical framework and offer it up as a tool



others can use, adapt and adopt; and 2) to demonstrate how the tool has been used to intervene in organizations, engage coalitions, and mitigate risks as we move towards a more socially just future. It is both all about community-engaged research and also not about it at all: we built it in and with communities and coalitions and we have also brought it to communities and coalitions, adopted it, adapted it, and reinvented uses for it.

## WHAT IS THE TOOL? AND HOW DID IT EMERGE?



**Figure 1**  
First instance of the pyramid in visual form, Erica’s 2021 keynote on open educational resources

In Figure 1, we present the earliest visualized version of “the tool,” which Erica used in a keynote on open educational resources (Stone, 2021). The pyramid, as we call it now, has four levels that map onto organizational elements:

1. Practices: Daily actions or behaviors that an individual chooses to enact in an effort to demonstrate their values, acknowledge their positionality and/or privilege, or shift power within an ecosystem
2. Pedagogies: Frameworks and theories for teaching others about our chosen practices, how we came to them (stories), and why we choose to enact them (values)
3. Processes: Institutionalized and replicable practices that are collectively upheld by individuals in positions of power and often take the “blame” for oppressive policies
4. Policies: Guidelines or rules for how processes, pedagogies, and practices should be enacted. They are documented in an official space, and often take on the positionality and privilege of their author(s)

As we worked to develop coalitions, we noted the need for illustrating, for example, the limits of policies as the end-all-be-all of decision-making and organizational change; in community organizations that functioned effectively, we noticed an allegiance to pedagogies as informal storytelling practices that invite new members of the organization to understand values and participate in the organization. The pyramid provided a mechanism for showing the need for building alignment among these elements and exposed the shortcomings of many approaches to building change, particularly tied to justice, equity, and inclusion. It also visualizes an accidental, but common hierarchy in organizational change work. Often, change workers begin by authoring a policy or process without considering how its users might teach others about or how individual practices might support or dismantle it.

Although we first began using the pyramid in 2021, we recall it

emerging from early work on the Anti-Racist Publishing Heuristic in 2020 as we worked to build a coalition of scholars to engage in anti-racist work (Anti-racist, 2020). There, we worked to build a sort of policy for anti-racist publishing alongside procedures for enacting that policy. As we write in the heuristic, the coalition emerged not only from those policies but also from the storytelling practices of the group, from our daily practices of working together, and from a shared sense of purpose. In other words: we were working across these pyramid levels before we articulated them. We had also conducted community-based research, where coalitional organizations modeled the importance of aligning vertically across the four pyramid levels. In other words: the creation of this tool was messy.

The tool is also related to our understanding of Patricia Hill Collins’ (2000) domains of power, which map in some ways but which are less immediately operationalized in organizations. For example: the interpersonal domain of power aligns with the pyramid’s “practice level.” That seems obvious. Yet when we move into the hegemonic and disciplinary realms, strategies for alignment become tricky because—of course—PHC is theorizing power, not offering a tool for organizational change. We note the alignment, however, both to amplify her theory of power and to note that we rely on her work as we seek to understand what it means to do anti-racist, inclusive community-engaged and coalitional work.

## A USE-JOURNEY OF THE PYRAMID

As we developed and engaged with the tool, we discovered its use-value to a range of “stuck places,” or moments when the next step in a decision-making process is unclear. To explain the tool’s use across coalitions, communities, and contexts, we hope to now take you on a use journey: illustrating where we’ve used the pyramid, how we’ve used it to get unstuck, and how it helped to structure and support coalition-building. The pyramid has aided us in articulating philosophies for building towards social justice in a number of community contexts.

### March 2021: A Tool for the Development of Open Educational Resources

As the Associate Director for General Education English (first-year writing and sophomore literature) at Middle Tennessee State University, I (Erica) was awarded a \$100,000 grant to develop open educational resources (OER) for our General Education courses. During this work, I was introduced to many OER advocates across the country. The Society for the Future of Higher Education invited me to give a keynote on our OER work at MTSU ([https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1wvK7f2CbQiXIDeeK662T9\\_79VaZO\\_EsaHV58k\\_642p4/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1wvK7f2CbQiXIDeeK662T9_79VaZO_EsaHV58k_642p4/edit?usp=sharing)), which provided me the space to think through the stuck places of OER development and publishing as social justice work. OERs are a form of grassroots organizational change. The very creation of OERs asks faculty to pour their most valuable asset (knowledge) into free, online texts with very little compensation in exchange for their labor. In this keynote, I was attempting to explain the layered work of open access texts: how they’re composed, how they do (or don’t) count toward tenure, how they contribute to inequitable labor structures... you can likely complete the rest of this sentence. After many days of toiling over how to talk about the stuck places of OERs, I sketched out the pyramid illustration for the first time on a sticky note. Then, I migrated it to a slide and made a few iterations.

For the keynote, the tool created a structural and visual way for me



to explain to policy-makers how ‘the rest of us’ were working to make education more equitable through the development of free, open access research articles and textbooks. Without a window into the work of faculty (practices, pedagogies, processes), it’s next to impossible for university administrators or board members to understand why an OER should count toward tenure in the same way a print, for-profit text might. To bring in another perspective, I invited Jamaal Abdul-Alim (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/dcwriter360/>), Education Editor for The Conversation (<https://theconversation.com/us>), to do a follow-up workshop on writing for public audiences. The keynote was well-attended, and many participants took the tool back to their campuses across the country to help think through the practices, pedagogies, processes, and policies around OERs.

## Fall 2021: A Tool for Guiding Antiracist Teacher-Scholars

In response to the growing interrogation of antiracist teaching materials in the state of Tennessee (Stone & Cirillo-McCarthy, 2021), a group of English faculty at Middle Tennessee State University formed a reading group (I know; this was super lame and unhelpful). To better articulate our goals, I summarized the layers of the tool and how they related to antiracist work in the academy:

- Practices: behaviors, daily actions/encounters
- Pedagogies: how we teach, how we teach others to teach
- Processes: the repeated behaviors that undergird department policies, often exclusionary and blame policy or history for their harm
- Policies: the documents and guidelines that guide our department’s power structures, which are highly linked to the positionality and privilege of the policy author and/or enforcer

As we read and discussed Kendi’s work (2019), we didn’t have a way to move from thoughts to action. The tool kept us from falling too far into the trap of a reading group that thinks about injustice instead of working to dismantle it.

Pairing our goals with the tool helped us think through how we might:

- Goal 1: To provide a safe space for antiracist activists within the English Department to work coalitionally toward equity and inclusion through personal reflection and collective action (praxis)
- Goal 2: To identify racist practices, pedagogies, policies, and processes within the English Department and work coalitionally to replace them

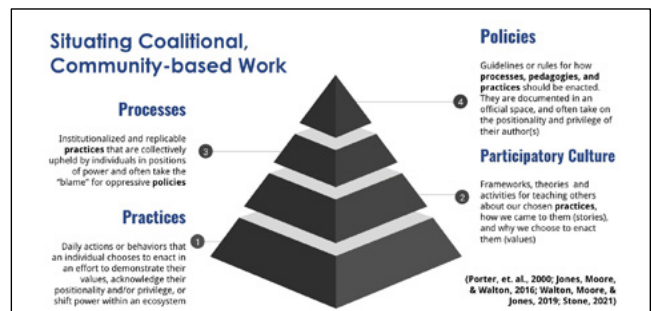
## September 2021: A Tool for Situating Rhetorical Change Work

As a new tenure-track professor at MTSU, I (Erica) was asked to give a brown bag talk ([https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1xBIKa9Ld35S1-IjGAG8w\\_izRe1WjQ3a6qOCAQ78OkYA/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1xBIKa9Ld35S1-IjGAG8w_izRe1WjQ3a6qOCAQ78OkYA/edit?usp=sharing)) to introduce the faculty and graduate students to my scholarship, teaching, and service. In a department that had 70 literature faculty and only 5 writing faculty, I needed a way to describe rhetorical change work and public-facing technical communication. The pyramid gave me a visual metaphor for how rhetorical change work functions in writing program administration and public rhetorics. After the talk, two graduate students scheduled

appointments with me to discuss how they might engage in research that is more praxis-oriented.

## October 2021: A Tool for Building Community-Engaged Methodologies

At SIGDOC in 2021 (an online conference), we proposed to discuss the ways community-based research allowed us to understand coalitional work and prompted us to shift our research and communication practices. We were working to expose two tensions: 1) that traditional research approaches failed to help us prepare for community-engaged research and 2) that we had two completely different coalitional experiences in community-engaged organizations, but both of these served as exemplars for the kinds of shifts we needed to engage in coalitional work as researchers.

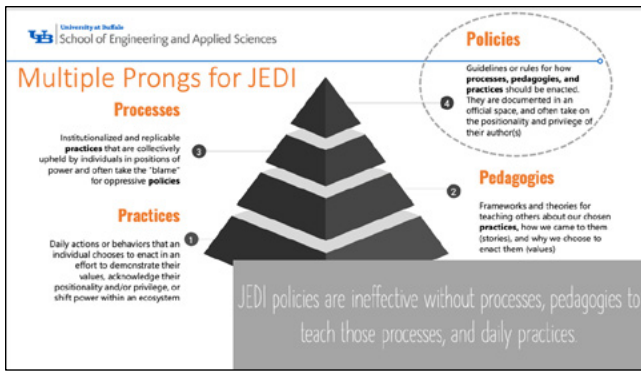


**Figure 2.** Example slide from Kristen and Erica’s SIGDOC presentation featuring the pyramid

The tool allowed us to consider how organizations might require us to shift in any range of areas—mitigating the risk of harming community members through an overly stabilized approach to research. Importantly, this willingness to shift and be responsive helped us build coalitions (in Erica’s case) or observe coalitions in action (in Kristen’s case).

## Beginning in Fall 2021 (Ongoing): A Tool for Arguing for Equity and Inclusion in STEM Fields

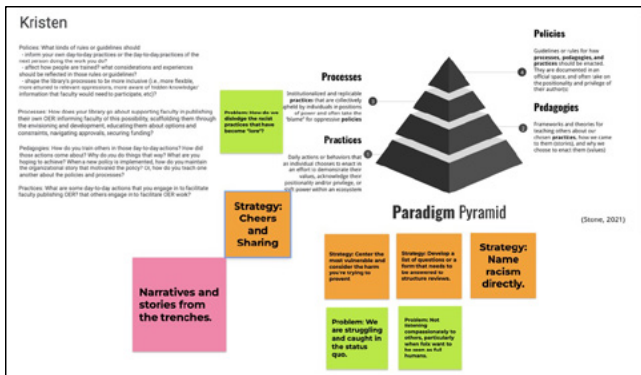
At a research I university, I (Kristen) lead the Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI) efforts in the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences; when developing JEDI initiatives, Kristen builds coalitions across faculty and staff committees by showing the pyramid as a framework for identifying action places. Often, moving to action in small places proves a challenge: groups get stuck in the abstract and then struggle to move to action, particularly if/when the action is mundane. Within the STEM unit, it’s sometimes difficult to see the need for changing mundane elements of the organization: does this actually matter? It also helped make a convincing argument about the need for extending policies into the organization in specific and purposeful ways.



**Figure 3.** Sample slide from a presentation for the Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) committee that Kristen chairs.

## February 2022: A Tool for Facilitating Workshops for Change

A cross-disciplinary AntiRacist Publishing Workshop was held to help librarians consider the role of anti-racism in their work. We were invited to participate in the workshop, and in developing an interactive activity, we proposed using the pyramid as a way of thinking about where in the organizational activities/work attendees might locate antiracist activities: Policies? Procedures? Practices? In the workshop, small groups were led to think about how the work of librarians can be antiracist. Using a digital whiteboard (see Figure 4), facilitators (including Kristen and Erica) led participants in thinking through steps they might take to address racist policies, procedures, pedagogies, and practices. Participants discussed things like developing OER textbooks as antiracist work and considering how DEI review guidelines can support the adoption of more affordable texts.



**Figure 4.** Digital whiteboard from Anti-Racist Publishing Workshop that Kristen and Erica helped facilitate.

## March 2022: A Tool for Supporting Public Engagement

The East Tennessee chapter of the Society for Technical Communication invited me to give a workshop on public engagement in technical communication with a specific focus on plain language. I (Erica) struggled to know how I should engage with an audience who mostly worked with classified information at Oak Ridge National Laboratory. The pyramid helped break down barriers between lived experiences and provided a way

for participants to discuss how their practices, pedagogies, and processes might support the work of public engagement.

## Fall 2022: A Tool for Socially Just Administrative Planning

A lot of TPC administrators are now aware of the impact of social justice within TPC, but often, administrators approach social justice through a piecemeal or single-prong approach. I (Kristen) used the pyramid to suggest a holistic, multi-prong approach building social justice into programmatic and administrative work. In a forthcoming chapter entitled “Building Inclusive Programs in TPC” (Jones et al., in press), “[W]e recommend not only developing policies (single-pronged approach) but also considering a) the processes for implementing the policy, b) the procedural and cultural strategies for teaching one another about the policy, and c) the practices of applying the policy. For each of these considerations, inequity is likely to creep in because each consideration moves decision-making and implementation into new contexts of power... By addressing multi-pronged considerations of how to implement equity and inclusion, administrators can pause and more reflectively (and effectively) address administrative and programmatic problems. Doing so can also stave off implicit biases that creep into administrative decision-making and, more importantly, can guide collective and coalitional decision-making” (n.p.). In this chapter, the work of aligning administrative philosophies and actions across a range of domains was made clear: a single policy or procedure cannot effectively enact practices without a pedagogical approach to organizational culture.

## June 2023: A Tool for Institutional and Personal Accountability

In an ongoing exploration of the rocky relationship between white women and Black women, Kristen and a colleague sought to explore how accountability works in both institutional and personal spaces. In doing so, we used the pyramid to show the ways that these two forms of accountability occurred across the four levels of the pyramid: practices (which tend to be personal) connect to policies (institutional forces), and we can ensure their alignment through procedures and participatory activities that account for the differences between the two. “Accountability” is not a retrofit to the work of knowledge-making built through dialogue and lived experiences. Accountability asks us to “account for” the things we have committed to as individuals and institutions. In order to be effective tools of coalition building, the mechanisms for accountability in equity and inclusion must be articulated. We articulate practices and pedagogies as the domain of personal accountability. Those of us seeking personal accountability must commit to addressing the harm we do through both our daily practices as well as the organizational storytelling that teaches others how “we” behave. Policies and procedures, on the other hand, are often the domain of institutional accountability. Importantly, the two work together: coalitions cannot build institutional accountability without demanding personal accountability” (Cox & Moore, 2023, p. 5). In presenting this work, we explained the way that the pyramid exposes accountability as a necessary part of equitable and anti-racist leadership. The pyramid, shown in Figure 5, helped us explicate how we can and should consider accountability:

- Personal accountability shows up in our practices and our participatory activities/culture: how we choose to interact with our organization.

- Institutional accountability shows up in processes and policies: how they enable justice, resistance, and anti-racist behaviors.
- Personal and institutional accountability often requires advocacy and shifts: that is, a white woman cannot maintain personal accountability in an org that lacks institutional accountability; she needs to work towards change.

In this way, the tool has also been a framework for building coalitions across differences, for building a community that is anti-racist and equitable in the face of white supremacy and white feminism. An important change in this version is that Kristen moved from talking about pedagogy to discussing participatory culture, a move that prompted a discussion of how members of the organization participate in activities that help tell stories and learn about how the organization ought to work.

## May 2023: A Tool for Organizational Change

In a proposal for a center for organizational change, Kristen used the pyramid to explain how the STEM unit she works in will build organizational change. The foundation requires a theory of change—by this point, that’s how the pyramid works: to show how we make organizational change work, how we build coalitions, inviting folks into a pedagogical or participatory space to learn more about how we might do work that aligns across values. Here’s how Kristen explains it in the proposal:

Systemic change requires an alignment of policy, procedures, participatory activities and practices; these elements map onto the macro, meso, and micro levels of systemic change articulated by scholars in curricular development (Kolmos et al., 2016) and disaster response (Quaschie & Leuschner, 2018), among others. In other words, a macro-level change to policies will fail to enact systemic change without purposeful, transparent procedures and participatory activities at the meso level. Similarly, individual changes in practices or perspectives (micro-level shifts) will not bring about systemic change unless they are built into the fabric of the organization. By aligning macro level policies with individual, micro level practices, UB School of Engineering and Applied Sciences works from the top down and bottom up to build change.

Throughout the proposal, I use the pyramid as a more accessible, more precise approach to making change in the School; the tool became a framework for explaining administrative and programmatic plans for building towards equity. We explain, “As an example, PI Lewis and Co-Is Errington and Moore worked to establish our EJAC initiative. To build systemic change through the program, PI Lewis and Co-I Errington established long-term (macro-level) goals for integrating EJAC across all departments. To spur boots-on-the-ground integration, Co-I Moore created (meso-level) mentored opportunities for SEAS faculty to implement EJAC instructional materials. These participatory activities (like workshops) and procedures for spurring interest (like JEDI micro-grants) align PI Lewis and Co-I Errington’s curricular goals with local practices.” In this instance, the tool moved organizational change theory towards equity and inclusion and alignment across units and pyramid levels.

## COMMUNITY-ENGAGED CONCLUSIONS

This experience report/use journey tells the story of a tool we use in various communities, and it might not be immediately clear how or why it connects to community-engaged research. We want to conclude by sharing the way this framework was seeded in and is now rooted in our own community-based research (even though we have primarily used it in academic spaces). When I (Kristen) began studying public engagement in engineering projects, I conducted research with a firm led by Black women technical communicators. My earliest emergent questions sought to connect the practices I observed in the community (open, transparent engagement; a commitment to listening to and building relationships with local organizations) with the workplace structure they’d put into place. In my early work, I describe their work as Black Feminist; that description holds. But it wasn’t until Erica and I started using this framework that I was able to see clearly how the procedures and policies the company enacted within the company aligned with the practices and participatory activities that I’d observed in the community. This community-engaged research has informed all of my local work, my administrative philosophies, my teaching, as well as the design of community-engaged projects.

Similarly, when I (Erica) researched an issue-based community organizing group for my dissertation, I tried to find ways to describe the conflicts between the individual practices and processes of local groups with the collective pedagogies and policies of the organization. This “stuck place” was a felt difference during my participatory action research project. Individual organizers would try to enact the organization’s action-oriented frameworks without adapting them to their community members’ lived experiences, often resulting in a transactional impact rather than a transformational one. It wasn’t until I began using the tool for OER creation, antiracist advocacy, and as a reflective sense-making strategy (see our SIGDOC talk) that I was able to assign a name to these observed conflicts. Now, as I work as a content designer in industry, I use the tool to explain power differentials and gaps between practices, processes, and policies across teams.

As we reflect on this tool, we note the way it has been adapted and how it has emerged in response to various contexts. In this way, it reflects the emergent strategy so many other scholars in this special issue have referenced. Frameworks like this often appear stable or overly constrained. We wanted to share the way we have built from and with our communities to align and understand values and to enact change.

We invite you to use it too.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kristen R. Moore is an Associate Professor of Technical Communication in the Department of Engineering Education at the University at Buffalo. Her research explores the role of mundane injustices in technical projects and the academy and has been published in a range of journals, including *Technical Communication Quarterly*, *IEEE Professional Communication*, *Technical Communication*, and *The Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, among others. Her award-winning, co-authored book, *Technical Communication After the Social Justice Turn*, and subsequent studies provide an applied theory of addressing inequities that she uses regularly in her work as the Associate Dean of Equity and Inclusion in the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences at UB.

Erica M. Stone (she/her) is a content designer and researcher with experience in both academia and industry. She works at the intersection of technical communication, public rhetoric, and community organizing. Erica's writing can be found in *Journal of Technical Writing & Communication*; *Technical Communication*; *Writing Program Administration*; *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*; *Forum: Issues about Part-time & Contingent Faculty*; *Basic Writing Electronic (BWe) Journal*; *Spark: A 4C4Equality Journal*; *Community Literacy Journal*, and various edited collections.

# Book Review

## ***Violent Exceptions: Children's Human Rights and Humanitarian Rhetorics***

### **Wendy S. Hesford**

Hesford, W. S. (2021). *Violent exceptions: Children's human rights and humanitarian rhetorics*. The Ohio State University Press.

Susan Jennings Lantz  
West Virginia University  
Susan.Lantz@mail.wvu.edu

Will someone please think of the children?

W.C. Fields has been notoriously associated with the warning “never to work with children and animals.” And he was right! Both varieties of co-performers are guaranteed to steal the show from any adult in the general vicinity. It is generally accepted that commercials with a cute puppy and a Sarah McLachlan soundtrack, or a baby amid famine and natural disaster is much more likely tug at heartstrings and garner cash donations than a city planner with a spreadsheet and a clip board. Consequently, the “adorable baby” cliché can be found everywhere from sitcoms to advertisements for products as diverse as healthcare, luxury brand cars, and banking securities services.

Vulnerable children sell.

But, as Wendy S. Hesford points out in her examination of children's human rights, there are often dark consequences for literally creating a “poster child” for a cause, especially when that cause is predicated on political discourse. As she points out in her book *Violent Exceptions: Children's Human Rights & Humanitarian Rhetorics*, “the iconic figure of the child-in-peril erases slow violence—the violence of the ordinary—from which the spectacle of the imperiled child emerges” (p. 21). In other words, while our attention is diverted by more the more uncommon exception of violence upon a child's body, it is far too easy to focus on a special case of dramatic savagery as opposed to the every-day, quiet,

transgressions that erode the civil liberties of children. It is easy to make a case of the violated female body of Malala Yousafzai (who was shot in an attempted assassination by the Taliban for her advocacy for women's education) as a “mobilized. . . site of political and cultural crisis” and ignore the way that “conservative [U.S.] media [has] appropriated ... stories of victimization to reinforce notions of the US as a morally exceptional Christian nation” (p. 35).

Hesford's book asserts that the practice of exploiting the child-in-peril trope to further human rights helps suture over systemic political practices that ultimately erode the human rights of children on a regular and consistent basis. She uses examples ranging from descriptions of child soldiers in Uganda and Sierra Leone, to images of Trayvon Martin in the United States. Descriptions of individual children affected by the Flint, Michigan Water Crisis were instrumental in obtaining state and Federal Funds to fix the State of Emergency, but in doing so “let neoliberal economic policies and corporate greed off the hook for the impoverishment of the city and its residents.” (p. 30)

The book points out that when one compares the dominant US media coverage of child Syrian refugees to anti-immigration movement that the US extends toward child migrants, children of undocumented parents, and children crossing the US-Mexico border to escape violence, certain children's lives would appear to be more important than others. Hesford also points out the paradoxes of the treatment of children in the United States who are disabled, transgender, or simply not white. Ultimately, the use of child icons to elicit emotional appeal effectively distracts from formal governmental support for policies that would improve the lives of all children.

Hesford's book is clearly written and thoroughly researched for an academic audience. The argument is sound and convincing. The problem, as she sees it, is the diffusion of attention to policies that would support the human rights children using emotional appeals based on personal stories. The solution for professional communicators, then, is to be aware of the pitfalls of the emotional

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appeal. In her conclusion, Hesford states, “If human rights scholars, teachers, and activists cannot dismantle the symbolic thresholds that divide us, how can we expect to inspire others, including those that represent us, to foresee a world without violent exceptions?” (p. 201). Likewise, if professional communicators and designers are unaware of the pitfalls of using a “child-in-peril” emotional appeal, how can we expect our audiences to figure it out and elicit change? Hesford suggests that the ability of professionals and scholars to utilize “resistant reading practices” and political awareness to combat the use of cheap iconography.

It is important for communication designers and technical communicators to understand what they **are** and **are not** communicating. And the use of a baby in trouble, though attention getting and capable of eliciting a response, may not ultimately lead to positive change in the lives of those who are most vulnerable.

## **ABOUT THE REVIEWER**

In both her roles as Director of the WVU Campus Read, and Teaching Associate Professor of Business Communication, Susan Jennings Lantz works to advance critical thinking skills and interdisciplinary humanist inquiry at West Virginia University. Simply put, she wants all students to think deeply about important things and communicate their ideas clearly. Dr. Lantz has been the recipient of awards at the department, college, university, and state level. Her written work has appeared in *The Bitter Southerner*, *Human Resources Magazine*, and *Student Affairs Today*.

# Book Review

## ***User Experience as Innovative Academic Practice***

### **edited by Kate Crane and Kelli Cargile Cook**

Crane, K., & Cargile Cook, K. (Eds.). (2022). *User experience as innovative academic practice*. The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. <https://doi.org/10.37514/TPC-B.2022.1367>

Meghalee Das  
Texas Tech University  
[meghalee.das@ttu.edu](mailto:meghalee.das@ttu.edu)

In *User Experience as Innovative Academic Practice*, editors Kate Crane and Kelli Cargile Cook present and curate fresh perspectives for instructional and curriculum design by arguing that technical and professional communication (TPC) programs will benefit if user experience (UX) methodologies are applied in pedagogical settings to gain greater insight into the student user's needs, challenges, and environments, thereby not only making student users the center of the course design process, but also co-creators of instructional materials and strategies. To support the effectiveness of UX methodologies in learning about student needs and assessing program success, Crane and Cargile Cook bring together authors who present case studies where UX methods such as user profiles, journey maps, usability studies, diary entries, affinity diagramming, and so on were applied in various aspects of pedagogic design and re-design.

The book begins with two chapters by Crane and Cargile Cook. In her chapter, Crane situates UX in TPC as a field and extends it to TPC instructional design and program development, where she uses findings from her syllabus usability test to argue that UX design processes like user-centered design, design thinking, and participatory design strengthen curricula and program development. As UX includes not just how efficiently users complete a task, but also how they “feel as they prepare and actively interact with a product” (p. 10), a UX approach gives us a holistic understanding of students' experiences with educational materials, and design or co-design with students by taking those

experiences into consideration. Cargile Cook and Crane continue this conversation in the second chapter, and true to the spirit of UX methodologies, they organize the chapters in the collection as journey maps instead of classic sections. A journey map comprises a visual representation of a process that someone follows and the thoughts and emotions they experience to accomplish a goal, which helps build a narrative about the experience. The editors recognize that readers may approach this collection with different goals, and thus offer four user/reader experiences through the processes described in the four journey maps to help readers choose how they want to navigate the collection.

The first journey map on student users and how instructors can use UX methods to situate the user experience within the larger TPC and instructional design landscape. The authors also aim to understand students by creating user profiles through surveys and diary entries (Martin), case studies and journey maps (Howard), and transliteracy narratives (Gonzales and Walwema). Furthermore, the authors design with users by helping students examine their experience with the course learning management system and syllabus (Pihlaja), use UX methods to design a mentor program between graduate and undergraduate students (Breuch et al.), and redesign courses or programs (Zachry, Masters-Wheeler and Fillenwarth, and Bay et al.).

The second journey map focuses on goals that drive the pedagogical design or re-design process and the selection of UX methods accordingly. The goals in these chapters, for example, include using activity or lesson design (Martin), using UX and transliteracies for iterative course design (Gonzales and Walwema), ideating curricular goals (Cargile Cook and Thominet), and extra-curricular design like using an oral communication lab (Clark and Austin).

The third journey map shows readers the rich possibilities offered by the UX research toolkit by focusing on the methods used by different authors to reach their pedagogical goals. The methods are categorized as observing the human experience, analyzing challenges and opportunities, and creating future possibilities. For

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example, Howard uses methods like UX mapping within his case studies, Clark and Austin use surveys, observations, and usability tests, Thominet applies a design thinking approach with interviews, affinity clustering, and ideation, prototype, and reflection workshops to create learning outcomes, Masters-Wheeler and Fillenwarth use surveys, and Bay et al. use surveys, journey maps, and interviews to gather curricular experience data.

The final journey map focuses on design, which will be particularly of interest to the readers of this journal. Design can be examined and modified at any stage and the book offers various chapters based on different design goals. For example, one can begin with Martin's, Thominet's, and Cargile Cook's chapters researching the needs of student-users to create student profiles, learning outcomes, and program design. Readers who have determined student needs can read how to use the data to design products and processes like curricula (Cargile Cook), learning outcomes (Thominet), resources (Pihlaja), student profiles (Martin), and a mentoring program (Breuch et al.). Readers looking to test prototypes of instructional ideas will benefit from how authors and students sketched ideas of effective learning management systems (Pihlaja) or an oral communication lab (Clark and Austin), and redesigned based on feedback on previous pedagogical products, curricula, school website, and programmatic work (Howard, and Masters-Wheeler and Fillenwarth). There are also chapters on usability testing and retesting the design of a mentoring program (Breuch et al.), while addressing challenges that may emerge, such as double binds, or situations in which a designer faces a dilemma due to conflicting student needs and programmatic requirements (Zachry).

Instructional design, including instructional design pedagogy, has emerged as a special topic in the expanding field of TPC, especially in areas like usability and UX research, and features prominently in many TPC degree and certification programs (Tham, 2022). Borgman and McArdle (2019) also support a user-centered approach to online writing instruction in their book on the Personal, Accessible, Responsive, and Strategic (PARS) framework and their edited collection (2021) that applies PARS to create personal online learning experiences. *User Experience as Innovative Academic Practice* expands the current scholarship on user-centered instructional design by introducing readers to UX methods that can be applied to learn a student user's needs, and design, test, and redesign instructional products and processes. In doing so, the book situates itself in the technical communication landscape by connecting multiple features—UX research, communication design, and instructional design—delineated by a fitting UX method of journey maps that readers can follow according to their own instructional goals.

Instructors already engage in user research through student evaluations, observations, technology experience surveys, etc. However, such methods give limited information that does not cover the entirety of student needs, thereby hindering informed pedagogical decisions. As “user advocacy and UX is a cornerstone of all technical and professional communication work” (Crane, p. 3), a UX approach can help us identify challenges in learning and avoid assumptions by centering the students and creating conditions that lead to their autonomy. This is supported by the various case studies presented in this edited collection, which provide a systematic and comprehensive approach to learning student needs. The description of rich and iterative UX methods, their application in various instructional design contexts, and matching them to different programmatic goals are some of the strengths of this book.

However, although Crane and Cargile Cook strongly advocate for UX methodologies, UX methods can be difficult to replicate to test the researcher's findings, which is an important aspect of TPC research (Lauer & Brumberger, 2016; Meloncon & St. Amant, 2019). This can make the execution of UX methods and the results variable. But the authors of this edited collection don't shy away from this fact; they acknowledge that UX can be contextual and it provides a glimpse into the experience of specific users in a specific setting. As UX research is meant to be iterative, the results from small-scale studies at different stages of designing pedagogical products like syllabi, learning management systems, activities, learning outcomes, etc., can give researchers new insights into the user. Also, while some of the methods used by the authors are similar, they are used in different contexts. This shows the versatility of the UX methodologies, and although they originated in industry projects, they can be applied in any communication design context, including pedagogy.

TPC and communication design researchers, program developers, and instructors will find practical examples of UX methods in this edited collection to understand users, articulate learning issues, improve pedagogical strategies, and move from “just teaching about user experience methods to actually using them to improve their students' experience” (Cargile Cook and Crane, pp. 35-36). Industry practitioners, especially educational content creators, instructional designers, learning management systems designers, and those working in the EdTech industry, will also benefit from the case studies described in the edited collection. The core of UX methodologies is the user, and thus, *User Experience as Innovative Academic Practice* will provide useful insights to anyone who is interested in exploring innovative methodologies to learn more about their target users.

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## ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Meghalee Das is a PhD candidate in Technical Communication and Rhetoric at Texas Tech University. She teaches first-year composition and technical writing courses, and served as an

assistant director of first-year writing, and an instructional development consultant with the Graduate School. Her research interests include user experience (UX), intercultural technical communication, online instructional design, and digital rhetoric. She has authored chapters in key edited collections, and her articles have appeared in *Technical Communication*, *Programmatic Perspectives*, and *Intercom*. For her dissertation, she studies the UX of international students in synchronous online classes to develop culturally-inclusive and learner-centered pedagogical strategies.

# Book Review

## *Tuning in to Soundwriting*

### edited by Kyle D. Stedman, Courtney S. Danforth, & Michael J. Faris

Stedman, K. D., Danforth, C. S., & Faris, M. J. (Eds.). (2021). *Tuning in to soundwriting*. enculturation/Intermezzo. <http://intermezzo.enculturation.net/14-stedman-et-al/index.html>

Andi Coulter  
Washington and Lee University  
[acoulter@wlu.edu](mailto:acoulter@wlu.edu)

Sonic rhetoric is still a relatively small field within writing studies. For the uninitiated, the editors define soundwriting as the study and practice of writing recorded texts. As a digital and multimodal text, *Tuning in to Soundwriting* explores how aural rhetoric should be given as much consideration as visual and written composition. Building on their 2018 edited collection, *Songwriting Pedagogies*, editors Kyle D. Stedman, Courtney S. Danforth, and Michael J. Faris explore compositional approaches to soundwriting through interdisciplinary practices. All five chapters are grounded in practical applications showcasing how soundwriting can be a generative approach to composition, allowing students to consider accessibility, technology, and audience reception in meaning making.

The introduction opens with the sound of scanning the radio dial; static sound momentarily punctuated by dropping down into distinct frequencies. The result is a series of sounds that when taken together create an idea of a whole. Later, Danforth's voice amplifies this sonic metaphor when she verbally compares the text to an orchestra's opening when all the individual instruments come together in tune. Both radio as technological sound or orchestra as physical instruments play in tandem to create the spectrum of sound from which these chapters work. In other words, this is a soundwriting text about soundwriting, offering the receiver varying ways to access information through embodied listening.

In the digital text's introduction, the three editors' voices can

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be heard in concert, discussing the underpinnings of their text. Additionally, the introduction can be experienced through scrolling and highlighted captions, thus drawing on ideas presented in Chapter 4. The most striking element of the introduction is the collection of authorial voices that help situate the text. Hearing a literature review of sound studies, both spoken and written by those whose scholarly ideas are being presented, gives intimacy and immediacy to the developing field. The aural use of voice allows the audience to be pulled into the conversation, akin to the parasocial relationship with a radio DJ. The multitude of disembodied voices assembles a timeline for the development of sonic rhetoric as a field, as well as tethering the listener to the present discussion through the editors' conversational banter. The Venn diagram of creative and critical discourse in the introduction deconstructs and reconstructs how soundwriting practice can open up new avenues of understanding through aural synthesis.

The digital textbook examines how soundwriting can be used by students and scholars in varying disciplines, from disability studies to feminist history. In Chapter 1, "Soundscapes: Rhetorical Entwinements for Composing Sound in Four Dimensions," Kati Fargo Ahern looks at ways soundscapes and ideas of space can be used for compositional practice. Through the layering of soundclips, using what she calls "rhetorical entwinement," she illustrates how soundscape design allows for reconsidering rhetorical practice. In her examples, Ahern looks at layering, sequencing, and amplifying sound to give students an understanding of audience, meaning-making, and compositional construction. Opening with Ahern's piece allows for a broad definition soundwriting by addressing head-on issues of technological access, ableist definitions of listening, and where to localize the pedagogical purpose within soundwriting. The strongest area of Ahern's analysis is her soundwriting examples themselves. Articulating four dimensions of sound—source, time, layering, and location—Ahern shows how each design choice works diegetically. And while it would seem that adding dimensions of sound would increase the complexity of understanding, Ahern argues that "the movement between the four dimensions is recursive and constantly in flux," much like composition's iterative process.

While Ahern's practice looked at ideas of sound and space, Jonathan W. Stone's chapter, "Resounding History: A Rhetoric of Sonic Historiography (in Two Parts)," illustrates how soundwriting can be used to create history from silenced or marginalized voices. Stone's work centers on historiographies, or the study of how history is composed. Specifically, he examines aural artifacts as ways to "compose" history from those less represented. In this way, he shows how soundwriting and historical research converge through parallel discussions of rhetoric and composition. Stone's piece is both a commentary on historical excavation in sonic archives as well as a first-person narrative on his own soundwriting process. In situating himself in the story, history becomes personal. Additionally, Stone's aural essay content is strengthened through his addition of music. By using music under his vocal argument the combined composition becomes more engaging than either written prose or voice alone. Through platforms like TikTok, we have seen how music and spoken word aid in understanding. Given Stone's interest in music (he discussed his desire to write on the Smashing Pumpkins) the choice of aural essay practice again seems both personal and practical.

Eric Detweiler probes podcasting as a soundwriting project in the third chapter, "The Bandwidth of Podcasting." As a podcast practitioner when the podcast pool was more of a pond, Detweiler gives a historical overview of the rise of podcasting, as well as offers a loose taxonomy for the types of podcasts currently saturating the market. Detweiler's discussion of podcasting as a medium and its import into a compositional classroom really resonates when he turns the discussion to a podcast's distribution. If a podcast is created and no one hears it, is it really a podcast? Emphasizing the need for both consistent content as well as distribution channels, Detweiler shows how effective podcasting can be used as a collaborative all-class project. This class activity also allows students to go deeper into areas of storytelling or the digital affordances within the podcast medium. Detweiler's all-class activity helps transform a single podcast assignment shows into a larger continuous project. Shifting from single assignment to semester-long activity is indicative of Detweiler's own development as a podcast creator. Examples of his varying iterations in his academic-via-absurdist podcast clips show how expansive the aural affordances are in podcasting.

Chapter 4, "Sound and Access: Attuned to the Disability in the Writing Classroom," takes five instructor approaches to incorporate captioning in composition. Less of a directive, this chapter offers a window into the classroom where students are positing what text is "captured" and who has agency in captioning. Using disability studies as a lens, these instructors push back on the notion that 'accessible text' is merely a straight transcription of the spoken word.

In Chapter 5, "Unboxing Audacity: Mixing Rhetorically with Digital Audio Workstations," Mathew Gomes interrogates the intersection audio mixing intersects with writing studies and technical communication. Audio mixing, with its layering and recursive structure, allows for an iterative process that can be seen as a rhetorical "arrangement strategy." Gomes looks at the affective implications on the audience in aural assignments. Much like Ahern and Detweiler, he cites the embodied experience of sound and its naturally discursive process (Ceraso, 2014).

In their applied soundwriting, Gomes and Ahern discuss the relation of space to sound. Where Ahern looks at soundscapes, even

bringing in the tactile to sound, Gomes focuses on the technical by using digital audio workstations (DAWs). Using Audacity as his DAW of choice, Gomes creates an 8-track sound piece from which to mix. In "The Sneeze Project," Gomes illustrates how audio mixing opens up a multitude of arrangement approaches. In the first iteration, Gomes combines all the tracks and amplifies them to an "uncomfortable" noise level. Gomes is careful to situate his discussion of noise as not something to be removed or necessarily unwanted. The resulting sound piece is a sonic cacophony working in tandem to overwhelm the listener. Gomes' second mix of "The Sneeze Project" recalibrates certain tracks giving rise to a narrative in the soundwriting. Gomes explains how he uses terminology in Audacity to serve as a foundation for students when creating their own mixed soundwriting as rhetorical practice.

Taken together, this textbook offers looks at the myriad opportunities for interdisciplinary approaches to sound rhetorics. This textbook serves as a more practical pedagogical compendium to the author's previous exploration into the possibilities of soundwriting. The textbook also showcases the potential for more critical work within a creative framework; the editors' multimodal aural text amplifying the argument for soundwriting's potential in rhetoric and compositional studies. *Tuning in to Soundwriting* is like moving up and down the illuminated radio strip, vacillating between song and static in varying frequencies. Soundwriting as a rhetorical practice can be heard if we just learn to adjust our dial.

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## ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Andi Coulter spent over twenty years in the live music industry, most notably as the Director of Marketing at the 9:30 Club in Washington, D.C. She is the author of the 33 1/3 music book Suicide's *Suicide* on the influential New York noise band's debut album. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Business Administration at Washington & Lee University.

# Book Review

## ***Writing in the Clouds: Inventing and Composing in Internetnetworked Writing Spaces***

### **by John Logie**

Logie, J. (2021). *Writing in the clouds: Inventing and composing in internetnetworked writing spaces*. Parlor Press.

Jasara Hines  
Southern New Hampshire University  
jasarahines@gmail.com

In the wake of the controversy surrounding the new AI chatbot application, ChatGPT, I wonder how Logie would seek to include this new technology in his work. I ponder this because, throughout the book, Logie presents compelling evidence for why the concepts of invention, composition, and internetnetworked writing should be embraced and not feared. While some denounce the application and take to social media to disparage the possible negative impact on students, creativity, and composition, ChatGPT, I believe Logie would argue, would be a powerful tool we can implement to become “composers.” He believes that through cloud computing services we are now more apt to collaborate, use, remix, and create rhetorical modes that extend far beyond the formulaic argument, therefore we are composers. So, Logie applies the idea of a composer as someone who is a “prosumer” (Toffler). This composer is media literate and transforms traditional rhetorical canons into multimodal compositions such as memes, Google Docs, and digital collages. However, his overarching argument is that internetnetworked writing tools have democratized writing through that same offering of innovative outlets. His book is arranged in a way that walks the reader through this argument.

Logie reminds the reader that the writing process has always involved some form of technology, so the only real change is the collaborative element. In chapter one, he outlines this argument and explains that current composers have a predilection towards cloud-based writing without even realizing it because much of the writing that we do is done on social media. Logie stresses

that writing moving away from a solitary endeavor to a public, collaborative one is why we will now write differently, not why we will not write. He expounds on this idea in the second chapter, where he notes that theorists like Bolter and Haas seem to be wary of the immaterial nature of writing (and reading) due to computing technologies, but points out that within their arguments is a key idea: we are actually “closer” to texts than we ever were. Due to the advent of the smartphone, we are researchers, collaborators, and writers—the process of composing is always, literally, a fingertip away. In these first few chapters, and in chapter four where Logie tackles the idea of invention in an internetnetworked writing space, instructors should find pause to begin to question and challenge their approach to teaching composition studies. Logie astutely considers the dividing line between authors and writers, noting that “author” connotes originality and has traditionally been an exclusive term. Cloud computing technologies have provided opportunities for “writers to become authors” (p. 80). The idea of equity comes into play, as groups that may have been excluded from “authorship” now have the ability to be a part of the club. So, instructors should consider leveraging internetnetworked writing, and non-traditional forms of arrangement, including remixed pieces, as pedagogical tools. Maybe even more importantly, instructors of writing, and by extension, those involved with designing and creating texts, should, if they do not already, view writing and teaching writing as a process that is flexible, fluid, and adaptable; a process where “author” denotes the owner, inventor, arranger, remixer, and collaborator on/of a text.

One of the most compelling chapters in Logie’s book is chapter five where he examines text design. Here Logie highlights that texts, whether codex or digital, have always had the ability to integrate color, different fonts, and even visuals, albeit it is much easier and cost-effective to do so in digital form. For Logie, what truly sets the design of digital texts apart from codex ones are fixity, isolation, and dependence. Digital texts can be altered, updated, and revised, in real time if needed; they are, as noted numerous times before, collaborative; and finally, composers can transform the “look and feel” (p. 105) of their work. Logie also establishes the power of the digital text, and the need of writers and publishers alike, to consider formless and definite content, and how those

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theories shape document design. Logie, with some admonishment, suggests that academic writing and publishing have been slow to adapt to the internetworked writing phenomena and, therefore, reside predominantly in the formless category—one that is limiting (which is antithetical to what one would envision as something being “formless”) and mainly text-based. On the contrary, definite content is able to produce truly multimodal texts. He began the book noting how the meme is a perfect example of internetworked composition, one that marries the image and the text. The meme highlights the power of internetworked composition and the use of digital tools in invention. He ends this chapter with a major question that we should all—composers, instructors, and publishers alike—consider: how can we better choose and employ the available media to help facilitate a writing process that embodies the composer’s goal? The takeaway is that despite those who fear the digital and its negative impact on literacy, we should instead see the digital text as a way to move away from formless texts and therefore bring “balance” to the text and image relationship—something that the meme has done.

The latter half of his book examines a few different ideas, like *dealphabetization* and *iconification* and the impact on not only businesses but on the design of our digital tools. In this chapter he notes that despite the changes in the technology, writing conventions have remained stagnant for quite some time. He also revisits the idea of the democratic nature of internetworked writing tools as they allow for greater opportunities for “a broader range of voices to be heard, both within and outside the academy” (p. 142). For designers and composers, Logie’s final chapter, “Keywords for Writing in the Clouds,” offers the most concise summary and application of his argument. Here he uses visual and alphabetical text as keywords for “writing in the clouds.” If one is short on time, this chapter does an excellent job of explaining the concepts discussed in the previous ones.

Overall, Logie’s book is one I wish I had when I wrote my dissertation. Not only does Logie exude ethos through his well “curated” text (his scholarship includes key theorists on any digital humanities program reading list), but he also facetiously incorporates some of the very elements of composing in the cloud that he theorizes about. Finally, the postscript, which outlines his own writing process, one that happened during COVID, ties everything together. It is here that Logie concludes with a nod to a concept that has withstood the test of time: it is our words that help us connect. Considering his thesis, it doesn’t matter who writes them, or through which vehicle we compose or access these words, but it will be the words themselves that continue to connect and define us.

## **ABOUT THE REVIEWER**

Jasara Hines is a high school program coordinator at a predominantly BIPOC school in the south suburbs of Chicago. She earned her M.A. in English Literature from the University of Central Florida, her M.ED. in Educational Leadership from American College of Education, and her Ph.D. in Texts and Technology from the University of Central Florida. Her research interests are the intersection of collective memory, technology, and pedagogy; and using computing technologies to facilitate and enhance democracy in the classroom.