Enhancing Interdisciplinary Communication
For
Collaborative Engaged Research on Food Systems and Health

“In theory, theory and practice are the same, in reality they are not.” Einstein.

INTRODUCTION

Collaborative Engaged Research (CER) methodology requires and enhances communication with community leaders and decision-makers as well as across disciplines. Our research on sustainability of food systems for enhancing health and well-being is led by interdisciplinary teams including community stakeholders as well as researchers. CER leadership teams include researchers and practitioners from multiple disciplines, family and community food decision-makers and stakeholders, and connectors. Connectors bring team members with common interests together and facilitate cross-perspective communication for the integration of multiple perspectives. These teams: (1) form around common and complementary goals for improving the sustainability of food systems to enhance health and well-being; (2) develop integrated research and practice agendas based on family and community needs and goals as well as research priorities; and (3) collaborate in data collection, analysis, interpretation, and application (Gillespie and Gillespie 2006).

CER methodology has matured through multiple university-community collaborations -- some initiated at the University and some by community stakeholders. The proposed chapter will describe communicative exchange and interdisciplinary communication for collaborative engaged research leadership teams. Two projects – one researcher initiated and one community initiated – will serve as examples to illustrate the processes and challenges of facilitating interdisciplinary communication among researchers and community stakeholders.

COLLABORATIVE ENGAGED RESEARCH: COMMUNICATION FOR ADVANCING INTEGRATION AND COLLABORATION

Transmitting information is necessary but insufficient for effective communication among interdisciplinary CER leadership team members and with each of their constituent groups. CER methods cultivate thoughtful decision-making through collaborative engagement in open inquiry, creative reflection, deliberative dialogue and collaborative action. CER integrates practice with research in ways that improve practice while this cyclic process builds and expands the depth and applicability of theory at the same time. CER methodology works for addressing complex issues that
evolve over time and are embedded in global phenomenon such as climate change and for which there are multiple pathways to social change.

Through CER, community stakeholders engage with researchers to cogenerate theory that illuminates their local, dynamic, and evolving family and community systems as well as relevant social and biophysical structures and resource allocations. Thus, everyday life theories and theories of practice inform scientific theory as it is articulated and tested (Gillespie and Brun 1992).

COMMUNICATIVE EXCHANGE IN COLLABORATIVE ENGAGED RESEARCH

We find that examining and articulating presuppositions on which research questions, methodologies, and interpretation of findings are based enhances communication for cross-disciplinary and community-engaged research. The norms and expectations of particular disciplines, organizations, and cultures shape presuppositions which may or may not be recognized as such. Thus, clarifying and articulating presuppositions and considering underlying values, norms, and ways of thinking and knowing leads to greater self-awareness and enhances the depth and meaning of communication. The presuppositions which underlie the asset-based approach of CER are influenced by the Symbolic Interaction tradition (Ulmer and Wilson 2003; Riessman 2009) and include:

1. Humans are inherently good and seek community
2. As members of society, people jointly construct a shared understanding reality” (social constructionism).
3. People actively interact with their environment in making decisions based on their understandings of reality (Agency and Free Will). These decisions have their own inherent logic which may not be easily understood from other perspectives.
4. In addition to adding to the scientific understanding of change, research can and should facilitate social change.
5. There are significant differences between priorities of academic based and community-based CER leadership team members which must be accommodated for effective collaboration.

Dynamics and Challenges of Communicative Exchange with Family and Community Food System Stakeholders and Decision-makers.

Articulation and clarification of the presuppositions and philosophical underpinnings of each member of the CER leadership team provides a common basis for communicating about research goals and priorities and underlying values. We define effective communication as agreed upon decisions resulting from cross-perspective dialogue toward shared meaning and integrating perspectives while valuing individual contributions and differences. It is important that team members agree upon common and complimentary goals and clarify the roles and responsibilities of each member and the disciplines and/or organizations which they represent before investing resources in a collaborative effort. Partnership principles and cross-disciplinary communication strategies will be described (Gillespie, Ganter et al. 2003). Challenges arise not only in
communicating across disciplines, but also with food system stakeholders, program leaders, and public and private food system decision-makers.

**Constructing individual and mutual identities in a collaborative cross disciplinary context**

Collaborative engaged research leadership teams bring together individual identities and in many cases identities of socially defined groups and organizations to create a common identity and at the same time maintain their individual identities. Negotiating this delicate balance is central to collaboration based on compromise instead of competition and/or conflict. Although the stakes and outcomes differ between academic expectations and community realities, there are also advantages to collaboration and sharing resources and expertise.


