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# ***Building Equitable Community-Academic Research Collaborations***

**Learning together through tensions and  
contradictions**

**Naomi Nichols**

**Uzo Anucha**

**Rebecca Houwer**

*York University*

**Matt Wood**

*First Work: The Ontario Association of  
Youth Employment Centres*

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This article describes findings from an evaluation of a multi-sectoral research initiative called *Assets Coming Together for Youth* (ACT for Youth), a community-academic research alliance that brings together multi-disciplinary academics, graduate student research assistants, community stakeholders and youth research interns. Midway through this five-year project, the alliance's Evaluation Working Group undertook a number of reflexive research exercises to better understand how these different partnership group members experienced the collaborative process. Specifically, the research sought to (1) understand people's experiences of the collaborative process; (2) engender reflection among stakeholders; and (3) support the alliance's ongoing efforts to cultivate an equitable participatory process. Research and evaluation activities were carried out by ACT for Youth staff, graduate students and a department of a provincial youth employment association (*Evidence Research and Evaluation*, [www.evidenceconsulting.org](http://www.evidenceconsulting.org)). One of the authors of this article (Houwer) was directly involved in the research activities. The other authors are the university principal investigator (Anucha), the executive director of the provincial employment association (Wood) and a research associate (Nichols). All of the authors participated in the project's Evaluation Working Group.

In this article, we draw primarily on focus group and interview data to address the following question: what are people's perspectives on ACT for Youth's organisational structures, goals, methods and early outcomes? From an evaluative point of view, we assessed whether participants felt they had sufficient opportunity to bring their perspectives or knowledge to bear on project implementation and whether the collaborative process reflected the project's social justice – or equity – standpoint. In addition to assessing the degree to which people felt they were able to give voice to divergent points of view, the research sought to understand social, historical and institutional conditions that enabled and/or restricted an equitable collaborative process. Data reveal three

interrelated themes, which this article explores in detail: we seek to understand how ambivalence, tension and a willingness to learn shape a collaboration's process and outcomes.

## **THE LITERATURE ON COMMUNITY-UNIVERSITY INTERACTIONS**

There is an extensive body of literature on community-academic interactions, including community-based (participatory) research. Community-based and participatory approaches are strategies meant to ensure that research is ethical, attentive to the needs of research subjects and useful outside of academic settings. In a review of the community-based research (CBR) and community-based participatory research (CBPR) literature conducted by the Research Triangle Park (2004), the authors suggest that CB(P)R is distinguished by a collaborative research approach that includes structures for participation by communities, organisations and researchers. CB(P)R frameworks are rooted in principles of social justice and influenced by constructivist and critical theories, and most strive to create useable, action-orientated findings (Israel, Schultz, Parker & Becker 1998).

### **Principles of Productive Community-Academic Collaborations**

Notions of reciprocity and inclusivity are vital to community-academic research partnerships (Campbell & Lassiter 2010; Carlton et al. 2009; Eckerle-Curwood et al. 2011; Flicker & Savan 2006; Israel et al. 1998; Pearce, Pearson & Cameron 2007; Vazquez Jacobus, Baskett & Bechstein 2011). Positive community-academic participatory research interactions recognise and build on the divergent expertise that partners contribute to the collaborative process. Terms like co-researchers, co-development, co-creation and knowledge exchange are used to signal the centrality of the reciprocal partnership in community-university collaborations.

Mutual trust is another pillar of community-based research (Carlton et al. 2009; Israel et al. 1998; Vazquez Jacobus, Baskett & Bechstein 2011; Wright et al. 2011). A collaborative process, based on the principles of reciprocity and inclusivity, builds trust (Carlton et al. 2009). Mutual trust is also fostered through meaningful dialogue and deliberation among stakeholders. The centrality of dialogue in the collaborative process is an indication that community participation is a valued asset in the production of collaborative outcomes (Campbell & Lassiter 2010; Carlton et al. 2009; Israel et al. 1998; Wright et al. 2011).

The other principles of community-based research are emancipation, empowerment and social justice. To actualise a goal of mutual empowerment, community-academic partnerships must demonstrate respect for different modes of knowledge, facilitate capacity building for *all* partners and establish conditions for constructive dialogue (London et al. 2011). When all of these principles are upheld, CB(P)R and other collaborative research approaches have the power to be politically and socially transformative (Flicker & Savan 2006; Freire 1970; Kovach 2005).

### **Graduate Student Involvement in Community-engaged Scholarship**

Institutions of higher education are increasingly being asked to apply their intellectual resources to help solve social issues. However, multiple studies provide evidence that university faculty members typically receive little to no formal preparation for conducting community-engaged scholarship (Austin 2002; Austin & McDaniels 2006; Glass, Doberneck & Schweitzer 2011; Khobzi & Flicker 2010; Moore & Ward 2008; Noy 2009; O’Meara 2008; O’Meara & Jaeger 2006; Reybold 2003; Rice 2002). With respect to community-engaged scholarship, a survey of over 4000 doctoral candidates found that ‘over half of students are very interested in providing service to the community; only 13.8%, however, reported any preparation by their programs for this role’ (Golde & Dore 2001, p. 28). The majority of doctoral students want to contribute to ‘the community’ but do not feel prepared to do this: doctoral training focuses predominantly on the acquisition of research knowledge and skills.

### **Youth Participation in Research**

Youth participation in research is an emerging trend that presents opportunities and challenges (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster 2003; Fine & Torre 2008; Jacquez, Vaughn & Wagner 2013; Khobzi & Flicker 2010; Kirshner 2006; Lerner et al. 2006; McLaughlin 2006; Nygreen 2009; Powers & Tiffany 2006; Smith, Monaghan & Broad 2002). According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, youth have a right to participate in the examination of matters that concern their lives (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster 2003). Not only do youth have the political right to participate in research, but their inclusion is thought to provide a standpoint from which to better understand dominant discourses (Hooks 1990). Marginalised youth, in particular, typically do not easily access institutions of higher learning in a capacity that does not frame their participation as ‘data’ (Sanchez 2009). In traditional research, youth ‘voices’ lack ‘currency unless they are “managed” – coded, analyzed, and quoted by the professionally trained’ (Sanchez 2009, p. 93). Full youth participation in research remains a significant challenge – the genesis of which lies in academic culture, institutional priorities and adult partner preparedness. The ACT for Youth process evaluations offer an opportunity to reflexively engage with the problems and possibilities of youth–adult research collaborations (Suleiman, Soleimanpour & London 2006).

### **Evaluating or Researching Collaboration**

A number of studies focus on researching and/or evaluating community-academic collaborations, themselves. Among these studies, survey, interview and focus group data are used to assess collaborative processes and outcomes. Many of these studies describe an evaluation of the collaborative process (e.g. Carlton et al. 2009; Eckerle-Curwood et al. 2011; Hart & Northmore

2010; Lantz et al. 2001; Wright et al. 2011). Like the studies cited above, our Evaluation Working Group used a number of research and evaluation strategies to generate the data, which this article explores. Data were collected through a survey (a partnership self-assessment tool), focus group discussions with stakeholders and most significant change interviews with youth.

### **THE PROJECT CONTEXT — ASSETS COMING TOGETHER FOR YOUTH RESEARCH PROJECT**

ACT for Youth is a multi-sectoral research alliance that is being carried out in an urban neighbourhood in Ontario, Canada. The Partnership Group of ACT for Youth includes a cross-sectoral alliance of community stakeholders and an interdisciplinary network of scholars, comprising 31 project team members (community members, academic members and graduate students) who are either co-applicants or collaborators on the grant. The project also includes 27 community organisational partners (for example, youth-led, youth-centred, multi-service and faith-based organisations). The School of Social Work was already part of a collaborative within the community that tackled different social issues. The ACT for Youth project began when a new professor (the principal investigator and second author of this paper) joined the school in 2006. Anucha initiated a series of conversations with several community partners to see if they could develop a project that would involve youth.

The development of the project proposal involved several presentations at coalition meetings, over 30 meetings with community organisations (some of the meetings involved youth), numerous emails and community consultations. A half-day community forum with over 50 attendees including 14 youth was held at the end of the proposal development stage to share the core ideas of the project and receive feedback and comments. A consistent group of academic and community stakeholders are co-applicants and collaborators on the research grant that funded the project; however, the work roles of some of these partners have changed over the four years of the project. For example, three academic co-applicants have changed institutions, five community co-applicants and collaborators have changed jobs, and one community partner has retired. Most have remained as co-applicants and collaborators on the project. For some, the project no longer directly addresses issues (or a geographical area) relevant to their current jobs. This means that their collaboration is no longer central to their new roles.

Youth interns were recruited through our community partners who work with youth. Interested youth were invited to submit an application and participate in an interview. This was a paid internship that focused initially on building their research skills to allow them to participate as youth researchers. The project defines youth as young people between 11 and 29 years of age. This expansive definition was suggested by youth themselves when we

solicited their feedback on the proposal before it was submitted for funding. Different research activities within our wide range have targeted different age groups. For example, the internship was open to youth 15 to 29 though most of the youth were under 24.

A positive youth development framework and a social justice perspective inform alliance activities. A positive youth development perspective highlights young people's strengths, rather than their deficiencies. A social justice approach acknowledges the cumulative impacts of structural racism, sexism, poverty, zero-tolerance policies and unemployment on the outcomes youth experience. Combined, these two perspectives guide the project's efforts to create a comprehensive youth development strategy that builds on and develops youth's strengths. In the first three years of the project, participants conducted a series of research and capacity-building initiatives to support this goal.

Research-related working groups undertook (1) survey research to assess youth assets and resources (Youth Survey Working Group); (2) photo-voice projects and a mobile 'speakers corner' research to understand youth experiences and perspectives (Youth Voices Working Group); (3) focus group discussions and in-depth interviews to understand young people's pathways to employment and education (Youth Employment and Education Strategies Working Group); (4) critical media discourse analysis of 148 texts on the community's youth, an interpretative policy analysis of various youth policies and in-depth interviews with journalists, academics and community stakeholders (Reframing Discourse Working Group); and (5) ongoing evaluation of, and reflection on, ACT for Youth processes and outcomes (Evaluation Working Group).

Alongside their involvement in many of these research activities, youth from the community participated in research internship programs, summer community-based research institutes, a youth-led committee and a number of working groups. They analysed data, blogged about research findings, planned and implemented a youth-led conference, participated in partnership group meetings and contributed to a variety of other project-related activities (for example, research and planning meetings). Ultimately, these activities informed the design of a multi-directional mentorship program, which facilitates mentorship 'pods' between middle school and secondary school youth, undergraduate and graduate students, as well as university alumni. Funding has been secured for the mentorship program, and it is currently being implemented in the neighbourhood where alliance activities have taken place.

The mentorship program was developed collaboratively through a series of brainstorming sessions with youth, faculty, graduate students, post-doctoral research associates and community professionals. With support from the post-doctoral research associates, the project's principal investigator secured funding for this initiative through an academic innovation fund

program. These ad hoc brainstorming sessions were fruitful spaces for working collaboratively and learning across difference. Participants reflected on emerging research findings, shared ideas, brought in readings to discuss and worked towards establishing actionable next steps. This complex mentorship project is a major outcome of the research alliance's work to date.

## **METHODS AND DATA**

To facilitate ongoing assessment and reflection on the collaborative process, an Evaluation Working Group composed of academic and non-academic project stakeholders was established. The working group was co-chaired by an academic (Houwer) and a community practitioner (Wood). The discussions focused on assessing people's experiences with the project. The working group was interested in understanding how people became involved in the project; their perspectives on the various research frameworks and instruments that have been used; their perspectives on the project's governance structure; and finally, their assessment of project leadership and the decision-making processes. Focus group discussions were conducted with academic (n=3), community practitioner (n=4), youth (n=7) and graduate research assistants (n=4). A trained peer researcher facilitated the focus group discussions with youth participants. All of the other focus groups were co-facilitated by a senior graduate student and the evaluator from *Evidence Research and Evaluation*. Each of these discussions were digitally recorded and then transcribed.

Most significant change interviews (Dart & Davies 2003) were conducted with four of the 2010–2011 youth researchers who participated in the project through a funded internship. These interviews focused on discovering how young people believed they had been changed by their experiences on the project. Young people were invited to reflect on their experiences with the project, and to articulate how these experiences had led to changes in their lives. These interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. Thirty-five partnership group members (13 community partners, 10 academic partners, 7 graduate research assistants and 5 youth) also completed a partnership self-assessment survey. The survey invited people to reflect on six partnership domains: partnership synergy; leadership effectiveness; partnership efficiency; effectiveness of the partnership's administration and management; sufficiency of non-financial resources; and sufficiency of financial and other capital resources. While the quantitative and qualitative results of the survey are not the central focus of this article, the authors have reviewed these survey data in the context of data generated through focus group and interview discussions, looking for themes that cut across the data sets.

The findings explored in this article are primarily informed by the qualitative focus group and interview data. The first author of this article (Nichols) coded all of these data. Emerging themes and preliminary reflections were discussed with project stakeholders during a research advisory meeting. The research

advisory body (composed of academic researchers, community professionals, graduate research assistants and youth) offered feedback on the preliminary reflections, which shaped subsequent analyses and the production of this article. Analysis and writing were also shaped by ongoing discussions among the authors of this article and between the authors and the other members of the Evaluation Working Group.

We realise that our broad categories – academic, community, graduate student research assistants and youth – do not capture the multifaceted identities people have for themselves. Many people in the ‘community’ category of stakeholders are not residents of the neighbourhood where research and development activities took place – they travel in from their own neighbourhoods each day to work. On the other hand, all of the people categorised as youth and some of those whom we described as graduate research assistants do live in the community. The slipperiness of the terms used to differentiate stakeholders was a source of ongoing discussion in the focus group data. Throughout this article, therefore, we use stakeholder categories with an awareness of their limitations. Because our goal was to explore the collaborative process from the perspectives of people differently oriented to the project, we sought out representation from the project’s official stakeholder groups.

## **FINDINGS**

In this section, we examine participants’ perspectives about the ACT for Youth collaboration – its organisational structure, goals, methods and outcomes. In so doing, we explore how historical, social and institutional relations shape the collaborative process. We focus on articulating a relationship between people’s ambivalence towards the partnership process, tensions between stakeholder groups and the role of multi-directional learning. It is important for a collaborative project to facilitate ongoing opportunities for collaborators to share their expertise and experiences with one another. When people’s different expectations, experiences and knowledge are not adequately acknowledged and incorporated into a project as resources, their commitment and energy dwindle. People need a space to talk, listen and learn throughout both the project’s development *and* its implementation. Our data suggest that uncertainties about the collaborative process can be assuaged by opportunities for learning across difference. When participants’ divergent points of view are seen as project resources, moments of tension can serve a pedagogical function. In turn, opportunities for learning strengthen people’s commitment to the collaborative process and support the development of mutually beneficial project outcomes.

**Historical Relations: Experience, Expectation and Ambivalence**

Political, social and economic conditions, as well as a history of interactions between communities and universities, shape how community-university partnerships unfold (Fisher, Fabricant & Simmons 2005). The focus group data – people’s experiential knowledge of the collaborative process – point to historical relations that shape the ACT for Youth collaboration. From the beginning, some stakeholders were skeptical about the project’s ability to create a strategy to support positive development outcomes for youth in the community: ‘... there is a lot of potential but I also feel concerned about what we are going to do with [the findings]. I don’t want it to be another report that sits on the shelf and doesn’t really have the impact – potential impact that it could’ (Community Professional).

Community practitioners’ uncertainties about the benefits of collaboration reflect historical and existing tensions between this community and the university. The university in question is situated in a highly stigmatised neighbourhood on the northwest edge of a large urban centre. The neighbourhood has an active network of community-based organisations. It also has a reputation for considerable gang activity, poor educational attainment and disenfranchisement amongst some of its youth. At times, this reputation obscures the community’s remarkable resilience and the diverse strengths of the people who work and live there.

Although it is a public institution, the existence of the university in the neighbourhood is not viewed as having resulted in substantial benefits to the surrounding community: ‘One of my fears going in was here we go again. Here is another thing that is going to go and pull the resources out of the community and then [the academics] go running for the hills’ (Community Professional). On multiple occasions, people referenced past experiences with the university that depleted community resources and created few positive changes in the community. One of the graduate student collaborators on this project suggested that people who live in the neighbourhood surrounding the university are

*really tired around being researched. There is a real fatigue around it and people are really anxious for ... ‘what are we going to get from this? What are we going to do now?’ And I don’t think always a university or the academic partners are on the same kind of time frame as community organizations, and so trying to navigate who needs what at what point – I see that as being a challenge.*

This student names a concern that was echoed by others in the graduate research assistants’ student focus group, the youth focus group and the community professionals focus group: historically, the link between research and action has not been apparent to non-academic participants in collaborative research projects.

In the above passage, the student questions whether it is an issue of contrasting timelines. People in community organisations are looking for timely returns on their investment in research. While academic participants *also* want to see useable outcomes generated from collaborative research, they are not working in frontline positions where useable outcomes could find immediate traction. People in different stakeholder groups experience the urgency around action differently.

Granting sufficient visibility to the research-to-action process and ensuring that a project generates timely outcomes for a diversity of stakeholder groups is a challenge for community academic research collaborations. Our data suggest that simply giving voice to people's prior experiences and divergent points of view is not sufficient. Academic collaborators clearly heard people's desires for reciprocity *and* their apprehensions about the project's ability to generate meaningful impacts in the community:

*I remember a strong message ... that if people had the sense that this was yet another research project that was not going to really benefit the community – it was going to draw resources out of the community but not really benefit the community – and that people would be again the objects of the gaze of the academics, that people would just bail quickly (Academic Professional).*

In the absence of a suitable process for acting on these concerns, tensions between stakeholder groups and ambivalence towards the project failed to serve a pedagogical purpose. An equitable collaborative process requires mechanisms or structures through which people's diverse experiences, knowledge and expectations can be mobilised for mutual benefit as a project evolves. Otherwise, as our data indicate, historical tensions settle into the background of a project, periodically surfacing to shape interactions between various stakeholders.

### **Social and Institutional Relations: Academic Grant-seeking, Accountability and Issues of 'Voice'**

People need an opportunity to voice their divergent expectations/ ideas, as well as their prior experiences with community-university partnerships in the process of developing *and* implementing a collaborative research and social change agenda. In the ACT for Youth initiative, project implementation has not been experienced as adequately attentive to this need. As the project progressed, some youth struggled to give voice to their ideas: 'they were planning on reframing the research process, and I didn't really feel like I had a voice in that. So all we really had to work with was the framework that they had already established' (Youth Participant). This tension between established (that is, articulated in the project proposal) and emergent research activities influenced young people's sense that the project was being 'steered by academics' and shaped whether they felt they could contribute to ongoing planning.

Academic grant-seeking requires that a research agenda is established before funding is allocated, and granting governance

and accountability work requires that one deliver the outcomes that were laid out in the proposal. Project leads – particularly the principal investigator – are accountable to the timelines and deliverables specified in the proposal: ‘there is a framework that comes with any funding source. Here is your money and you have to hit these benchmarks by these timelines, and meet those expectations. So to also honour the desire to be as flexible and responsive in the process as your colleagues demand is a challenge’ (Community Professional). In the case of ACT for Youth, the project proposal was produced through a number of collaborative exercises, involving academics, community practitioners and youth; however, the youth who participated in the proposal were not the same youth who were involved once project funding had been secured. While there were aspects of the project process that young people were invited to steer (for example, a youth-led committee), other aspects of the project (for example, much of the research) needed to reflect what had been written in the original proposal. The proposal put the responsibility for the generation of a positive youth strategy in the adult court but with feedback from youth.

In much the same way, the community practitioners who entered the discussion during the project implementation phase – that is, after funds were secured – expressed their struggles to contribute substantively to the collaborative process. One community professional suggested that non-academic partners interpreted the process as ‘really academic’, which made it challenging for people to carve out roles for themselves: ‘It doesn’t really feel clear what we are trying to do. I don’t know how we would contribute. I feel like it would be difficult for a lot of people, not just youth, to really feel effective in contributing to designing the process.’

It is significant that two years into the project people are still grappling with the project’s aims, and how to effectively contribute to ‘designing the process’. While the project has a clearly articulated theoretical framework and an explicit set of research objectives, this information is not necessarily illuminating or relevant for people who work outside of academic institutions. The articulation of a project’s theoretical framework and central research questions are, however, essential to the successful navigation of research grant-seeking processes. The process of applying for the federally funded community-university alliance grant that supports the ACT for Youth project requires people to conceive of the project in the terms laid out in the proposal submission process. Once this frame is in place, it continues to shape the process moving forward.

On multiple occasions people explained that tensions between academic and non-academic stakeholders resulted from the different expectations people brought to ‘the table’. There is a general sense that people who work in academic settings have a different ‘understanding of what should be happening’ than people who work in community settings; but focus group participants

never actually name the different expectations that make it difficult to collaborate effectively. The data suggest that people have not had sufficient opportunity to discuss their divergent expectations throughout the life cycle of the project. People remain uncertain about one another's expectations and whether those expectations are being met.

Because this lack of ongoing transparency is combined with an overtly academic project frame, people who work in community organisations – much like youth – have not experienced equitable participation in the collaborative process. Upon reflection, a graduate student observes that she has not had an opportunity to work with the community professionals involved in her working group: 'maybe our community members are not participating at this point ... when I was talking earlier about working and setting things up via email, I was saying I was working with academics ... It was supposed to be our entire working group ... but we didn't have a community voice on it' (Graduate Student). A community professional explained that it can feel like one is 'down here because I don't have the knowledge'. Instead of viewing people's divergent knowledge, skills and professional foci as resources, there is a sense among community, youth and post-secondary student participants that academic 'voices' or perspectives have dominated the collaborative process.

When people did have a chance to bring their divergent knowledge and expertise to bear on project development and implementation, deliberation and conflict ensued. In all but the youth focus group, people discussed a particularly tense conversation about a proposed survey instrument. Some people cited the discussion about the survey instrument as an important moment where non-academic participants in the project gave voice to their concerns about the appropriateness of the survey tool for the community and the project's aims. The discussion was upheld as a pivotal moment across focus groups because the division of participants into academic and non-academic 'camps' was acknowledged, and ultimately people engaged in a productive dialogue across a divide which had always been felt, if not overtly named:

*what started to develop, if I remember correctly, was academics defending the tool and community members critiquing the tool. And then we moved to a space where there was some engaged dialogue about it ... people have to cross the floor. Some academics have to begin to align themselves with community so that they enter that space and are able to say they understand what the critiques are, and say 'those are valid critiques' ... a kind of an openness to the perspective and viewpoints of others so that you can sort of hear and understand each other (Academic Professional).*

While a difference in viewpoints is initially experienced as confrontational, the group is ultimately able to listen to what one another have to say and engage in dialogue. Across focus group discussions with community professionals, post-secondary

students and academics, the discussion of the survey instrument was remembered as an instance when people encountered another perspective and were open to learning from the encounter. Opportunities for deliberation and debate may be difficult, but ultimately they contribute to a deepened understanding of people's evolving expectations of the partnership process and outcomes. They are also opportunities for learning.

### **The Centrality of Learning**

Although no discussion questions addressed learning directly, in all of the focus group discussions people talked about or offered evidence of learning, knowledge creation and/or knowledge exchange. In some instances (particularly the discussions and interviews with youth), conversations settled on missed opportunities for learning. An exploration of these data – evidence of learning and not learning – allow us to explore the role that pedagogy might play in the development of equitable and productive collaborative processes, as well as the importance of learning as a collaborative outcome.

One of the participants in the post-secondary student discussion observed that opportunities to create knowledge positions people to see and understand the relationship between power and knowledge more clearly: 'up until high school or even the early years of university, you are mostly just reading knowledge and regurgitating back [what you've read]. Whereas research is more – you're involved in the process of creating it [knowledge] ... a lot of power is held in information and so you got to know how information is spread and created' (Graduate Student). Another graduate student remarked on the importance of 'hearing from all these different people'. She had never considered that her (quantitative) way of researching and/or looking at the world would not be appropriate for some research questions and for some research populations. An opportunity to learn and work across disciplinary and professional difference opened her eyes to the limits of a singular disciplinary or methodological frame.

Non-academic professionals also highlighted the importance of learning through dialogue and participation in the working group meetings. These meetings offered a space to: 'think out loud and think in ways that are not traditional about how we are either going to continue the research or apply the research' (Community Professional).

The most vivid learning outcomes are evident in young people's descriptions of *their* involvement in this project. Young people participated in the project as members of a Youth Voices Working Group, members and co-chairs of a youth-led committee, participants in a summer community-based research institute, participants in other project working groups and as research interns. Young people were clear that they learned much from opportunities to interact with people who work and study at the university. For many, this was the first time they had been on the university campus. Ongoing opportunities to engage with

graduate students were cited as particularly transformative for youth. The graduate students were perceived to be more accessible than the faculty members, and so the youth engaged with them in frank discussions about academic life, travel, and the research they were doing together. In the end, many youth discovered that the people who work and learn at the university are not 'like a different species or something. It's just that I've never thought that I would be talking to, you know, you [the researcher], or like other people, like Ph.D. students, like – on like – a conversation level' (Youth Participant).

The young people explained that the collaborative process provided them with opportunities to think analytically, to receive mentorship from graduate students, and to apply their learning in the context of ACT for Youth's collaborative research and social change agenda. In so doing, they explain that they have learned more about their community and how to understand it from a critical research perspective. As much as they have learned about research or the community, young people also described having greater self-awareness as a result of their participation in the ACT for Youth project. They described a learning process where youth are agents, actively carving out opportunities for knowledge creation (Cammarota & Fine 2008; Kirshner 2006).

The project also provided ongoing capacity-building activities (for example, the summer community-based research institute) as well as multiple opportunities for youth to contribute to working group and research meetings. More than other participants in this project, young people described openly engaging in, and benefiting from, opportunities to learn. That said, youth were also quick to point out places where opportunities for learning were missed. Some young people explained that they did not feel sufficiently prepared to take on roles as youth researchers for this project: 'this is our first time doing research and there should have been someone to at least mentor us or assist us throughout this entire time – oversee our work. That didn't happen' (Youth Participant). While young people wanted – and benefited from – a chance to make knowledge as they actively brought their own ideas and goals to bear on the research process, they also wanted to receive ongoing mentorship and support from the adult participants on this project (Camino 2005; Kirshner 2006).

Young people wanted a chance to learn from the 'big-wigs' who attended the initial project meeting, but had not been *visibly* involved since then. They clearly articulated that the responsibility for reaching out should be shouldered by the adult participants of the study. They wanted to learn and receive mentorship from '*all the people at the table*', but they also wanted flexibility and a chance to drive certain aspects of the project themselves (Cahill 2007; Hadfield & Haw 2007; Jacquez, Vaughn & Wagner 2013). Access to opportunities to develop the collaborative skills and relationships that will aid us in addressing complex sociopolitical problems

are crucial for young people *and* adult members of community-university research partnerships (Suleiman, Soleimanpour & London 2006).

The data from our reflexive analysis indicate that the adult participants of the study share young people's desires for reciprocity, flexibility and meaningful involvement. Perhaps more to the point, adult participants' uncertainties about the collaborative process and its ability to generate mutually beneficial project outcomes mirror young people's ambivalence about the research and community development process. We use the term ambivalence here to bring attention to people's continued uncertainty about the equitable nature of the collaborative process. For instance, people clearly expressed reservations about the project's ability to generate timely and meaningful changes in the community. Data also indicate a perception that expressions of concern or disappointment fall on 'deaf ears' or fail to influence an existing project framework. Because the data illuminate instances of learning and shared reflection as positive project outcomes, we suggest that expressions of uncertainty – and even tension – might be productively framed as sources for learning and dialogue across stakeholder groups throughout the life cycle of a collaborative project.

## **DISCUSSION**

In our discussion we articulate a productive relationship between 'voice', ambivalence and multi-directional learning. Our data suggest that the ACT for Youth project would benefit from more opportunities for face-to-face communication, learning and knowledge exchange. Productive collaborations require ongoing attention to, and deliberation about, the collaborative process, people's roles and accountabilities (in the project and elsewhere), project governance and the generation of project outcomes. A process that is iterative, dialogic, reflexive (that is, continually evolving) and explicitly pedagogic will sustain interactivity among collaborators; such a process would celebrate ambivalence, uncertainty and inquiry as the heart of its emergent and responsive model.

For example, a productive project process would enable ongoing and transparent conversations about the various – and sometimes conflicting – institutional relations shaping people's involvement. People are juggling multiple institutional demands on their time, which reduces the amount of time they can dedicate to a project. In academic settings, people's participation in a project like this represents one aspect of a complex professional portfolio: many people also have other research projects they are conducting as well as their ongoing contributions to teaching and service. Tenure and promotion processes – which must be engaged in if a person is to keep her/his job as a university professor – continue to privilege the production of peer-reviewed publications over reports or other research outcomes that might be accessible

and of interest to people outside of academic institutions. While academic participants in this study acknowledge young people's requests for more support and face-to-face engagement, they remain unclear how to meet this request given the demands of their employment.

People are navigating similar accountability relations in community agencies that rely heavily on governmental and charitable funding. How they proceed to do their work is clearly shaped by the ways in which the work will be evaluated (Nichols 2008). Funding relations (for example, chronic under-funding and ongoing grant-seeking), agency mandates and strategic plans all shape what and how community work happens, and whether or not this project becomes a 'front burner item' for an executive director. Whether people are working in community agencies or university research institutes, they are required to organise their work such that it can be held accountable to the funding timelines, priorities, deliverables, etc. that have been articulated for them.

Bringing visibility to the divergent institutional contexts shaping people's involvement in, and expectations for, a project supports the generation of mutually beneficial project outcomes. Across focus group conversations, people suggested that the ACT for Youth project required a more effective communication structure. Communication within and between working groups often fell apart, and many people reported uncertainty about the project's overall progress to date: 'There are so many moving parts and so many players. I think it's extraordinarily complicated. I think the in-person meetings are important, but I think those are often difficult to arrange – to get people there' (Academic Professional). On one level, the project's 'communication problems' reflect the challenges of coordinating a complex project, composed of many 'moving parts'. But the 'communication problems' also signal inter-systemic breaks, which are shaped by differences in professional and experiential knowledge, expectations and communication patterns, as well as divergent institutional governance frameworks. People are navigating multiple institutional demands that can interfere with or detract from the time and energy that is required to sustain purposeful inter-institutional relationships.

Day to day, people's work is constrained by obligations to funders and an imperative to work within the dominant ideological frameworks within which their professional performance will be judged. Across community and university settings, people are working within institutional reporting, fund-management and performance-evaluation frameworks that have individualising effects. The divergent perspectives and expectations that people bring to a collaborative research project are shaped by social and institutional relations, which draw individual people (and individual projects) into extended relations of governance. In combination – and particularly when they lack mutual visibility

– these coordinative relations make it challenging to maximise opportunities for reciprocal engagement and mutual learning. But they do not undermine the potential entirely.

One way to facilitate ongoing reflexivity and flexibility among collaborators is to acknowledge this need and work to collectively navigate moments of tension or hesitation – whether these are shaped by people’s various accountabilities or not (Dumlao & Janke 2012; McCormack, Buck & McGraw 2012, 2013). McCormack et al. (2012) suggest that embracing tension or differences between collaborators can itself be a source of learning. Opportunities to view a situation from another person’s position are opportunities for thinking differently.

But merely bringing these differences into visibility for one another will not necessarily lead to learning. As we indicated in our findings section, collaborators also require a mechanism for productively and equitably facilitating learning as the outcome of sharing divergent viewpoints. Dumlao and Janke (2012) suggest that relational dialectics is a framework that can be used to address the tensions that result from stakeholders’ diverse professional accountabilities, cultural norms and expectations. As described by Dumlao and Janke (p. 154), the concept of dialectal tensions resonates with our own use of the term ambivalence, to describe tensions that reflect ‘both/and nature of different perspectives rather than either/or thinking’. The concept emphasises ‘the complexity of relationships’ and the ‘multiple systems of meaning held by the people involved in a partnership’ (p. 154).

As a practical tool to stimulate learning within a partnership, a relational dialectics approach invites collaborators to adopt a learning stance, such that they become open to learning from evolving tensions and relationships throughout the collaborative life cycle. The key is to focus on using opportunities for dialectical learning to make decisions or agree on next steps – that is, to see the conversations as key to generating some form of collective response.

## **CONCLUSION**

ACT for Youth is a complex multi-sectoral research alliance. The collaboration spans generational, disciplinary, professional and institutional boundaries. It also spans considerable temporal and geographic distance. This complexity is a common feature of community-academic research alliances. The project is designed to mirror the complexity of the problem it intends to resolve. The collaborative framework is meant to facilitate interdisciplinary, interprofessional, interinstitutional, and in the case of ACT for Youth, intergenerational problem-solving.

To some extent, the ACT for Youth project has achieved this objective. The project has used photo-voice, in-depth interviewing and large-scale survey data to understand young people’s strengths, the resources available to them, and their experiences in

school and community. The project has implemented community-based research institutes for youth, a youth-led conference, and a multi-generational mentorship program involving local youth, the university, and university alumni. The combination of research and development initiatives is shaping the alliance's articulation of a strengths-based youth development framework for 'marginalized' urban communities. These various outcomes are a direct result of collaborative activities. But project complexity also comes with organisational challenges. It has been difficult to maintain people's enthusiasm about, and dedication to, the ACT for Youth project throughout all project phases. A collaborative project requires ongoing opportunities for people to engage in joint planning and problem-solving. It requires considerable coordination and planning to enable opportunities for mutual learning and engagement, as well as the flow of collaborators on and off a project over the course of its life cycle. At the same time, the project needs to be flexible enough to respond to collaborators' evolving contributions and objectives, while also demonstrating fidelity to a funded project proposal.

Throughout the collaborative process, people need opportunities to come together to discuss and reflect on governance relations, share experiences and knowledge, re-evaluate project objectives, celebrate project milestones and collectively move the project forward. This article proposes that expressions of ambivalence and tension throughout the life cycle of a project indicate areas that require continued dialogue and learning across stakeholder groups. Dumlao and Janke's (2012) relational dialectics is one potential framework for structuring the type of multi-directional learning opportunity we recommend.

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