ACTION-RESEARCH

# Community-Engaged Teaching: Lessons from a Participatory History Project

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How can we create opportunities for students to gain experience in community-engaged scholarship that truly benefits the community given the constraints of the academic calendar, students' varied capacity to develop reciprocal and responsive community relationships, and the tendency for community-engaged research to instrumentalize community partners in service to academic deliverables? This paper explores one attempt to meet this challenge: an experimental graduate course in community development that linked course content to a participatory history project. Designed as a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) study, instructors studied the instructional process as well as outcomes for students and community partners. We find that the project—while not without difficulty— provided a valuable opportunity to develop skills and relationships while contributing to a project that both students and partners found meaningful and relevant. The paper explores the experiences for students and community partners, as well as key course design elements, and considers implications for other community-engaged courses.

**Keywords:** Community-engaged teaching; Public history; Scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL); Participatory action research; Course design

## Introduction

The professionalization of many fields (including education, social work, community psychology, and urban planning) overwhelmingly prepares students to work in service to, rather than in partnership with, or following the leadership of, local communities. As a result, "professionals" often ignore the expertise of everyday people in everyday places. Reflecting on the legacy of research conducted in indigenous communities, Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith concludes, "It told us things already known, suggested things that would not work, and made careers for people who already had jobs" (1999, p. 3). Furthermore, such 'disengaged' scholarship often views communities through a damage-centered lens (Tuck, 2009), representing places exclusively through accounts of gaps, deficits and needs. In response to these concerns, there are increasing calls for community engaged scholarship.

Community engaged scholars leverage their resources in partnership with community members to explore issues of mutual concern and create products/change efforts that are meaningful and relevant to the community. Authentic engagement of resident experts in conducting inquiry and action reflects a desire-based framework (Tuck, 2009) that values community members' knowledge, hopes, and agency to effect change. Importantly, calls for community-engaged scholarship have arisen from multiple perspectives: from residents demanding to represent their own experiences and shape change efforts in their own communities, from scholars committed to democratic and ethical knowledge production and practice, and from students feeling an urgency to not only learn about social problems but also work to alleviate/transform them.

Yet, students are rarely exposed to methods of participatory research and action, and opportunities to practice applying these approaches are even more scarce (Warren, Park & Tieken, 2016). Warren, Park, and Tieken contend that "limited attention has been paid to how to prepare and socialize graduate students for a role as public scholars" (2016, p. 251), concluding that we need "sustained, collective spaces where students can cultivate the skills and dispositions of engaged researchers" (2016, p. 255), and we would add, practitioners. There are a number of challenges to creating such spaces, including the constraints of

the academic calendar, and ensuring that students have the requisite skills and appropriate supervision to engage ethically in the community work. Even with the best intentions, community-engaged projects can easily instrumentalize community partners in service to academic deliverables, and often fall short of producing actual benefits for the community. How can we meaningfully integrate community-engaged scholarship into graduate training programs? This paper traces one attempt to meet these challenges with a graduate course in Vanderbilt University's Community Development and Action master's degree program.

## Context and Methods

Nashville—lauded an "It City" by the *New York Times* (Severson, 2013)—is an apt place to study community development. A recent report by the Brookings Institution (2016) found that while Nashville ranks 5th out of 100 in measures of growth (based on changes in the number of jobs, the value of gross metropolitan product and aggregate wages), the city ranked 73rd in measures of inclusion (based on changes in median wage, the number of people in poverty, and percent unemployment). The growing economic disparities deepen existing racial disparities: black and latino residents are twice as likely to live below the poverty level as their white counterparts (Metropolitan Social Services, 2016). It was in large part this discrepancy between the boomtown rhetoric and the reality of struggle for many residents that motivated a team of Nashville faculty and students to launch *A People's Guide to Nashville* (Thurber, Williams & Fraser, forthcoming).

Part of an edited book series, *A People's Guide to Nashville* is an alternative tour guide to the city that focuses on sites significant to struggles for social justice. The editorial team set three broad criteria for entries, seeking sites that challenge missing or inaccurate information; sites that reveal privilege or dominance; and/or sites that celebrate cultural resistance, resilience and creativity. In addition to countering dominant narratives through the content of the book, the project also sought to upend notions of who is a legitimate author of place-stories. The project is epistemologically rooted in the commitments of critical participatory action research (Torre, Fine, Stoudt, & Fox, 2012), which reorients views of expertise and emphasizes the importance of collaborative knowledge production. Given that stories carry legacies of sedimented ways of knowing, as well as imaginative possibilities for knowing differently, the project emphasized the importance of community members authoring their own counter-narratives of place (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2017).

The culminating manuscript, to be released in 2019, includes 100 entries and will be accompanied by an interactive website with a platform for additional online submissions. To produce the text, the editors engaged nearly 200 community members in researching, writing, and contributing entries about their own communities. In addition, the editors encouraged faculty at area colleges to incorporate the project into their classes, with the understanding that students must work in partnership with community partners to develop entries for submission.

In the fall of 2015, the director of Vanderbilt University's master's degree program in Community Development and Action decided to incorporate *A People's Guide to Nashville* into HOD 6100: Professional Seminar. Required in the first semester for all graduate students (approximately 20 students annually), this course provides an introduction to the broad field of community development. Integrating theories, methods, and applied practice experience, the course goals are 1) to help students develop their identities as community development professionals, and 2) to introduce students to practice skills they would likely use while working in and with communities. By connecting student assignments with *A People's Guide to Nashville*, instructors hoped to provide an enhanced learning environment for students to apply course content and to develop their capacities as community-engaged practitioners.

*A People's Guide to Nashville* solicited entries for the print guide for two years, during which two cohorts of students participated in the project. The third year, students completed a modified version of the project preparing entries to be published online. The authors were intimately involved in the project. Amie Thurber is a co-editor of *A People's Guide to Nashville* and Sarah Suiter is the Community Development and Action Program Director; the authors co-taught the course for two years during the life of the project.

The department in which this course was taught has a long history of supporting and valuing experiential, community-engaged learning at the undergraduate, professional, and graduate student levels. Additionally, the authors' department provided support in allowing a relatively small course (15–20 master's degree students/semester) to be led by two instructors for two of the three years of the project. These long-standing commitments and resources provided a fertile environment out of which for this project to grow.

### Course Design

Through a highly scaffolded, classroom-supported project, the course required students to build partnerships with community members, and working together over a semester, to collaboratively research and write submissions for the guide. Examples of entries developed include the following sites: a bridge crossing along the Trail of Tears, co-authored by an indigenous historian; the former state penitentiary, co-authored by a former inmate; and the site of immigrant rights protests, co-authored by youth organizers (for samples,

see Supplemental File 1). Course materials, instruction, activities and assignments were designed to support students in developing the theoretical orientations, research competence and practice skills needed to complete the project (for syllabus, see Supplemental File 2).

Within the first weeks of the semester, students identified general areas of interest they hoped to explore through the assignment, such as immigrant rights, labor history, or gender justice. Once identified, they completed a reflexive practice assignment which challenged them to answer the questions such as: *Why you and why this topic? What do you already know about this topic? What don't you know? What skills/strengths/resources do you already have that you can bring to this project? What skills/strengths/resources will you need to develop?* The intention of this assignment was to foster greater self-awareness of student's motivations, assumptions, and desires, and to develop the practice skill of articulating these to others.

In the first month, course readings and activities were designed to help students develop a Just Practice framework (Finn, 2016), which encouraged them to consider their area of interest through the lenses of history, context, meaning, power, and possibility. Given the importance of place to the guide, other readings helped students to develop a critical analysis of how places are raced/classed over time (Neely and Samura, 2011). Engaging with Eve Tuck's compelling essay, "Suspending Damage" (2009) students considered what it might mean to conduct research to document community desires, rather than the ways people and places have been damaged. Further, the course introduced students to a number of place-based research methodologies, including working with census and archival data.

Students were encouraged to get to know the community they hoped to work with prior to initiating conversation about *A People's Guide to Nashville*. Instructors provided a tip-sheet for building partnerships, which included suggestions on the type of initial background research students might conduct, and scripted prompts for how they might introduce the project to prospective partners (see Supplemental File 3). Instructors coached students to invite community members to be part of a community project—rather than a course assignment—and to offer themselves as assistants, helpers, scribes, or co-authors. To encourage students to teach and learn from one another, each week in class, two students shared a five-minute reflection on their process of researching, finding/working with a community partner, and/or drafting their entry.

Given the 500-word limit for each entry, the final product was relatively brief. While there was an expectation that this product be well researched and well crafted, the emphasis of the assignment was on *process*. Students were required to work independently to build relationships; gather preliminary information through walking tours, one-on-one visits, attending community gatherings/events/meetings, and archival research; and to collaborate with their partner on the writing and revision process. In some cases the community member took the lead in writing, and students contributed background research and editing. In other cases, the reverse occurred. Other pairs actively co-authored, using google-docs as a shared workspace to write and revise. Each team determined appropriate authorship based on their process.

## Methods

Concurrent to leading the course, instructors studied the instructional process as well as outcomes for students and community partners. This research was designed as a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) study. Felten (2013) suggests the following guiding principles for SoTL studies: that they are focused on student learning, theoretically and contextually grounded, methodologically sound, engage students as collaborators, and finally that findings are appropriately disseminated. Given that this SoTL project focused on a community-engaged project, we broadened our application of these principles to also account for community members experiences.

In total, 54 students participated in the course over three terms (for student demographics, see **Table 1**). To understand course outcomes for students, instructors collected data through normal educational practices, including written and oral student reflections completed in class, completed assignments, and course evaluations.

**Table 1:** Student Demographics.

| Cohort Year | # of students | Women | Men | White | Person of color | From Nashville |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2015 | 19 | 15 | 3 | 11 | 8 | 2 |
| 2016 | 20 | 16 | 4 | 18 | 2 | 5 |
| 2017 | 15 | 12 | 3 | 11 | 4 | 5 |
| Total | 54 | 43 | 10 | 40 | 14 | 12 |
| % | 100% | 80% | 19% | 74% | 26% | 22% |

Forty-two community partners worked with students to complete entries that were submitted to the book or online platform. Partners included community and faith leaders, community and labor organizers, as well as people connected to local businesses and community organizations. To explore outcomes for community partners, co-instructors gathered narratives from students regarding their partnership, conducted an online survey of community partners, and gathered additional feedback through voluntary, confidential, semi-structured interviews. At the time of the survey, instructors had working email addresses for 20 partners, all of whom received an invitation to complete the online survey. Eight (40%) partners responded to the survey, and the authors conducted follow-up interviews with six people who agreed to provide additional feedback about their experience working with students. After data collection was complete, the authors completed thematic analysis of all data. In order to understand how students and community partners experienced the project, authors coded data with attention to outcomes (i.e. what were the perceived benefits and challenges of participating?), and process (i.e. what were the design elements of the course that enhanced and impeded positive outcomes?).

## Findings

As explored below, we found that participation in the project was overwhelmingly beneficial to students and to those community partners from whom we received feedback. Overall, students appreciated "tying class concepts to real-world experience" and "being able to be out in the community obtaining knowledge from others as opposed to always traditional forms of lectures and articles." Students valued contributing to a project that would eventually materialize as a published book and website, and many reported the project as among the most rewarding parts of their graduate coursework. Community partners also appreciated the facilitated opportunity to counter dominant and often deficit-based narratives about their communities. Most also found the opportunity to build relationships with students personally rewarding.

Although students and community partners generally found the project to be meaningful, it was not without challenges. In the pages that follow, we explore the experiences for students and community partners, including the difficulties encountered along the way. Given the focus of this paper—to explore a model of integrating community-engaged scholarship into graduate training—our interest is less on why outcomes occurred and more on the conditions that fostered such outcomes. As such, we outline the course design elements that contributed to successful student-community engagement, as well as features that could be improved.

### Student Outcomes

Analyzing student written reflections and course evaluations, we find that participating in the course: 1) strengthened student's place attachments and social ties, and 2) developed student's foundation for community-engaged practice.

***Strengthened place attachments and social ties.*** When asked what the most rewarding part of the project was, 56% of students noted the opportunity to learn more about the place they lived. This place learning took on particular significance for students whose social identities are often marginalized. Joseph, a child of immigrants from the Philippines, shared this reflection in class:

> I had a lot of ideas when I heard about the project, but as I learned more…I felt there were two questions that I had to answer: What is Nashville to me? What am I to Nashville?…So, with this mindset of being part of Nashville's Asian community, I decided to learn more about it."

He went on to explore three sites significant to Asian immigrants. Similarly, Hannah, also new to Nashville, shared:

> As a queer woman in a very new place learning more about the queer community where I live is important to me. To understand more about the context in which I am living makes me feel safer and more at home. I also believe it makes me a more involved and aware community member, bettering not only my personal experience in this community but my ability to contribute….

As evidenced in these student reflections, feeling connected to place is often correlated to well-being and civic engagement (Mihaylov & Perkins, 2014). Indeed, in end of year reflections from the first two years of the course, approximately half of students intended to continue collaboration with their community partner. By creating an opportunity for students to intentionally explore the place they lived, the project fostered meaningful place attachments and a sense of belonging.

**Developed a foundation for community engaged practice.** All but one student identified specific ways they developed as a community development practitioner through the project. In particular, students described developing a practice epistemology, a practitioner identity, and practice skills.

*A practice epistemology.* Participating in the project helped students recognize the already-existing expertise within the people and places they hope to serve. As one student offered, "[the class] taught me to approach communities not with the mindset of a knower or academic but rather as someone willing to let community members take the lead on the research and story to be told." Sarah, a white woman who formerly taught in a school with a significant Spanish-speaking population, was interested in learning more about the Latino community in Nashville. She reached out to a local women's organizing group, where she was confronted by her internalized view of professionals as experts. As she reflects:

> …their process of self-organization was fascinating. As the only Spanish-speaking teacher at the school where I taught, I was used to being the knower, but at these meetings I got to see these women as powerful knowers…I have learned so much about what community work can and should look like and how to value community members as knowers. Going forward, I will be a completely different (and better) practitioner….

Sarah and her collaborators went on to collaboratively develop two entries for the book.

In addition to helping students recognize the wisdom of the people with whom they work, the project helped students recognizes the importance of place. As Joseph reflected several years after participating in the course:

> Before Proseminar, I took physical space for granted…The experience also helped me focus my own thesis research. I think without it, I would have looked at community engagement in schools in a more general way, but a focus on place made me hone in on the community-school model and how schools function as community places.

Through engaging with community partners to study the significance of particular places, students developed a practice epistemology that values knowledge grounded in particular people and places and amplifies community self-determination.

*A reflective professional identity.* In addition to changing the way students think about their practice, participating in the project shifted the way many students understand themselves as practitioners. For example, one student noted that in-class reflective activities helped her understand how "personal biases could/do manifest themselves while working with communities." Another student grappled with her privilege as a white woman as she researched sites related to the Ku Klux Klan. Through her research into the rise of the Klan—which was founded in Tennessee and held its first national convention at the Maxwell House Hotel in downtown Nashville—Lauren was struck by the continued activity of white supremacists in the state and considered submitting the entry she was writing about the hotel anonymously. After reflecting deeply on potential ramifications for herself and for racial justice, she wrote, "I don't want to be someone that clings to a sense of control, comfort, or safety at others' expense," and ultimately chose to attach her name to the entry.

*Practice skills.* Finally, many students identified concrete practice skills they developed over the course of the project. Most common were gains related to relationship building and communication skills. Students described a range of ways they worked to build connections with community partners, including cold-calling, attending religious services, participating in community organizing meetings, or showing up at actions. One student attended weekly community meetings for a month before broaching the subject of the *People's Guide* and went on to have one of the most successful and lasting partnerships. Importantly, students learned that the relationship building work foundational to community development requires a long-term investment and a willingness to make oneself vulnerable.

In addition to the interpersonal competencies gained, a number of students highlighted the research skills they developed through the project, particularly learning how to conduct archival research. As reflected in one student's appreciation of "utilizing history as a means of creating change," they valued developing tools of place-based inquiry and understanding the role of counter narrative as a social change strategy.

Taken together, the gains in place-attachments, social ties, and the foundation for community-engaged practice infused students with sense of hope, agency, and possibility for their future practice. Student gains were summarized by one student, "I went from having no idea how to move through the world as a future practitioner with no experience, to having a clear picture."

### Challenges for Students

Although most students found the project rewarding and valuable, it was not without difficulty. As noted above, over the course of the project many students developed a practice epistemology that recognized the wisdom embedded within communities. However, that orientation developed over time. At the start of each semester, instructors found that students were much more familiar with service provision than social movements, and much more comfortable partnering with professionals than grassroots community leaders. Instructors had to provide more coaching than anticipated regarding the types of partners students might consider.

The process of building community partnerships—while the most rewarding aspect of the project for many—was also the most challenging, noted by nearly 70% of students. While the majority of students ultimately made strong community connections, not all did. In some cases, this was the result of student procrastination, often exacerbated by feelings of discomfort in making initial connections. Yet even when students were confident and persistent in their outreach, some still faced difficulties in discerning the appropriate modality of contact (i.e. when to email, when to call, when to get an introduction, when to show up), or how to proceed with busy or unresponsive community members. One student shared that a prospective partner—an elder who had been active in the Civil Rights Movement—had expressed concerns of exploitation, noting that he had been interviewed many times before to benefit someone else's work. Though the student clarified this was an opportunity for the community member to author his own story, he stopped returning her calls.

Ultimately, several students noted that the challenge provided important learning experiences despite being somewhat frustrating. Considering his difficulty making contact with a community activist, John noted:

> … the time frame on which she and I are working is drastically different and as such has affected the timeline of our relationship. However, it's been informational as a reminder that changes in the community don't usually happen in a matter of weeks or even months.

Importantly, instructors made clear that the project would be graded based on student's process rather than their results. Though framed as an assignment, the goal was for students to experience the work needed to build collaborative partnerships, not to instrumentalize community engagement in order to complete an assignment. Those students who were unable to form productive community partnerships over the course of the project were still expected to conduct research and produce draft entries for the *People's Guide*, with the understanding that they could elect to submit these entries to the editors at a later date if a community partnership developed.

### Outcomes for Community Partners

For the most part, community partners sole engagement in the project was through their student partner. As instructors, we heard much *about* students' partners (or lack thereof) over the course of the project, yet we did not solicit feedback directly *from* these individuals until after the book manuscript was complete. In some cases, this contact came three years after community members completed their work with students. Although we had a 40% response rate to our survey, given lack of working contact information for a number of community partners, we were not able to sample the full population of community partners. This is a limitation to fully understanding project outcomes for partners, and the findings should be considered provisional. That said, analysis of available data suggests several themes regarding partners' experience working with students, including the value of challenging dominant discourses about their community, their own personal development, and strengthened relationships between the community and campus.

***Shaped the public narrative about their community.*** The most significant benefit identified by community partners was a new opportunity to tell their community's story. Although the call for submissions was open to all and the editors had engaged in broad outreach to encourage submissions from diverse cross-sections of Nashville, many community members were introduced to *A People's Guide to Nashville* through contact from a student in the class. Numerous students recounted sending cold-emails to strangers who responded within 24 hours, eager to collaborate. Jackson found members of an immigrant youth organizing group who were immediately "excited about the potential for the People's Guide entry and see it as a way to broadcast their message to a larger audience." Bailey was shocked to get a reply to her initial email outreach on the "contact us" form on the website of a local lesbian bar. She explained, ""Christa, one of the

owners, responded almost immediately. Her message was exceedingly kind. She expressed that she was eager to work on an entry for the guide, and that she felt honored to be considered for such recognition." Most survey respondents echoed this sentiment, noting that *A People's Guide to Nashville* offered an important opportunity to put forward a wide-reaching counter narrative about places that are often ignored or misrepresented. As one partner wrote, it was rewarding "to be able to demonstrate the importance of my community in the history of Nashville that has been underrepresented." Some expressed hope in the ripple effects of the project, described by one partner as the "indirect benefits in educating the public about what truly happened, thus reducing ignorance and prejudice." In addition to these external gains, many also found the project personally rewarding.

*Gained personal benefits.* Community partners shared a number of ways they gained personally from the project, from learning more about a history they cared deeply about, to learning to use online file sharing tools, to building meaningful relationships. A leader in the Muslim community partnered with a student to tell the story of a mosque and Islamic community center that had been the target of anti-Muslim attacks and arson during its construction. Though the partner has been actively involved in his community for many years, he reflected, "Ironically, when Sarah asked me questions and asked me to reflect, it enriched my experience. It added to my self-awareness." Others similarly noted that they learned more about themselves, and in some cases their community, through the research process.

Building relationships with students was also rewarding. A seasoned labor activist, concluded, "I feel like I learned every bit as much from them as I shared with them." Another noted being inspired by his interaction with the student, noting, "Young people—they are trying to change society for the better—and that's really good." A third reflected, "First and foremost, I have a new friend. I learned more about our neighborhood and the student fell in love with the neighborhood and has continued to work here, in the neighborhood high school." Just as the students gained social ties through participating in the project, so too did their partners.

*Strengthened relationships between the community and campus.* A number of partners noted the significance of getting to partner with university students in a reciprocal project, where each contributed to and gained from the collaboration. One noted that he often feels a level of intimidation interacting with people from the university, and this project alleviated some of that anxiety. Others noted that students often lack complex understanding about the communities they hope to enter and serve, and this project provided an opportunity for community partners to help students gain more nuanced perspectives. At the same time, many partners deeply valued the skills and competencies students brought to the project. The majority of community partners reported that students demonstrated competence in communication, research and writing skills, and found that students were reliable, respectful of partner's time and knowledge, and had "done their homework" prior to reaching out. Community partners elaborated on these characteristics in interviews. One partner noted the students she worked with were "very accommodating, in many cases bending over backwards to work with someone like me – who was working nights." Another confessed to having an initial level of skepticism about what his student partner might be able to offer in the collaboration. Yet he was quickly impressed by her communication skills and her commitment to the project. Ultimately, nearly every partner we spoke with hoped that though this particular project had culminated, the relationship with the university would continue, in one form or another.

## Challenges for Community Partners

Although most community partners built strong connections with their student collaborator, this was not always the case. Upon receiving the survey link to provide feedback, one community partner sent an email that said, "I don't remember working on this project…Do you have any additional info?." Two others remembered the project but not the student with whom they had worked. As one of these partners recalled, "I can't place [the student] visually at all; I have a vague recollection of her sitting across from me…" In each of these three cases, instructors recall the students were delayed in establishing contact with the community partner, and—though the assignment encouraged ongoing collaboration—the student and partner only met once. In at least one of these cases, the student submitted the entry to the *People's Guide* without having shared it with their partner. Although this experience appears to have been an anomaly, it is an important caution that student procrastination and/or sloppy work can frustrate community partners, jeopardizing their willingness to engage with students in the future. Furthermore, it challenged the instructors to consider the balance between fostering student autonomy and providing close enough supervision to ensure students are engaging in high-quality, ethical community engagement.

### Elements that Contributed to Successful Student-Community Engagement

Based on the number of successful student-community partnerships—which ultimately contributed 40% of the entries for *A People's Guide to Nashville*—as well as feedback from students and community partners, we conclude the project was overwhelmingly successful. With some exceptions, the project provided students with a scaffolded opportunity to develop and apply practice skills while participating in work that both they and community members found rewarding. Based on year-end reflections from students, it appears that a number of elements contributed to the effectiveness of the project, included the holistic integration of the project into the course, and the high level of individualized attention from instructors.

**Holistic integration.** Importantly, developing entries for *A People's Guide to Nashville* was not an add-on to the existing course, but rather the course was redesigned in service to the project. As described previously, course readings and assignments were selected to prepare students for community-engaged practice and place-based research. In written year-end reflections, 55% of students identified the reflexive assignment as particularly critical in helping them clarify their personal interest and orientation toward the project. Many also credited Tuck's article, "Suspending Damage" (2009), for helping them develop a practice epistemology that centered community partner's expertise in their collaborative work. In addition, 59% noted that the five-minute presentations—during which two students each week described their progress—created an important avenue to learn from one another and reduced isolation around common challenges. In addition, nearly every student noted that the strongest feature of course was in-class discussions. As one student explained, "I think the conversations that pushed us to really critically think about our own role in our work were most fruitful." The in-class scaffolding—through course content, reflective activities, and facilitated dialogues—supported students in their work outside of class.

**Individualized coaching.** In addition to the foundation provided through the course design, 76% of students highlighted the important of individual feedback from instructors. No two student experiences were identical. Some came into the class with pre-existing community contacts, while others were brand new to Nashville. Some had natural in-roads to their community of interest (through shared faith tradition, social identity, or life experience), while others sought to build relationships across group lines. Some students had ample experience conducting community outreach, while others had none. Some found rich archival materials related to their site of interest, while in other cases the historical record was sparse. Thus, while the course design provided a strong project foundation to all students, they also needed tailored coaching in areas ranging from identifying potential community partners, exploring alternative ways to make contact, encouraging confidence in outreach activities, and troubleshooting research difficulties. From a faculty perspective, this meant that the course was more demanding in terms of time, attention, and resources than a more traditionally structured course. That said, the instructors found the increased demands were more than worth the payoff in terms of student learning, community benefit, and performing work aligned with our own practice epistemologies and ethics.

**Recommended improvements for future courses.** In addition to noting the strongest elements of the course, students identified a number of areas that could be strengthened. Although students appreciated the tip sheet and coaching they received related to building partnerships, several noted that it would have been helpful to role-play initial outreach conversations. Given the number of students who described feeling awkward reaching out to prospective partners, the instructors agree that this increased attention to the practice skills of introducing oneself and a project would enhance the project, and is in itself an important, transferable skill.

Relatedly, feedback from students and community partners revealed a number of research skills it may have been beneficial to practice in class. Instructors incorporated a workshop at the library regarding finding archival materials and a workshop with a census expert related to finding and analyzing demographic data. However, we did not practice some of the more basic research skills students were likely to need in the project. Given that community partners were often the most important source of data for the entries, it was important for students to be experienced in taking notes while listening to partners speak, asking generative follow-up questions, or repeating back what was heard to check for understanding. These skills could easily be incorporated through in-class pair activities, followed by student reflection on what they learned in the process, and would prepare students for their work with community partners.

Further, a number of students suggested adding greater accountability through deadlines for establishing a partnership, selecting a site, and drafting entries. Although the assignment description detailed these steps, instructors understood that each student's process would follow a different trajectory and emphasized ethical engagement in the partnership-building process over achieving a benchmark by a specific deadline. Our primary concern was that students build meaningful relationships with partners and establish a true

collaboration rather than instrumentalize community member engagement in service to a 'school project.' Yet, in the absence of early accountability deadlines, and given some students discomfort in making initial contact with unfamiliar community groups, some students procrastinated in getting started, ultimately resulting in the very rushing and instrumentalization that instructors sound to avoid. While some procrastination may be inevitable, we agree with students that soft deadlines, particularly around the initial steps in the process, would have had a beneficial motivational effect.

## Conclusion

Warren et al. recently called for improved training for graduate students, suggesting the need to "foster the development of a new generation of scholars with the ability and commitment to engage with educators and families in the work of transforming schools and communities" (2016, p. 251). Partnering with community members to develop entries for *A People's Guide to Nashville* is one example of a project that prepared students for a role as public scholars. The project fostered students' development as critically-reflective practitioners who can better attend to entanglements of history, place, power, positionality and possibility. Students came to recognize communities as sources of knowledge, strength, and resource. They learned the importance of looking to past and present social movement leaders for wisdom and insight, and the usefulness of exploring history to better understand the context of current social struggle. Students developed valuable practice skills, including attending to their own biases, building authentic relationships, conducting collaborative research, and communicating effectively in a variety of modalities. Community partners also benefited from the project, through authoring wide-reaching counter narratives about their communities, gaining new insights and building meaningful relationships.

While this project offered a unique opportunity for students to contribute to a manuscript already under contract with a publisher, other public history projects could be developed with similar goals and different modes of dissemination. Instructors might consider partnering with a public library to co-create or contribute to an oral history archive on a marginalized community; collaborating with the local public radio affiliate to create a series of podcasts related to lesser known periods of history or places in the community; or developing a website incorporating maps, images, and narratives related to social justice struggles. In an era, fraught with polarizing discourse, public history projects offer an important way to re-humanize narratives of oft-stigmatized people and places. At the same time, as exemplified in this case study, such projects can also provide a meaningful practice ground for students to develop as ethical community-engaged scholars and practitioners.

## Additional Files

The additional files for this article can be found as follows:

- **Supplemental File 1.** Samples of student work.
- **Supplemental File 2.** Class syllabus.
- **Supplemental File 3.** Building partnership tip sheet.

## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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