
REFLECTIONS ON EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PORTAL (STUDENT PORTAL)

The Crucial Role of Community Liaisons in Place-Based Experiential Education Organizations

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In 2014, community volunteers and university grant writers created the Bowman Creek Educational Ecosystem (BCe2), focused on revitalizing a river tributary that stretches throughout the Southeast neighborhood of South Bend, Indiana. The organizational partnership linked efforts of local community groups, schools, and universities in continued revitalization a post-industrial urban environment. The initial goals of this ecological coalition included the systematic transformation of a long-neglected waterway and its environs. By the summer of 2018, BCe2 was a dynamic organization of thirty interns in eight teams working with a complex host of research advisors, community partners, and three dozen mentors. The interns, from thirteen different universities, colleges, and high schools, worked on a variety of engineering projects including urban sustainability, tree nurseries, lead mitigation, stormwater management, arduino technology, and vacant lot assessment. As the current organization continues to integrate its efforts in redevelopment projects with the neighborhood surrounding Bowman Creek to expand its benefits for other South Bend communities, it continues to serve as a vibrant opportunity for experiential learning, place-based science, and community-university partnerships.

Keywords: experiential learning; place-based science; community-university partnerships; community organization; neighborhood advocacy; ecology; engineering; intern program; urban revitalization; collaborative learning; community liaison

In 2014, community volunteers and university grant writers created the Bowman Creek Educational Ecosystem (BCe2), focused on revitalizing a river tributary that stretches throughout the Southeast neighborhood of South Bend, Indiana. The organizational partnership linked efforts of local community groups, schools, and universities in continued revitalization of a post-industrial urban environment. The initial goals of this ecological coalition included the systematic transformation of a long-neglected waterway and its environs “into a respected and revered part of the City” (Bowman Creek Project, 2017). By the summer of 2018, BCe2 was a dynamic organization of thirty interns in eight teams working with a complex host of research advisors, community partners, and three dozen mentors.¹ The interns, from thirteen different universities, colleges, and high schools, worked on a variety of engineering projects including urban sustainability, tree nurseries, lead mitigation, storm water management, arduino technology, and vacant lot assessment. As the current organization continues to integrate its efforts in redevelopment projects with the neighborhood surrounding Bowman Creek to expand its benefits for other South Bend communities, it continues to serve as a vital opportunity for experiential learning (Efstratia, 2014; Kolb, 1984), place-based science (Hebert & Lewandowski, 2017), and community-university partnerships (Hogan et al., 2017). The project embodies

¹ The authors include one of the co-advising mentors and two of the then- undergraduate interns of the 2017 ethnographic team. This research was based on a National Science Foundation Improving Undergraduate STEM Education (IUSE) grant, “The Bowman Creek Educational Ecosystem.”

active civil engagement and contributes to vibrant research on university-community partnerships (James & Figaro-Henry, 2017), and place-based undergraduate experiences (Bott-Knutson et al., 2018).

The BCe2 organization remains deeply committed to the Southeast neighborhood where it is based, but initially fell short in sustaining community outreach efforts to understand its neighbors' emergent needs. Organizational goals to steer interns towards STEM fields through its projects and training efforts both complemented and contended with the values of the local community where it was based. In its first summer of 2016, the organization's projects tended to assert interventionist roles in the neighborhood through the assumed necessity of local environmental improvements rather than roles informed explicitly by substantial community input.

Following these initial intervention-based frameworks, in the summer of 2017, a uniquely-gifted BCe2 intern began fulfilling a critically needed organizational role as a neighborhood resident with ties to the community. As an intern, Valor² informally and organically became a community liaison as a neighborhood resident and talked openly with other neighbors. In this way, his participation fulfilled a gap between the previous disparity in BCe2's organizational intervention and the community's local input. Drawing from BCe2's ongoing community-university partnership as a collaborative place-based experiential learning project, this paper explores the crucial importance of employing community liaisons in similar locally-based organizations to foster sustained community benefits and neighborhood advocacy. The mediating roles of community liaisons, individuals who live and work within neighborhoods in which collaborative organizations are based, provide critically-needed rapport, advocacy, and direct input from community members.

Building Organizational Capacities for Community Mediation and Local Advocacy

BCe2 is organized around improving South Bend's Southeast neighborhood, an area which continues to experience a revival of community building mostly free of trends of gentrification in other cities. Nevertheless, half of the neighborhood continues to hold a median income of \$17,922 a year and a wide income disparity with the neighborhoods that surround it (City of South Bend, 2015, 2016). Many Southeast neighborhood residents are working to transform urban development strategies that are based on the community's perceived deficits into those that emphasize its significant strengths. By becoming active participants in the neighborhood, Bowman Creek project teams attempt to directly contribute to these transformations, beginning from their physical presence in the Southeast neighborhood. Valor later reflected, "We are not set up well for community members to visit, we are kind of closed off in the building...it does seem somewhat exclusive" (South Bend, IN, July 2017). Thus, the interns and mentors, including BCe2's ethnographic team authoring this article, worked in a local multi-use workspace, a reimagined warehouse that provided a local base, but also a relatively comfortable refuge from the complex realities of their neighbors' lives.

In its first years of operation, BCe2's stated mission to work "with," but not "for" the community, centered on local improvement projects in urban sustainability, community development, and the internet of things. Through this mission, the project initially focused on engineering and development interventions rather than community advocacy. BCe2's 2017 orientation lectures included activities positing that people do not necessarily understand what they want rather than focusing on community self-determination. One lecture referred to an example of a surveyed group of Americans who said they preferred strong coffee, but disliked strong coffee when it was provided. As ethnographic interns, we often reflected on the irony and tried to amend BCe2 leaders' emphasis on doing work "with" and not "for" the community when doing work for the Southeast neighborhood was central to most projects. Simultaneously, for many of BCe2's mentors, working with established neighborhood groups that claimed to speak for the community was equivalent to working with the community itself.

However, these groups were often politically and operationally opposed to each other. For example, one prominent community organization promoted urban gentrification as the penultimate example of positive neighborhood change. As a result, amid economic restraints and structural struggles, many residents pervasively mistrusted intervening outsiders who were perceived as consistently uncaring and detached from the neighborhood. This community mistrust of outsiders emerged from perceptions of surveillance and negative effects caused by previous external government and charity interventions from outside the neighborhood. BCe2 could also be interpreted as operating in similar potentially detrimental ways. However, while observing the Bowman Creek organization, it was clear to the ethnographic team that the program's

² "Valor," like all of the names in this article, is a self-selected pseudonym.

interns were enthused and motivated in the initial weeks. Yet as the interns realized that the required work was difficult or impossible in a condensed ten-week time frame, some of the projects lost their initial allure.

Given these difficulties, for BCe2 and similar locally-based groups, the liaison role augments potential gaps in complex urban collaborative projects, providing continuity, commitment, and outreach to community members. Historically, this role originated in the community health research of Community Health Workers (CHWs) in Russia in the late 19th century and these trained rural paramedics emerged again in China in the 1920s as the “Barefoot Doctors” (Perry, 2013). CHWs were locally enlisted in participatory engagements aimed to reduce undernutrition, infection, and disease while fostering local programs of healthcare and wellness (Perry et al., 2014). According to the World Health Organization’s approach, CHWs vary individually except for their shared origins in the communities they work with and in their relative lack of elite education (Lehmann & Sanders, 2007). Community liaisons are referenced primarily in public health and medical fields where they are a hireable category of employees (Janosch, 2016; Kelley et al., 2012; Musco & Thorn, 2014; Vuong et al., 2008; Wigdorski & Garvey, 2017). Yet the role of community liaisons can be significantly expanded beyond these traditional health roles and occupational boundaries to reinforce other organizational commitments for collaboration.

At Bowman Creek, this collaborative role emerged unexpectedly in the summer of 2017, when BCe2 employed Valor as a project intern who was also a long-term neighborhood resident. He joined the project’s affordable housing group, which was tasked with creating strategies for additional low-cost home approvals in the area. Because he lived within a five-minute walking distance from project’s warehouse space and had strong family ties to the community, the neighborhood was his home and not just a work site. As an older student who attended a local community college with many connections to a network of friends, parishioners, and family, he initially assumed that he would serve as a leader for younger students. As he independently began developing a community liaison role, his project team intensified their engagements and interactions with the community, exceeding the capacities of other groups who lacked similar collaborative outreach skills. Valor was intimately familiar with many individuals in the community and often spoke about their intrinsic humanness. Some of these friends in the community, he said, “bring contacts and wisdom,” while other neighbors provide insights for those who may not have extensive training in learning to understand community needs (South Bend, IN, July 2017).

As one of the ten project teams, the affordable housing group joined BCe2’s broader Southeast Neighborhood redevelopment projects. They participated in community events held after work hours, including local efforts to increase street light coverage and to install additional solar panels on South Bend homes. They also attended the meetings of the city council and of local neighborhood organizations. As the only project group who successfully conducted door-to-door surveys, Valor’s skillset became clearly apparent to the ethnographic team, project leaders, and other interns. Through his unique talents, demeanor, and connections, Valor performed an invaluable role in the Bowman Creek project’s research, operations, and outreach efforts. BCe2’s interns repeatedly chose him to represent the organization at community events, at meetings with then South Bend Mayor and recent US presidential candidate, Pete Buttigieg, New York Times reporters, and other public interactions.

Through Valor’s knowledge of the Southeast neighborhood and an ability to gain trust, the BCe2 organization’s interdisciplinary interests in local collaboration benefited profoundly from his active presence as a community liaison. As a locally-informed participant committed to the neighborhood, his role was key to Bowman Creek’s overall framework, making it possible to operate at a high level of efficiency and integrity.

Because this role emerged organically, project leaders did not anticipate how essential he would be to BCe2’s successes. As an impromptu educator, he served to guide interns towards their own insights into how the neighborhood works through participation. In addition, he provided connections within the community so that the interns could access existing networks of neighborhood trust. Valor helped the interns understand the neighborhood by navigating the internal prevailing attitudes and external preconceived notions that influence it. The key to his leadership was not just in carrying out the organization’s initiatives, but also as an advocate to shape the organization towards fostering community agency. His community liaison role emphasized how community growth is locally generative and reliant on collaborative growth from within.

The collaboration issues revealed through this role showed how community members perceived BCe2 and its interns as a locally-based organization. In the summer of 2017, for example, one internship team was attempting to provide irrigation to a tree nursery. They encountered difficulties with access to a water source that was in the basement of a neighborhood rental home. Initially, the home owner and the renter granted the interns permission to access the water source based on a cash benefit agreement. Subsequently,

the home renter became reluctant to allow the interns entrance to the basement to hook up the necessary water lines. Valor and another team leader, who was a former city employee, then intervened as experienced mentors, eventually making the tree irrigation possible. While reviewing this initially stressful experience during a subsequent weekly group update, Valor presented possible reasons why this community member might be reluctant to provide access to her home.

Another factor exemplifying the critical need to build neighborhood trust in this case emerged from the project team's initial assumptions that the resident's increased utility bill was their biggest hurdle. However, when compensation for the bill was resolved, the interns stalled rather than move forward with the intended plans. The importance the resident ascribed to a clean well-maintained home was not anticipated as a potential issue or a major concern. When Valor identified the resident's feelings of vulnerability as the key reason or not wanting them to enter her house, the interns seemed surprised. Without his experience coming from the local community, they were unable to anticipate these reasons or to understand her perceptions. Nuanced community understanding emerges from intimate familiarity. This subtle discernment is an important and critical resource for BCe2 and similar local collaborative organizations. Without a capacity for such delicate and critical nuance, communication difficulties between community members and locally-based organizations will continue to emerge.

Along with this capacity for informed mediation, community liaisons provide informal education on neighborhood practices, understandings, and perceptions. Their insights into how community residents view a local organization and its interns can serve as a crucial basis for understanding the community's practical workings. With community knowledge that extends beyond formalized education, local demographics, and neighborhood geographies, liaisons demonstrate the complex heuristics of community members' understanding. Their insights benefit communities through feedback based on these locally generated modes of understanding that would otherwise be organizationally inaccessible. As informal educators, they help organizations understand communities as holistic spaces for people's homes, workplaces, schools, and places of worship. They lead by example, showing interns that informal education programs can help empower communities and that neighborhoods are also spaces to test innovative ideas that imagine potential futures.

In addition to enacting potential future trajectories through collaboration, one of the key strengths of liaisons for practicing anthropology is building significant community relationships. Beyond their ability to create robust neighborhood connections, community liaisons create potential space for community advocacy among neighborhood-based organizations. While communities can do advocacy work independently, neighborhood advocacy that is initiated by an organization requires building rapport, conducting local research, and gaining community trust. Ethnographic advocates can also direct interns towards organizational mediation to ascertain their needs as well. Through their particular traits and skill sets, whether they are community members or ethnographic researchers, community liaisons can work towards committed neighborhood advocacy.

The Role of Community Liaisons in Fostering Organizational Education

As a crucial service component for community-based organizations, community liaisons are able to integrate collaborative work with communities and create sustained connections to neighborhoods. To foster and sustain genuine relationships in communities, it is essential that such organizations can see and understand their role as their neighbors do. These expanded perspectives encourage lasting positive change and the possibilities for revitalizing community vibrancy. Perspectives on organizational education can be transformed as well, with community liaisons providing a bridge for knowledge production among community-based student teams. In the case of the Bowman Creek project, many resources are available for interns at the beginning of each summer. Nevertheless, pre-determined directives on project outcomes and production paths are not mandated in order to ensure self-discovery and improvisation. Programmatically, this improvisational encouragement could more explicitly include the community liaison role, which emerged organically from Valor's experience and skillset.

This sense of self-improvisation and processual flexibility was crucial for BCe2's interns to create working spaces in which team productions could be based on non-hierarchical experience. As a result, they rallied around the deliberate initial lack of specific pathways and outcomes. With flexibility or openness to new projects, these experiential spaces encouraged interns to share emergent information and previously acquired skills. Interns initiated new roles within their team structures and the overall project including Valor's community liaison role. They operated independently, conducting improvisational and collaborative research. The project teams' work resulted in practical implementations outside of textbooks or classrooms.

Mentors also served in a collaborative and advisory capacity, providing disciplinary expertise and practical guidance without giving explicit answers. In addition, local stakeholders ensured that interns were accountable to people within the community, providing a direct contrast from typical classroom experiences that lack community-based accountability. In this high-stakes setting people in the community expect results and, if promised results are not delivered, their potential disappointment provides real consequences.

For some interns these expectations caused some initial discomfort while others embraced the challenge of accountable independence. At the beginning of the internship we, the co-authors as part of a team of anthropologists and sociologists, conducted interviews with each intern. During these initial interviews, we asked how interns felt about the real world consequences of their work at Bowman Creek, which could directly affect our neighbors in the community. One intern expressed enjoying that the internship focused on practical projects that helped people in the surrounding community rather than being a graded assignment. Another said,

Well it makes me feel great [laughing]. I say that it makes me feel great because that means I get to decide on something. That means I have to really work on being as safe as I can. It means that I will really have an impact on people's lives ("Sua," South Bend, IN, June 2017).

As an engineering student, Sua was excited to apply classroom knowledge towards positive change in South Bend's Southeast neighborhood, a community that lacks adequate resources to address flooding sewers, poor lighting, and other problems. This intern then reflected on the ethical practices and potential consequences of the project,

When something has a harmful side it also has a good side...I am assuming the question is more from like the negative side, but I really think that we will be doing more good than harm. Putting in sensors does not cause any harm, it is a good thing it is trying to make sure that we know how much water goes in the ground, so that we can prevent people's business or homes from flooding. It only has positive effects, I really can't think of anything that could go wrong ("Sua," South Bend, IN, June 2017).

By contrast, another intern expressed feeling ambiguity and pressure from the initial presence of community stakeholders, but eventually embraced the idea that the neighborhood depended on their work. In response to the question if the interns felt pressured or motivated by this community presence, Sitka replied,

It depends. It feels good, but if you mess up one thing then everyone will remember that, so you will have to do like four good things to make it go away. So, it's kinda scary, but when you do something good, then it makes you feel great. So, it depends on the problem ("Sitka," South Bend, IN, June 2017).

In time, the interns held weekly check-ins with organizational stakeholders, attended after-work community meetings, and stayed up late trying to measure lighting levels in the neighborhood. Many of the interns who felt initial anxiety that community stakeholders depend on their success later saw these expectations as assets.

As the project developed, several other interns from South Bend also worked as emergent community liaisons in addition to Valor, demonstrating that the role could be sustained beyond one unique individual. In 2017, hiring efforts to recruit interns from local universities and technical schools brought several other South Bend natives to the project. These efforts to expand BCe2's institutional diversity continued in 2018 when more than half of the interns were from South Bend or its surrounding communities.

Nevertheless, the laudable inclusion of these interns from local neighborhoods was unable to fully match Valor's longstanding relationship to the community, further supporting the importance of recruiting closely connected leaders for the community liaison role.

Alongside interns who grew up in the community, Valor's sustained collaboration with the Southeast neighborhood is a recommended model for others who perform this role in future university-community partnerships. He attended events with community stakeholders prior to the internship and used this knowledge to enhance bonds with local social connections. His efforts transferred to his intern group, creating solid relationships with community stakeholders. Through these reciprocal relationships, stakeholders were willing to provide additional assistance and accessibility to the project's interns. Individual perceptions and

assumptions evolved among some community members and university interns, into a shared understanding of, according to one Southeast neighborhood resident, “the beautiful combination of [our] street smarts with your book smarts” (“Jo,” South Bend, IN, July 2017). By merging the enthusiasm of students with the initiatives of those more grounded in experiential knowledge, community members’ goals and needs were more likely to be integrated into the core goals of BCe2’s initiatives.

In this way, the active presence of liaisons from the neighborhood and the surrounding community improved the educational experiences of BCe2 interns. These individuals provided locally-based knowledge and additional awareness of community resources. This crucial role worked in conjunction with the Bowman Creek project’s educational components. The beneficial resources provided by interns with deep community knowledge who know their neighbors well enough to work among them and communicate without reservations cannot be understated. Rather than reproduce a formal and hierarchical mentor role, locally-based liaisons also resonated personally with other interns. As collaborative colleagues, they felt more comfortable to discuss problems, seek advice, and share support with peers, which facilitated communication throughout the BCe2 organization.

Conclusion: Enhancing and Formalizing the Community Liaison Role

The participation of community liaisons significantly improved BCe2’s collaborative capacities to create possibilities for collaboration beyond top-down initiatives for neighborhood improvements. The continued inclusion of interns from the neighborhood can help ensure that community members are truly empowered by this collaborative partnership. In the organization’s short-term cyclical framework, fostering community liaisons remains somewhat difficult as they would primarily join the team each year with a limited knowledge of the organization’s projected activities. Through community collaboration, BCe2 can reflect South Bends’ positive future trajectories by helping to transform neighborhoods. The organization’s outreach efforts suggest that by consciously committing to hiring interns and project leaders from the neighborhoods it works within, it can more closely integrate itself with the community.

Furthermore, with community connections that expand beyond formal organizational ties, liaisons can continue to gauge overall neighborhood perceptions. They are able to formally and informally interact with disparate groups of people including those in the community in positions of power. Liaisons can attend events outside of the typical work day, with the confidence and openness to create relationship networks between other organizational interns and community power brokers. BCe2’s future community liaisons could already live in the neighborhood or maintain connections to the area beyond their employment with these organizations. Ideally, they would maintain several different connections to their community and organizations like BCe2 that work within it such as the Ala Wai Watershed Collaboration in Hawai’i (Hawaii Green Growth, 2018). Community liaisons working in new organizations that might otherwise be seen as emerging from the “outside” reduce the perceived distance between them and the surrounding community. By creating local jobs, employing neighborhood residents, and working on vital community issues, these organizations could provide crucial improvements. Liaisons who are already part of the community in which they are working, increase the likelihood of making more local connections. In contrast to interns who join organizations for reasons other than improving the neighborhood, such liaisons are already individual stakeholders who have proven their vested community interest.

Community organizations like BCe2 focus on creating place-based educational opportunities where interns can explore practical knowledge while applying classroom learning to experiences beyond it. Simultaneously, these emergent organizations work in communities that could benefit from engineering projects that focus on urban sustainability. BCe2 continues to operate within South Bend in its fourth year. In the summer of 2018, it expanded to a second location in South Bend’s West side, a neighborhood with similar complex challenges to the Southeast. The organization has the opportunity to develop its community relations efforts and to build positive outcomes within these neighborhoods. Prioritizing the inclusion of community liaisons would build trust and rapport in communities that have been marginalized from the city’s development plans, local politics, and educational opportunities for decades.

From a nascent project approaching a half decade of operation, BCe2 continues to encounter organizational mistakes and barriers to successful collaborations with South Bend communities. As such, it serves as a critical example to help researchers consider how to build and sustain ethical partnerships with communities. Given the documented difficulties of campus-community partnerships in creating and valuing reciprocal relations with community partners (Arrazattee et al., 2013, p. 41), prioritizing community benefits through local interventions is crucial in neighborhoods where locally-based projects like BCe2 exist. Focusing on open communication with community members can create organizational bonds with local

neighborhoods. Project interns benefit from immersive and sustained contact to community members who, in turn, encounter engineering and scientific frameworks within the context of the neighborhoods where they work and live. These reciprocal engagements mean that they are not bystanders for change in their neighborhoods, but are active participants of community transformation. This active engagement can serve to empower communities and to encourage neighborhood vibrancy. Community liaisons bridge communities and organizations, bringing them together towards mutual and reciprocal transformation including the welcome potential for organizational change in response to community input and needs. For community-based organizations, actively including liaisons to build neighborhood relations, can help ensure organizational continuity and fosters genuine leadership while creating potential for profoundly transformative futures.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Haanstad, E., Robinson, G., & Webb, S. (2020). The Crucial Role of Community Liaisons in Place-Based Experiential Education Organizations. *Collaborations: A Journal of Community-Based Research and Practice, 3*(1): 12, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.33596/coll.64>

Published: 07 September 2020

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