"Earning the Right": Conducting Community Based Research[1]

Laura Ruth Johnson, Northern Illinois University
Colleen Stribling, Elgin Community College
Nicole Rivera, North Central College
Katharine Preissner, University of Illinois at Chicago
Chia Pao Hsu, Northern Illinois University
Antoinette Jones, Northern Illinois University
Amy May-Schroeder, University of St. Francis

Abstract

In this article, we examine the process of conducting community-based research within graduate coursework, discussing and analyzing student reflective narratives on various aspects of the research process as a way of providing insight into the challenges, dilemmas, and joys entailed in conducting community-based qualitative research. In particular, we focus on the process of gaining entry into a research site; negotiating one's role as a researcher, and how researchers can be ***observant participants*** *rather than just participant observers; and building reciprocal and collaborative relationships with participants. We also explore how our experiences in the community helped us challenge pejorative stereotypes about low-income communities and communities of color and lead to expanded views of the role of researchers within community contexts, as well as more nuanced and critical notions of researcher reflexivity that consider how researchers themselves are implicated in the issues and contexts that they study. We articulate the notion of* ***dialogic reflexivity****, which calls attention to how reflexivity involves on-going and collective refection and discussion with research team members and community members.*

Keywords: *Community-based Research; Participatory Action Research; Teaching research methods; Researcher reflexivity*

> *It was not my first choice. I wanted to find a more "interesting" place to do my fieldwork. I envisioned discovering something revolutionary that I could report in my findings. My initial thought was, "So, what? What will I learn from my Saturdays at the café?" The café workers were also hesitant about my participation. It seemed more of a chore than a useful addition to their already busy days.*

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The above reflection, from a graduate student enrolled in a community-based research class, raises important issues related to conducting research in community contexts. One issue concerns the student's view of what might be gained from her site—a context she viewed as somewhat banal and unremarkable, rather than as a place where she might gain "findings" worthy of research. This view speaks to prevalent notions within educational research that often disregard everyday community contexts as sites of learning. Another view expressed by this student, also an author of this article, implicates workers at the site, who viewed the presence of a student researcher as a hindrance; in this case, employees in this community business were unwillingly being positioned as research participants, as their supervisor had approved the project but had not conferred with employees. Their reaction to the student underscores the need for constant and sustained negotiation with community partners and participants at all stages of the research process, not just at the outset. In order to be able to talk to, and thus learn from, participants, this student would need to, in her words, "earn the right" to be there, which meant not just building rapport and relationships of trust, but also being of use to her site. This article attempts to explore some of these issues and concerns related to learning and conducting community-based research and ethnography, by sharing the experiences of a group of researchers, comprised of seven students from a course in community-based research, as well as the professor for the course (they are all co-authors of the article). Here, we explore some lessons learned from the process of entering a research site and participating in a variety of community-based settings, and how these can be used to inform the design of community-based research courses. The issues raised by an analysis of this student's experiences are important ones for researchers to be cognizant of as they conduct ethnographic research in a community setting, particularly if they are novice researchers.

Although some research has been conducted that examines the process of teaching research to graduate students (Delyser, 2008; Hopkinson & Hogg, 2004; Hsiung, 2008; Kleinman, Copp, & Henderson, 1997), less research is available that explores student perspectives on the process of conducting such research, and even less focuses on research that has taken place within a particular community setting as part of coursework and how students' engagement in reflective practices during the research process helped them rethink traditional notions of research. In this article, rather than report findings from the projects, we emphasize the process of conducting community-based research within graduate coursework, discussing and analyzing student reflective narratives on various aspects of the research process as a way of providing insight into the challenges, dilemmas, and joys entailed in conducting qualitative research. In particular, we focus on the process of gaining entry into a research site, negotiating one's role as a researcher, and the process of building relationships with participants, demonstrating the ways researchers working across multiple and diverse contexts within communities that have too often experienced distress and disinvestment must navigate a "methodological tightrope" that "demands a fully reflexive approach that moves beyond simple constructions of the self to one that fully and explicitly engages the context" (Stich, Cippollone, Nikischer, & Weis, 2012, p. 464). We also explore how our experiences in the community, as students and as researchers, helped us challenge stereotypes about low-income communities and communities of color, as deficient and devoid of resources, and lead to expanded views of concepts such as learning and community, as well as transformed views of ourselves—not only as researchers, but also in relation to the community settings within which we participated. Examining these processes from a student perspective can provide substantial theoretical and practical insights to educators and researchers regarding how to view communities as intellectual spaces (Community as Intellectual Space, 2005; Johnson, 2017), and as sites of knowledge and theorizing, instead of as merely as "authentic" or "engaged" contexts for students to learn research

skills or to provide community service. As we share our reflections, completed for course assignments and also as part of reflective practices engaged in after the class had ended, we also aim to provide a critique of our own initial assumptions, and detail how some of the early missteps we made as nascent community-based researchers have informed the development of our views of what it means to conduct this sort of research. In this way, this article hopes to respond to the "renewed reflexivity," (Stich et al., 2012) some others have called for, as well as document the important knowledge and learning that often takes place in community-based research courses, with the goal of helping instructors design reciprocal community learning experiences for their students.

Relevant Theory & Literature

This article seeks to add to extant literature and scholarship in the area of teaching research methods, in particular, work that has focused on community-based research approaches (Hacker, 2013; Johnson, 2017). In this section, we review some of the research in the area of teaching research methods and also briefly discuss community-based teaching and research models undergirding our approach in the class. In conducting this study, the research team was informed by perspectives that urge reflection by researchers regarding the process and "politics" of conducting qualitative research (Mikesell, Bromley, & Khodyakov, 2013; Stich et al., 2012; Weis & Fine, 2000). Within class sessions and throughout the research process students were encouraged to be self-reflexive regarding aspects of their own background, following the lead of researchers such as Behar (1996) and Delgado Bernal (1998) who have challenged traditional research paradigms and notions of the researcher as neutral, objective, and unbiased, and have urged for new research epistemologies which build on researchers' "cultural intuition" (Bernal, 1998, p. 556) and consider the ways that researchers themselves are often made vulnerable within the research process. Thus, we will review some of the research on reflexivity, including that which has called for a "renewed reflexivity" that moves beyond mere discussions of how researchers' backgrounds figure into their research (Stich et al., 2012).

Teaching and Learning Research Methods

Although other researchers and teachers of qualitative research methods have described the process of teaching research to graduate students (Booker, 2009; Delyser, 2008; Henderson, et al, 2008; Hopkinson & Hogg, 2004; Hsiung, 2008; Kleinman, Copp, & Henderson, 1997; Trujillo, 1999; Unluer, 2012), few have offered in-depth *student* reflections on the process of conducting qualitative and ethnographic research, and even less have provided insights on how students negotiate participation in communities and build and navigate relationships with community institutions and residents. Often, when student reflections on the research process are included, we learn very little about their backgrounds and how these intersect with or are challenged by their experiences in the research setting and interactions with participants

Weis & Fine (2000) offer student reflections that examine how students negotiated and grappled with various "speed bumps"—referring to obstacles, points of reflection, ethical dilemmas, and warning signals—within the research process. Others have explored the ways that researchers are insiders and/or outsiders within research settings (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992; Hellawell, 2006; Weis & Fine, 2000) and this study seeks to add to this work by exploring the ways that researchers' lives intersected with those of research participants and how community-

based research can transform researchers, as well as help them reconsider existing notions regarding the contexts within which they research. Teachers of research methods such as Hsiung (2008) highlight the importance of explicit instruction in reflexivity within their research process, whereby students interrogate their assumptions, backgrounds, and theoretical and conceptual lenses. Hellawell (2006) also advocates for helping students think through the series of insider-outsider continua on which they are situated, so that they can better understand their roles as researchers. Cousik (2015) urges teachers of ethnographic methods to build awareness among students of the ways that characteristics such as race, class, and gender affect their interactions with participants, particularly for those students not part of the majority culture. Others have called for a more critical view of reflexivity, that does not just examine individual identity vis-à-vis the research process, but accounts for broader conditions and resources.

Community-based Research Models

The course described in this paper was premised on a community-based qualitative research design (CBQR): a collaborative and reciprocal approach to research which involves building relationships with community-based organizations and community members to develop and implement research projects that investigate salient community issues and concerns (Johnson, 2017). This approach is grounded in participatory paradigms that challenge more traditional, positivist designs viewing research as an objective and value neutral endeavor (Hall, 1992; Lather, 1986). CBQR is guided by the concept of communities as intellectual spaces wherein communities and their members are acknowledged as rich sources and sites of theory and knowledge and entails that research involves learning that occurs "through participative investigations…[and] supportive, situated experiences…[which] make use of a variety of resources in multiple media" (Community as Intellectual Space: Preliminary Program, 2005, Symposium Overview, para. 2; Johnson, 2017; Rosing, 2008). CBQR is also informed by the notions of praxis and engaged learning. Praxis refers to practical knowledge and involves the integration of reflection and action upon the world aimed at transformation (Freire, 1970). Engaged learning takes place when students are provided with real-life contexts and activities in order to apply their knowledge and skills towards addressing relevant issues and problems. Although each CBQR project is unique, and there is no "blueprint" for this type of research, CBQR studies have some common characteristics.

First, CBQR projects are *collaborative* and involve dialogue and discussion among researchers and community partners at various stages of the research process. Researchers conducting CBQR adopt a *critical* stance, utilizing research to challenge status quo narratives about social problems. Finally, CBQR is intended to be *transformative* by employing research findings to make substantive and meaningful changes related to the issue under study; in addition, projects should enact transformations on researchers and participants, by shifting or impacting their perspectives on particular phenomena, as well as expanding their views of specific community and educational contexts,

The approach that was employed for the research course described in this article draws heavily from the above model. We view it as an approach to course and community-based research that involves critical immersion, inquiry, and reflection on the part of graduate students within particular community settings. Furthermore, over the years that the course was offered, students' own reflections and feedback from community members led the course towards a more collaborative and participatory approach. Whereas initial instantiations of the class involved students in

more traditional research activities within community settings, later offerings focused on participatory projects, and involved students in creating proposals for research projects in conjunction with organizations and individuals from the community. Although the course was at the outset designed to provide graduate students with immersive research opportunities within a community setting, and to promote more enhanced views of community knowledge, over time the course also sought to build reciprocal research relationships with individuals and communities towards the development of emancipatory knowledge "by asserting that everyday people not only engage in sophisticated self-reflection, but also learn how to make changes to their communities" (Cammarota, 2009-2010, p. 7). Guiding theories for the course, and for the research described here, include critical perspectives on teaching and learning as collective and liberatory processes (Freire, 1970).

A Renewed Reflexivity

Many researchers have called attention to the need for researchers to be mindful of how their own backgrounds, characteristics, and experiences figure into the research process and their building of relationships with community partners and residents. This self-reflexivity assists researchers in being aware of the ways they are both insiders and outsiders relative to a research setting and participants, and how their own backgrounds and experiences intersect with and/or diverge from those of participants. This sort of awareness is important within community-based research, as it helps researchers understand how such characteristics and various identity categories enable or restrict resources, shape conditions and contexts, and inform our perspectives.

Behar (1996) has explored the ways that researchers themselves become vulnerable, as they react and respond to events occurring within the setting and to participants, challenging views that ethnographers must remain neutral in the face of trauma and pain. Delgado Bernal (1998) addressed failures of traditional and mainstream educational research in explicating intersections of gender, ethnic, and class oppressions, positing the notion of cultural intuition—whereby scholars of color are acknowledged as having unique viewpoints for understanding and analyzing their own experiences and those of their cultural community—and epistemologies that are premised on certain cultural and local knowledge as necessary paradigms for research. In opposition to views of bias as a polluting factor, this sort of cultural intuition serves as a lens that allows researchers to more accurately make meaning of contexts, beliefs, and practices.

Some researchers have urged for a view of reflexivity that goes beyond a "simplistic focus on the self" (Stich, et al., 2012, p. 464) and that makes connections to the material conditions and contexts within which projects take place, particularly as related to state disinvestment in urban communities, increased economic inequities between city populations, and neoliberal policies that have led to the privatization of many public services, such as education. These shifting conditions and declining public resources create complex contexts which demand that community-based researchers not merely reflect on their backgrounds and experiences in relation to community issues, but think critically about and problematize their own experiential narratives and viewpoints, and particularly reflect on how they might be implicated within, or even complicit to, larger destructive and oppressive policies and practices. It is important for researchers to be mindful that power inequities exist between themselves and research participants, but more importantly also be attentive to how they might also be endorsing or replicating such unequal relationships within their own research projects and daily interactions with participants (Abu-Lughod, 1996; Weis & Fine, 2000). Furthermore, researchers inhabit a range of identities and relationships with participants that shift

throughout a study and must be constantly negotiated (Dmitriadis, 2001); these reflect the dynamic contexts and shifting conditions within which research takes place.

Community-based qualitative research's insistence on collaborative research projects that are premised on community knowledge, and guided by community concerns, demands attentiveness to how relationships are formed and negotiated throughout the study. These sorts of research projects often require that academic researchers cede a significant amount of power and authority within the project, a task difficult for scholars used to serving as "the expert." Although many community-based and participatory models have advocated for the establishment of symmetrical relationships between researchers and community members, CBQR often urges for *asymmetrical* relationships which privilege community knowledge and leadership, entailing a radical reimagining of the role of research vis-à-vis communities and a repositioning of academic researchers in relation to community leaders and communities. This process involves a sort of *dialogic reflexivity* wherein researchers and community members engage in on-going and critical reflection and dialogue regarding power, positions, resources, and social and economic conditions and contexts in ways that often challenge the hegemony of academic research and knowledge.

Course and Study Details

This article represents the experiences of students enrolled in graduate courses in field based qualitative research that took place over five consecutive summers, from 2008-2012. Each summer the class had a unique focus, but the overall emphasis was on gaining access to a community and developing qualitative and ethnographic research skills. In some class years, students were assigned to specific sites within the community—such as a community-run aerobics program, a bike shop, a café, a summer arts program for youth, an Afro-Caribbean music and dance group, the public library, and a community newspaper—to conduct field work and explore processes of knowledge acquisition and transmission taking place in each setting. Other summers, students decided on a topic or phenomenon, such as gentrification, youth mentorship, or social-emotional learning— and then explored this topic through interviews with individuals in the community who could provide them with relevant insight.

The class met on Saturdays for six weeks at a community-based organization. Students completed reflective journals throughout the research process that focused on their reactions to and experiences within the community and included reflections on their roles and responsibilities as researchers. Within course sessions, students discussed their research findings, aiming to describe particularities of individual sites and experiences, as well as to identify commonalities and patterns across settings and within the broader community. In addition to conducting fieldwork, students attended community events, which helped them gain further insight into community life. At the completion of the course, members of the community and former students were invited to participate in informal presentations of research projects, followed by a luncheon. These culminating events allowed for discussion and dialogue of research findings and the exploration of issues related to researcher role and the establishment of university-community partnerships.

Description of Site and Community

The community setting was Humboldt Park, Chicago, (also referred to as *Paseo Boricua*, or Puerto Rican Way) and many of the programs were either direct projects of or associated with

the Puerto Rican Cultural Center (PRCC), a community-based organization that has provided educational and cultural services in the area for over 35 years. The motto guiding the PRCC's work was 'Live and *help* to live', a philosophy which reflects their collective framework for service delivery and emphasizes the need for "giving back" to one's community and helping others become successful. Humboldt Park is located on Chicago's Near Northwest Side, about four miles from Chicago's downtown loop. Humboldt Park and its institutions possess a long legacy of social activism, and grassroots community organizations, such as the PRCC, have designed and implemented numerous programs and initiatives aimed at maintaining the cultural character of the community; staving off encroaching gentrification and displacement of community residents; and maintaining the vibrancy of the community.

Description of Student-researchers

Many of the students in the course had never before been to Humboldt Park, and rarely spent time within city limits, save to attend a sporting event or visit a tourist attraction in the downtown area. Other students had grown up in other areas of the city—mostly in predominately African American communities on the South Side—but now lived closer to the university for school and/or work. A few students did live in the city, but had not often ventured into the community because of fears of crime and violence. They were all graduate students, most pursuing their doctorates in Education at a university located 60 miles west of Chicago. The data presented in this article draws from four years of the course being offered. During this period 30 students have enrolled in the course; of these, there were 18 Caucasian, eight African American, and two Latinas enrolled. There were also students from Palestine, Taiwan, and Belize enrolled. The students who collaborated on this particular article were four Caucasian women, a Taiwanese woman, and an African American woman. They ranged in age from 30 to 50.

The instructor's relationship with the community began in 1994 when she served as the director of an educational program for young mothers, a program of the PRCC. In 2002, she conducted dissertation research within the community, and, when she began work at as a professor, continued this research and work with community organizations and residents. In 2008, she began offering a community-based summer graduate-level research course at the PRCC, as a way of providing students the opportunity to conduct hands-on ethnographic research, as well as to begin forging a more formalized partnership between the university and the PRCC. She is also a community resident and lived about ½ mile from where class sessions took place. Her longstanding ties to the community helped facilitate students' access to community organizations and residents. Many students cited this relationship as instrumental in providing them with access to sites that would otherwise have been largely closed off to them as researchers.

Study Data Sources and Analysis

The data shared here primarily consists of reflective writings from class assignments. After participation in the class had ended, a few of the students came together to discuss their learning process in the course, including some of the challenges faced in conducting this research. In the tradition of narrative inquiry, the group used this collaborative, reflective and analytical process to better understand their roles as researchers and how the process transformed the group's notions of what it means to be a researcher (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Furthermore, the group also engaged in a reflexive process of "active self-examination" in order to examine how "research

agenda and assumptions, subject location(s), personal beliefs, and emotions enter[ed] into" (Hsiung, 2008, p. 212) the research, as well as explore the "emotional work" often entailed in "navigating" research relationships in the field (Brown, 2011, p. 109). These group discussions and analytical process were used to construct narrative vignettes, based on reflective writings, that could shed light on aspects of the research process within community settings and student-researcher positionality. Although all of the data shared here are from the authors of this article only, IRB approval was obtained for this project.

Earning the Right: Reflections on the Research Process

The reflections described here are meant to provide insight into the process of conducting such community-based research, rather than present findings from research studies conducted as part of the class. Through self and group analyses of experiences and reflective journals, members of the research team identified aspects of their participation in the class and community that contributed to their understanding of the community, the research process within a community setting, and roles as a researchers. This type of self-reflexivity is a hallmark of much ethnographic research, and is an especially important component within PAR models; however, in our presentation and discussion of the following vignettes, we aim for a more nuanced discussion of the process of conducting research in community settings and building relationships with participants—a "renewed reflexivity"—so as to better understand tensions and challenges related to various aspects of the research process: entering the field, negotiating and building relationships, and transformation of the researcher (Stich et al., 2012).

Entering the Community/Field: Challenging Stereotypes and Notions of Research

For most of the students, this was their first experience conducting research in an urban community. Before the course began, students were asked to complete a writing assignment that asked them to describe and discuss their impressions of Humboldt Park. Many admitted that they were initially influenced by stereotypes and media images of the community as dangerous. They shared how family members and friends questioned their decision to enroll in the course, warning them not to drive into or park their cars in the neighborhood. One student's husband insisted on driving her the first day. However, over the summer, students' experiences in the community helped them shed these negative perspectives, and they developed an extremely positive view of the community, one that many sought to disseminate among fellow students and within their respective communities.

Students inevitably began the class with their own lenses, which often included pejorative views of the community and its residents. These lenses also included perspectives of the community as deficient and in terms of problems that needed to be "fixed." Some viewed their task as student-researchers to devise solutions to these perceived problems. For example, after one class session, two nurses enrolled in the course immediately suggested conducting a needs assessment to determine ways to combat health issues within the community (they later discovered that such an assessment had already been done and that there were numerous health and diabetes/obesity initiatives). Within the course, students were challenged to cast off assumptions about the community and the need to evaluate or assess the community, and instead seek ways to learn from community members and research participants. In this way, students' experiences conducting research

often challenged and/or transformed their notions of concepts such as community, learning, and research.

Below, Kathy, a doctoral student in Adult Education and an Occupational Therapist who lived and worked in Chicago, described her initial impressions and experiences in Humboldt Park:

> **West of Western:** I live in Chicago and had some limited familiarity with the Humboldt Park neighborhood, mostly through patronage at restaurants, shops and bars just east of Paseo Boricua, in an area that had been recently gentrified. I knew lots of people who were either looking for apartments or just making recommendations about the area say, "well it's safe up until Western. You don't want to go west of western." That's just something that I heard a lot. Because of these feelings that the neighborhood was unsafe, the first day of class I established a carpool plan with classmates, and chose not to immediately tell some of my family members that I was taking a course in Humboldt Park. After only one weekend in the community however, I realized that my previous thoughts about the area were inaccurate, and began to feel safe and welcome. I also began to challenge some of my friends and family members' views of and attitudes the community.

In the vignette above, we see that Kathy examined her assumptions about the Paseo Boricua neighborhood. Her previous views were based on the perceptions of others, but being immersed in the community and interacting with community members provided the opportunity to establish new perspectives of the community that were based on her own experiences. In class discussions, she revealed that an older relative by marriage, who used to live in Humboldt Park as a child, shared racist views of the neighborhood, and she expressed some feelings of guilt and complicity about these views in her own family. During this process, she began to think differently about the encroaching gentrification in Paseo Boricua and also critiqued some of her previously views of the gentrification as a benign process and her own role in perpetuating it; through her exposure to community organizations and interactions with residents, she was able to think more deeply about community issues, and make connections between her personal choices and familial viewpoints and the larger structural and economic forces bearing down on low income and marginalized communities. Within her reflective notes, Chia-Pao, an international student from Taiwan enrolled in the doctoral program in Instructional Technology, also described her first entrée into the community and how her experiences conducting research within a *Bomba* (Afro-Caribbean music) music group challenged initial assumptions:

> **An Outsider and Another Outsider**: "Where are you going?" The taxi driver, an Asian man with black-grey hair and wrinkled face, asked me: "Please drive me to Division and California, the Puerto Rican Cultural Center," I said. "Do you speak Spanish, Miss?" "No!" I laughed. The taxi driver: "So why do you go there?" I answered him: 'There is a festival today"…An outsider of the Puerto Rican community (me) being challenged by another outsider (the taxi driver). There are indeed assumptions of linking the language with culture, race, and territory. My research experience with *Bomba* musicians has led me to rethink the relationships among language, ethnicity, community, and identity.
>
> As a Taiwanese student in the United States for a few years, I have traveled through several cities and states but have never been in this area of the Chicago. Both the native Puerto Rican community and Humboldt Park community seemed remote to my native culture.

> Was I a sensitive tourist/outsider who was curious and interested to everything, an eager student wanting to learn the music of *Bomba*, or a researcher who took on a mission to make sense of cultural practice in this community? Being a mixture of all these roles during this research project pushed me out of my comfort zone. Not only because I had to filter through several cultural layers to understand the context of Chicago's Humboldt Park community, but also to change my practices from passive observation to active participation.

The above reflections illustrate how students' initial experiences within the community generated a thought process on their own backgrounds in relation to the community, as well as caused them to reflect on her own lenses and interpretative frameworks in the context of the community. Here, Chia-Pao was also confronted with the narrow views of the community by the taxi driver, and his view of her in relation to the community. The taxi driver's comment also pushed her to think about her own presumptions of what it meant to be a researcher and how to navigate the roles as insider and outsider as she sought to understand cultural practices within the community through her own lens (Hellawell, 2006). Furthermore, she spoke to the inherent discomfort involved in such research endeavors, as researchers are challenged to rethink their own stances and roles.

The start date of the course coincided with the Puerto Rican People's Parade. Students were asked to read articles about the community prior to the first day of class. After a morning of introductions and orientation to the class and community, students were directed to go out on their own to experience the neighborhood and encouraged to navigate their own way into the community and for lunch and the parade. At the time of this reflection, Nicole worked as an instructor at two local higher educational institutions. The following edited journal entry demonstrated her responses to the first contact with the community:

> **The People's Parade:** The People's Parade provided such a wonderful opportunity to become immersed in the community…The community groups in the parade demonstrated what is important in this community: social justice, youth, health care, and empowerment. The float for Oscar Lopez Rivera[2] was a reminder that this community is tied to larger political story. Another group brought focus to the youth of the community and contemporary youth issues such as underage drinking. Health issues were represented by agencies that support children and families dealing with asthma and diabetes. Common to all of the groups was the element of empowerment. The story of people coming together to make a difference and serve a greater need was a constant and truly inspiring.

As illustrated by Nicole's reflections, The People's Parade provided an excellent opportunity for students to gain a snapshot of the community. The parade represented the smaller groups and needs of the community. During the fourth year of the class, two students came to the class with doubts that they would find a group to connect to in a community that they perceived as so different than their own. Antoinette, an African American woman who identified as LGBTQ, was very interested in exploring issues related to the LGBTQ community. Another man was an international student from Palestine. During the first day of class, both of these students saw evidence that their own interests did exist in this community. Antoinette remarked on the imagery of rainbow flags and a float spotlighting transgender individuals. The man saw Palestinian flags as part of a solidarity contingent in the parade and also met Palestinian shopkeepers who he ended up

2. A Puerto Rican political prisoner sentenced in 1981 to a 70 year sentence for seditious conspiracy, (he was released in 2017, after this experience at the parade).

interviewing as part of his project. This underscores the need to view communities not as monolithic entities but as diverse and heterogeneous spaces. Students marveled at how welcoming people in the community were to them as "outsiders." Many of the African American students enrolled in the class were particularly taken aback by this, as they perceived a divisive relationship between the African American and Puerto Rican communities within Chicago. In contrast to their expectations, they found that a number of community residents went out of their way to talk to them and share the African aspects of Puerto Rican culture. Antoinette, who grew up on the South Side of Chicago, described her initial experiences in the community:

> **Education in an Unlikely Space:** During the Parade the atmosphere along Division Street was electric. I was quickly reminded of summers I spent as a child in on Chicago's South Side at the *Bud Billiken Back to School Parades* held each year in the African American community. It was evident that the residents of the Humboldt Park community were anticipating something special and I was eager to witness the parade. Before the parade I strolled down Division Street, this time on foot, and had the opportunity to mingle with the residents of the community. I met Juan, a Puerto Rican man who made me laugh heartily with his quick wit and comparisons of James Brown dance techniques and traditional Puerto Rican salsa. Juan "schooled" me about the connections between the African-American and Puerto Rican communities. His lesson was about not only dance technique but of historical solidarity and bloodlines…I met people I would have never met had I come back to Chicago and travelled to my familiar South side and West side neighborhoods…I had received an education in the most unlikely of spaces.

Here, Antoinette was able to make connections with a community that she initially viewed as potentially unwelcoming, and maybe even hostile to her presence. Her preconceptions about the area also speak to larger stereotypes about certain communities and ethnic groups, and the hyper-segregated nature of the city. Her experience within the community helped her rethink views about the divisions among certain communities. She learned to not view the community as an "other" (see Abu-Lughod, 1993), but in terms of the common struggles and issues shared by marginalized communities of color. This shift also helped her view community problems as connected to broader inequities impacting a range of marginalized communities, and her exposure to organizations addressing specific problems in one particular community provided her with models and approaches that she believed might be employed in her own community.

However, not all students felt such an affinity with the community during their initial experiences. One student in particular wrote in her reflective assignment that she was bothered that there were no "American" (U.S) flags at the parade. These different reactions to the parade and expressions of community identity illustrate how our own worldviews can inform our views of a community and our ability to authentically participate in community-based research. In some cases, it is necessary to part with viewpoints and strongly held beliefs, so as to be able to see a situation or context from another's point of view. These differing stances on the community also reflect the students' distinct identities: one was an African American lesbian woman who was raised in Chicago, whereas the other was a white woman who lived in the suburbs. The latter student also entered the course intent on "fixing" problems in the community, which reflects a deficit-orientation towards the community and a view that the primary purpose of the class should be to help the community, possibly disregarding the wealth of opportunities for learning purveyed within community settings.

These divergent reactions to the community speak to the role that "cultural intuition" (Bernal, 1998) can play in the research process, and how power and position can influence one's view of community practices and shape interactions with the community. Those who undertake such community-based projects and coursework should provide preparation at the outset of the project/course—through relevant readings and community tours—and also provide opportunities for students/researchers to reflect on personal stances and experiences relative to the topic and setting prior to the beginning of the project**.**

Negotiating Researcher Role: The Observant Participant

Although students were allowed entry into research sites through relationships developed by the professor, many learned the hard way that they needed to gain trust of research participants through their own efforts. In some cases, when students started by engaging in what has been termed "participant observation" they quickly realized that it was more useful to be "observant participants" and become involved in the activities and daily life of sites. For example, Kathy who conducted fieldwork at a community bike shop, endured some awkward moments during her initial field visits as she attempted to collect data standing in the corner with a notepad. One bike shop member jokingly asked her who she was an informant for. On subsequent visits, she brought her bike and participated in a fix-it workshop, finding this a better and more natural strategy to gain insight into the learning processes at the shop. Colleen, who conducted her research at a community bakery, had to don an apron and prove to bakery workers that she was willing to work hard before they agreed to participate in an interview.

Participant observation has often been viewed as occurring along a continuum and thus allowing for researchers to serve in roles that range from passive observers to active participants. However, the term emphasizes the role of the researcher as an observer and outsider rather than as an active participant, or even as a potential member of a research group that includes academic researchers and community members. We believe that the term "observant participant" more adequately describes the relationship and role one should aim for when conducting community-based research. Below, Colleen, a student in Adult Education and Literacy and a professor at a local community college, described how she gained access into her site and developed relationships with community residents:

> **Earning the Right:** My research site was Café Colao, a busy bakery and sandwich shop along Division Street. Initially it was an uneasy partnership. Part of my struggle in this setting was earning the right to be a researcher. My presence in the cafe, during the lunch rush on Saturdays, was intrusive. I had gained entry into the site on the reputation of my professor, but it was clear that I was going to have to earn some trust from the employees. As we sat with our lunches my first day at my research site, I could hear a hushed discussion in Spanish about me between the cook and the front room worker. She wanted to relegate me to the cook's domain. The cook was not receptive to the idea. She questioned my reason for being there…I had no history in this place…Sitting at the bar with my notebook as a passive observer would have endeared me to none of the workers in the café; I was already an outsider. It was also apparent that no one had time in their day to train me for my role as an active participant in the café. My challenge was to make myself a help rather than a hindrance during my Saturdays there.

> Each week during my time in the community, I would don my apron and look for opportunities to help. I cleaned tables, washed dishes, and emptied the garbage. I learned how to make coffee "properly" and became familiar with the sandwiches and pastries. I tried to help without being asked to and to learn the routines through careful observation. I noticed that personal service was valued in the community, so I worked to remember customer names and preferences. Through these efforts, I gradually earned the respect and trust of the café workers.
>
> What I learned from this process is that to be successful as a researcher you should acknowledge that you are entering into a reciprocal relationship. You must give something of value to the process, you cannot simply take. I tried to contribute through my efforts as a worker and in turn the employees agreed to share their stories and histories with me. Although the interchange is rarely equal, I believe it is the researcher's willingness to contribute in a meaningful way to participants that forges the relationship.

Colleen's experience at the café underscores the need for developing relationships of trust with participants and participating in research settings in genuine and authentic ways. Harrington (2003) terms this self-aware ethnography "informed improvisation," whereby the researcher continuously evaluates the relationship to "engage skillfully and flexibly with new people and situations" (p. 595). As illustrated, the women's initial reactions to Colleen's presence point to the ways that as researchers we are often a disruptive element rather than a helpful one. This vignette is from the early instantiations of the course, when students were conducting ethnographic research in community settings, in order to study learning in various community contexts, and was not intended as a participatory, collaborative project. The worker's reaction to her as an imposition and disruption to daily work activities highlights the tensions between the researcher and those being observed that can arise from a traditional ethnographic study. Although Colleen sought to identify points of connection between herself and participants and became involved in the work of the café rather than observing from the sidelines, this may not have been sufficient to overcome some of the workers' apprehensions about her presence. In a PAR project, workers would be consulted beforehand regarding the research study and be involved as co-researchers in the design and implementation of project, instead of having a researcher foisted on them. Wherever a project might land in terms of amount of participation from community members, researchers should strive to participate in authentic and meaningful ways, and be involved in community activities and daily practices as much as they can, rather than observe passively.

Personal Transformations and Building Relationships

At the beginning of the course, students were for the most part outsiders to the larger community setting and the particular sites within which they conducted research, and unfamiliar with many of the realities community residents were daily confronted with. Despite these differences, there were a number of commonalities that were shared with participants that enabled students to forge connections with them. Some of the issues and experiences addressed within interviews were ones shared between interviewer and interviewee, regardless of race, ethnicity, and class, such as struggling with weight and body image, learning a new job, raising children, negotiating between work and parenthood, and losing a parent. Although it is important to be cognizant of differences between researchers and research participants and how these might shape the research process, an

overemphasis on such differences can contribute to "otherizing" (Abu-Lughod, 1993). Although Humboldt Park is identified as a Puerto Rican community, it is by no means monolithic and homogenous in terms of race/ethnicity, class, education, sexual orientation, occupation, or age. Participants in students' research projects included teachers, business owners, college students, librarians, children, activists, youth, and elders.

Many students were personally impacted by their interactions with research participants and community residents. In a number of cases, students' experiences on Paseo Boricua caused them to reflect on, and even critique, their own lives and beliefs, to view their families, communities, and perspectives through a different lens. A number of students made changes in their daily practices and behaviors on account of their research experiences, as when Kathy began biking more regularly after her fieldwork at a bikeshop that advocated biking as a way to address health and environmental issues. Below, Amy, a doctoral student in the literacy program and the mother of two teenage boys described the connections she forged with adolescent girls attending and summer program:

> **What I Brought Away:** To call my experiences in Humboldt Park and specifically with five teenage girls in Humboldt Park transformational is an understatement. I prepared myself for my journey into the "foreign neighborhood" as many would…reflecting on all the things that the people there did NOT have that my family and I were fortunate enough to enjoy daily. What I learned was the many things my family and I did NOT have—those things that only five teenage Puerto Rican girls from Humboldt Park could enlighten me about.
>
> The words that I use to describe the inner sense of these girls and their community connection are *loyal, committed, dedicated* and *empowered.* I would use none of these words to adequately describe my own sons' community connection…I questioned these girls about this: "Where had I failed my own children? Why didn't they have the love of community that these girls emanated on a daily basis?" One of the girls…told me that my boys have never had the threat of their community being taken away…Humboldt Park is in danger of being gentrified beyond reclamation and this fact spurs its citizens—even the youngest—to fight for her with a vengeance. At the end of eight weeks I was not only inspired by the girls and their inherent defense and love of their neighborhood, but sorry that my boys had not been brought up to have these same instincts.
>
> Ultimately what I thought I was going to bring *to* this experience—inspiration for the downtrodden people I expected to meet—became what I brought away from the experience…We learned together that they had some preconceived ideas about me too and laughed about it all. Ethnography and qualitative research will never be considered in the same way for me. I was transformed—I learned a lot about ethnographic research, yes, but I believe more importantly I learned more about my own beliefs about me, I learned about being a better mom and I learned that five teenage girls from Humboldt Park have changed the world for this middle aged, blonde, suburban woman in a most positive way.

Amy was obviously extremely impacted by her experiences working with youth at the center, as well as transformed. Within this reflection, she addressed some of the deficit-oriented assumptions about the community and its residents that she held at the outset of the research. Although her

initial expectations were that she would provide assistance and help to "downtrodden" community residents, her engagement with this group of girls taught her some valuable lessons about resilience and fortitude, and the privileges she enjoyed on her account of her racial and class background, lessons that she hoped to instill in her own children.

Chia-Pao similarly addressed the ways that researchers learn from research participants, and in the process sometimes become part of the community:

> **This is Your Community Too:** Several moments indicated the change in my relationship from an outsider to an insider during my fieldwork. I felt like a complete stranger…at the beginning of this research project because seldom was there an Asian woman in that area, not to mention one who was sitting in the *Bombazo* and playing drums with community members. I started as a quiet observer in a *Bomba* drumming class until someone handed me a drum. "Hey! Do you have an extra drum?" asked a woman sitting beside me who was the mother of one of the girls learning *Bomba* dance. She pointed to me and said, "She wants to learn."
>
> My feeling of distance because of the culture and language differences was totally changed during my interview with the music director of a *Bomba y Plena* group. *Bomba* is a tool to "build community"…He talked about…how the *Bomba* community is like a village that people always come back. Knowing me as a learner in the *Bomba* class and a community researcher, the music director said: "This is your community too." A warm feeling came through my mind when I heard him. I knew it had been a long way from outsider, to researcher, to student, and finally to part of this community.

"Giving Back": Building Reciprocal Research Relationships

The goal of the ethnographer is to become immersed in a setting, and we readily acknowledge that a summer course does not provide the type of long-term and in-depth community engagement usually associated with high-quality ethnography. In fact, some would disparage it as merely a snapshot, providing students with a superficial glimpse into the issues and realities of the community. Yet, the course did furnish participating students with the opportunity to explore issues involved in the research process, such as negotiating researcher roles and developing participatory partnerships. Furthermore, for many, their brief experience on Paseo Boricua helped them expand their notions of community and what it means to be a researcher. As mentioned earlier, a few students from each summer session joined a research and writing group that has conducted presentations exploring their research experiences at local and national conferences.

Within coursework in many graduate education programs, there is little time devoted to explorations of participatory or community-based research and ethnography, and graduate students are generally provided scant opportunities to become involved in communities in authentic, sustained, and mutually edifying ways. The sharing of student-researchers' experiences within community settings can add to our theoretical and practical understanding of research approaches that bear the potential of transforming relationships between universities and communities, which is particularly crucial given the ways that low-income urban communities and residents have often been exploited by researchers. It is important for qualitative researchers to identify their beliefs and biases, in order to understand how their assumptions influence their interpretations of experiences (Hellawell, 2006; Hsiung, 2008). In this study, engagement in the community and dialogue

with the instructor, peers, and community members allowed the students to move beyond being reflective to be reflexive—that is to analyze, question, and change their beliefs, attitudes, biases and assumptions (Hsiung, 2008). By doing so, the students had a greater understanding of themselves, as well as developed an awareness of the self as dynamic in response to experiences and engagement in reflexive processes. The course provided a context for this process by affording students experiences outside of their comfort zone, which sometimes lead to disorientation, but supported what we refer to as *dialogic reflexivity* by offering a collective context to further examine experiences and their reactions to them, and engage self-critically with the experiences of teaching, learning, and doing community-based research. Furthermore, the notion of the *observant participant*, articulated in our research, emphasizes the participatory nature of community-based field work and the underscores the need for deep listening and attention as well as meaningful interactions with community leaders and residents, thus steering us away from positivist notions of the detached and objective researcher as observer.

Throughout the course, many of the students were anxious that they were not doing enough to help the community, were not adequately "giving back" to the community for the opportunity they were provided to conduct research there. However, developing a research relationship that could be described as reciprocal takes time and does not occur overnight. It would be naïve to assume that a group of researchers with little knowledge of the community could sufficiently produce or contribute something of use to the community in a mere six weeks, or that the community would even want or need their "help." Throughout the course, students were encouraged to "give back" in small ways, by frequenting community businesses and eateries, donating materials to local programs, and attending and volunteering at community events. One of the longer-term goals of this course is to strengthen linkages with the community and develop sustained initiatives and projects. One project was expanded into an independent study project. This project explored health perspectives and the role of urban agriculture in fostering healthy communities; the student worked with a science instructor at the participating alternative high school to work with students on the issue of healthy communities and also connected the school and students with university resources, such as engineers who work on solar, wind, and water issues. The hope is that in the future other projects can continue beyond the course, and help the group develop additional collaborative university-community initiatives. Throughout the span of the course, members of the research group have elicited increased involvement and input from community leaders and members, and this has helped facilitate dialogue regarding the purposes of the course and how research projects can best meet the needs of the community.

Although the reflections offered here are not meant to serve as a template for community-based research courses, it is hoped that they can inform others interested in developing similar sorts of initiatives. Some of the practical lessons gleaned from the group's experiences are included below:

- **Provide guided engagement experiences for students in and out of classroom settings:** This could include community tours led by leaders and community members, as well as structured in-class events, such as panels comprised of community youth, for them to participate in and learn about the community.
- **Offer opportunities for formal and informal learning:** Include more formalized lectures on research methods and the history of the setting/community, as well as occasions for students to learn *in situ* through field work and unstructured experiences in the community, such as community walks and lunch at community eateries.

- **Provide sufficient opportunities for students to reflect on their community experiences:** Students should be able to discuss their reactions and responses to the community; the completion of regular reflective journals can help students process their experiences and be reflexive about how aspects of their own autobiography intersect with the community and its residents, as well as connect community conditions, resources, and practices to broader social, historical, and economic factors and contexts.
- **Develop initiatives in dialogue with community organizations and leaders:** Community members should be involved in all stages of the course, from development to culmination. Researchers should identify specific community liaisons to help facilitate the planning of class activities and the development of projects.
- **Initially focus the course on the process of becoming engaged in a community, rather than on the products:** Be realistic regarding what the course can accomplish in terms of "deliverables," as it would be more damaging to the university-community relationship to promise products that were not completed, or shoddily thrown together because of time constraints. Instead, craft ways to maintain continuity from year to year, building on work from previous years.

We believe that the above research and instructional practices can support the building of reciprocal research relationships and also help students "earn the right" to conduct research within communities; furthermore, these practices can also work towards building partnerships between universities and communities that can address inequities between these entities and help to transform and expand conditions, resources, and perspectives in *both* realms.

Much of the focus on university-community partnerships and community-based research efforts has been on transformations and action within communities on account of these projects, often ignoring how researchers and higher education institutions might also be changed—and more importantly the sorts of shifts in thinking and emphasis on the part of research and universities that are necessary in order to conduct research within communities that is premised on and respects local knowledge and expertise. These practices can help us reimagine the role of academic researchers vis-à-vis communities and emphasizes the need to reconsider researcher reflexivity in ways that go beyond mere reflection on one's own background, experiences, and perspectives, so as to include how researchers themselves are implicated in the social issues and processes they are studying.

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Chia-Pao Hsu received her doctorate from the Department of Educational Technology, Research and Assessment.

Laura Ruth Johnson holds a Ph.D. in Language & Literacy, Society & Culture from the University of California at Berkeley. She is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Technology, Research and Assessment in the College of Education, Northern Illinois University. She published *Community-based Qualitative Research: Approaches for Education and the Social Sciences* (Sage Publications) in 2017.

Antoinette Jones is the Interim Associate Director of Educator Licensure and Preparation at Northern Illinois University. She is currently a doctoral student in the Department of Counseling, Adult and Higher Education in the College of Education at Northern Illinois University.

Katharine Preissner holds an Ed.D. in Adult and Higher Education from Northern Illinois University. She is a Clinical Associate Professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Dr. Preissner's scholarship is focused on teaching and learning in OT education and practice, fieldwork education, and self-management educational programs for people with multiple sclerosis and their caregivers.

Nicole R. Rivera holds a Ph.D. Educational Psychology from Northern Illinois University. She is an Associate Professor of Psychology at North Central College. Nicole's scholarship focuses on research and evaluation in informal learning spaces.

Amy Schroeder is the coordinator of the Reading Specialist Master's program at the University of St. Francis. She works in area high schools with future educators and is counselor to the honor students in Kappa Delta Pi, the international honor society for educators.

Colleen Stribling holds an Ed.D. in Adult and Higher Education from Northern Illinois University. She is an Associate Professor of English as a Second Language at Elgin Community College. Her research interests include transitioning adult language learners to academic and technical programs.