

Entangled Production of Individuals and Organizations: A Food Systems Case Study in Service-Learning Transformations

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Abstract

This article presents a longitudinal case study of a collaboration between a university and a nonprofit food justice organization. Using a collective autoethnographic process, we examine a three-semester service-learning course in which each author participated as instructor or client. We use the theoretical tools of intra-action and entanglement to address the challenges of complexity in such social justice collaborations. We also deploy these tools to avoid the instrumental/functional paradigm of evaluating collaboration in terms of negative or positive effects or un/successful outcomes, focusing instead on phenomena within a system in their transformative entanglements within ongoing (re)becoming. This approach was amenable to the content of our collaboration: a systems approach to thinking about food equity. Conceiving of ongoing interrelated phenomena within a system, as opposed to discrete separate objects impacting one another, helps accommodate the complexity involved in service-learning collaborations. Author/participants include an independent farmer who also teaches architecture, a communication instructor, and the director of a regional food justice nonprofit who collaborated via a land-grant university on an applied service-learning series of classes. We describe productive transformations in food-systems activism for individuals, our institution, local organizations, and the broader community. Therefore, this article contributes not an evaluative assessment of the success or failure of a single collaboration but a longitudinal examination of how individuals, institutions, organizations, and communities change through their entanglements and intra-actions.

The food system is broken in the 10 counties of Upstate South Carolina, particularly with respect to local procurement. For decades, wholesale, retail, and institutional markets have focused on supply through the global agricultural marketplace, even though the region is well-suited to smaller-scale crop and livestock production. Some improvements have been made over the past decade with the establishment and success of many community-based farmers markets. However, much work remains to be done in terms of sourcing local products into the larger food system of restaurants, institutions, and marketplaces.

This article presents a case study of a collaborative service-learning project with an emergent community service organization in the sectors of food justice and economic development. Our collaborative autoethnography, conducted over 5 years, examines how service-learning can help build and transform nascent organizations through the formation of partnerships. Such partnerships, in turn, also transform institutions, individuals, and communities. With this unique form of assessment, we aim to demonstrate alternative approaches to documenting and researching service-learning initiatives in higher education.

Feed & Seed is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization based in Greenville, South Carolina, cofounded by author McGirr, who was its executive director for 5 years. It has been dedicated to increasing local farmers' access to the wholesale and institutional supply chains that serve the 10 counties of the Upstate (Abbeville, Anderson, Cherokee, Greenville, Greenwood, Laurens, Oconee, Pickens, Spartanburg, and Union). Founded in 2013, Feed & Seed has aimed to connect farmers, community leaders, organizations, nonprofits, businesses, governments, funding groups, and others with the goal of improving Upstate economy and health. At the time of Feed & Seed's founding, South Carolina had a statewide poverty rate of 18.5%, with poverty rates in the 10 counties of the Upstate ranging from 16.2% to 25.6% (South Carolina Revenue and Fiscal Affairs Office, 2020). Although Feed & Seed has recently opened a retail market, this was planned as a small, public-facing expression of its larger mission. Feed & Seed has had many partners, from Head Start and the Appalachian Regional Commission to local philanthropists and Greenville Health System (now PRISMA). One partner, Spinx, is a family-

owned chain of 92 gas station convenience stores in South Carolina, founded in 1972. Many stores are in low-income and food-insecure areas, but they are outfitted with full-service kitchens linked to a local commissary, making them a key source of neighborhood nutrition.

Authors Hambright-Belue and Scott are associate professors, at Clemson University in Upstate South Carolina and Emory and Henry College in Southwest Virginia, respectively. Hambright-Belue is also an independent family farmer whose farm engages in mutually beneficial projects with Feed & Seed. Author Scott is married to McGirr and has directly supported Feed & Seed since its inception. Rather than frame these relationships as biasing our analysis, we operate from a perspective that our situated knowledges of these relationships and roles provide unique insights into all sides of the collaboration between an educational institution, a community organization, and their partners.

Founded in 1889 from a bequeath by Thomas G. Clemson, Clemson University is a land-grant institution with a mission to improve lives in the region. Clemson's will states, "My purpose is to establish an agricultural college which will afford useful information to the farmers and mechanics ... terminating in thorough theoretic and practical instruction in those sciences and arts which bear directly upon agriculture" (Clemson, 1883). Through the Morrill Act of 1862, Clemson was included as one of the original land-grant universities and colleges of the United States. The land-grants' purpose was "to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts ... in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life" (Morrill Act, 1862). Clemson incentivizes faculty to engage the university's land-grant mission through service-learning and related activities, including senior capstone classes, applied project studios, and the Creative Inquiry (CI) program: classes designed, proposed, and taught by typically volunteer instructors with modest funding to support students. CIs are intended as opportunities for undergraduate students to participate in applied research, often with external clients and community organizations.

Background

This collaboration arose from primarily personal connections. Scott and McGirr had been in a romantic relationship for 2 years. McGirr had

met a professor in landscape architecture who introduced him to a farmer, Hambright-Belue. McGirr began collaborating with Hambright-Belue and Scott, among others at Clemson, on various service-learning projects that utilized pedagogies of community engagement. Hambright-Belue engaged McGirr as the client for an upper-level architecture studio in which students in architecture and landscape architecture worked on designs for a food hub in Greenville, South Carolina. With a population of approximately 65,000, the city was experiencing rapid gentrification that was threatening the city's 14% poverty and 25% African American populations (World Population Review, n.d.). Feed & Seed began designing its food hub to help provide food access to the low-income residents of Greenville's downtown neighborhoods. Hambright-Belue and Scott both recalled supporting the nascent Feed & Seed, as well as teaching students about local food systems, environmental justice, and sustainability, as the motivations for their classes.

For a communication undergraduate capstone course on food communication, Scott engaged Feed & Seed as the client. Students interviewed farmers, staff, and customers at local farmers markets about their priorities and needs in the local food system. From this data, they developed lexicons and popular communication memes as exercises in food communication. Students also aggregated, updated, and verified contact information for over 300 Upstate farms, markets, and distributors, and they added these details to Google Maps to make it easier for producers and consumers to find one another. Prior to this, no single resource for such information had existed. Students were working with small independent farmers rather than industrial, commodity agricultural businesses or tourist attractions, so even basic contact information, hours, and locations were important details that had not previously been accessible.

In a short class for advanced high school students offered the following summer, Scott created a pop-up advertising agency with Feed & Seed as the client. Students interviewed people on campus about their willingness to purchase fresh, local produce at convenience stores and created communication materials such as logos and packaging. These efforts provided Feed & Seed with market research and creative ideation for its work with Spinx.

McGirr recalled the impact of these initial collaborations:

There were dozens of different reference points, from the Department of Agriculture to Clemson Extension, a lot of different listings from different local organizations and not-so-local organizations, but no one ... provided a comprehensive list. The majority of the lists had inaccurate and incomplete information.

The communication students' farm list became a crucial tool for Feed & Seed's outreach efforts. McGirr described how the architecture studio helped create the first visualizations of Feed & Seed's complex plan:

The student groups envisioned designing a future where this old, tired store ... could be replaced with a site that had dynamic, edible landscaping, educational landscaping, and store fixtures that would encompass the abilities of selling fresh produce and prepared foods, and making certain that those foods and those vegetables and fruits would actually be something that the neighborhood residents wanted. ... They translated that into what were ... surprisingly elegant interpretations of an informed, designed space for combining the growing of produce that is appropriate and desired by a community.

These initial investigations laid the foundation for Hambright-Belue, Scott, and McGirr to collaborate on a cotaught CI class sequence. While maintaining the food systems focus of their previous projects, Hambright-Belue and Scott also prioritized fostering collaboration between students from different disciplines and engaging with community organizations in Greenville County, which had approximately 75,000 residents living in poverty in 2013 (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2021). The class, *Site-Specific Messaging*, was conceptualized as connecting the research methods and messaging skills of communication students with the place-based thinking and applied project experience of architecture students. For the first two semesters, student teams focused on developing creative ideations for remodeling Spinx store #112, located in a racially diverse, low-income neighborhood of West Greenville. Student teams would research, develop, and present concepts for incorporating a community garden and other public spaces into the remodel.

Hambright-Belue, Scott, and McGirr delivered class presentations and alternated supervising the student teams' work. Using funds from the university's CI program, the classes visited farm stands and markets, community gardens, a neighborhood child-support center/shelter, a large brewery and restaurant with onsite gardens and livestock, Spinx #112, and other locations. They consumed and discussed food systems documentaries and readings and met with Spinx, Feed & Seed, and community organization representatives. The undergraduate and graduate students—from architecture, landscape architecture, English, professional communication, and communication—researched demographics, comparative gardens, food insecurity, and related issues. All of this was done to facilitate communication between Feed & Seed and its partners, generate and share data, and apply these insights to Spinx's development process. Regular group critiques were held to assess progress and refine concepts. The course's structure and content continued in the third semester, but the topic changed to *Communicating Food, Identity, and Culture*, with a focus on creating concepts, maps, and mobile application designs for local agritourism to support farms, markets, and related sites in the Upstate.

Service-Learning and Community Development

Approaches to service-learning have evolved from a patronizing model of passive community organizations receiving the supposed benefits of higher education's knowledge and resources to a more equitable and active view of productive community-university relationships. However, as Darby et al. (2016) described, "Scholarship on academic service-learning has focused primarily on faculty and student perspectives, rarely accounting for the crucial role of community partners" (p. 3). Failure to embrace community assets—underestimating what community partners have to offer—is one of two major challenges to effective service-learning as identified by Borrero and Reed (2016). The second challenge is the university's overconfidence in its contributions—that is, the ivory-tower benefactor model.

In contrast, sociocultural approaches to learning, perhaps most famously associated with Vygotsky (1978), foreground a multidirectional, multiactor social process that occurs in numerous contexts. For example, Borrero and Reed's (2016) participant observation of a service-learning faculty seminar generated three approaches to

encourage this learning process: envisioning mutually beneficial service-learning, creating opportunities for reflection, and bringing community to the classroom. García and Longo (2015) argued for situating service-learning within a pedagogical model of collaborative engagement, conceiving of teachers, students, and community organizations as reciprocal partners cocreating knowledge through locally and globally connected projects. They asserted that collaboration is key to enhancing community development through service-learning. Community development is also part of university development, as universities are part of the communities they are developing. With teachers and community leaders facilitating the production of learning spaces and opportunities rather than disseminating knowledge, such projects can enhance democratic pedagogy and participatory culture. For example, Buch et al. (2016) conducted a study of a food pantry on a college campus, the seeds of which began with connections made at a conference on civic engagement. The pantry project was eventually realized in a partnership between the university, individuals, and a discount grocery store chain. However, as the partnership expanded, it grew to include a local Indian grocery store and chef as well as graduate student organizations. Such perspectives move service-learning from a model of closure, in which an educational institution solves a community problem, to a model of transformative expansion, in which service-learning is inherently engaged with community development and its collaborative relationships grow to engage new actors and organizations in an increasing network of partners.

Within authors Hambright-Belue and Scott's respective disciplines, there are specific traditions of socially engaged, applied service-learning. For example, landscape architect Horrigan (2015) described a process for collaborative knowledge construction as the formation of dialogic learning spaces, accomplished through placemaking. "Placemaking," wrote Horrigan, "is a democratic design process and purpose that fosters greater environmental justice, equity, community empowerment, and ecological and landscape democracy" (p. 9). Communication employs similar perspectives, such as communication activism research (Carragee & Frey, 2016) and participatory action research (Huesca, 2008). An earlier publication by two of the authors centered the making of meaningful places as pedagogical practice (Scott & Hambright-Belue, 2016).

Theoretical Perspectives

Complexity is an increasingly recognized component in collaborative community projects. In interviews with 14 diverse faculty members describing their recent experiences leading community-engaged projects, Heasley and Terosky (2020) found a "metatheme of their students learning to grapple with complexity" (p. 19). However, complexity is unavoidable, particularly in teaching projects oriented toward social justice. Crook and Cox (2021) drew on John Urry's complexity theory to conceptualize how "pursuit of economic growth serves to mask both human interdependence with the natural world and the threat that rapid cumulative consumption poses to our existence through its unintended effects" (p. 1). Their case study at an English primary school argued for embracing complexity as a way to account for interconnections. Complexity theory's conceptualization of natural and social systems' order and disorder helps with "unpacking the interplay of economic, ideological, physical, and virtual structures that young people are navigating" (p. 2). Some attempts to address complexity, such as complexity in social issues and organizational structures, have imposed flowchart and organization-chart type schematics. For example, Deal et al. (2020), who defined service-learning as "an approach to teaching that meaningfully integrates classroom instruction with practical community service" (p. 2), proposed "a logic model for infusing service-learning in higher education" (p. 3). They used a figure that mapped partners, students, and collaborators across silos of inputs, instructional approaches, strategies, goals, outcomes, and measures.

Significantly, embracing complexity necessitates a longitudinal perspective. One of Okamoto's (2016) participants, in a study of an Appalachian school community organizing around nutrition and food insecurity, described community organizing as "like moving the Titanic" (p. 1047). This is due not simply to the quantity of actors and relationships but also to changes in these actors over time (e.g., in mission, scope, available resources, priorities, etc.), including leaving and being replaced by new actors.

A theoretical perspective amenable to embracing ongoing complexity is the philosophy of feminist science scholar Karen Barad (2007). Components of her philosophy of agential realism have been applied to various disciplines and research projects. For example, Milstein (2016) drew on Barad's "new materialism" as "similar

to ways environmental communication scholars have argued matter and meaning imbricate one another” (p. 230). Brown et al. (2020) argued for educators to use Barad’s theories connecting matter and meaning. Dare and Fletcher (2019) applied her perspective of connectedness to examine “nonhuman agency and entangled species” (p. 412) in studying a wildlife refuge.

Here, we draw on two of Barad’s key concepts: *entanglement* and *intra-action*. These exist within a broader ontology that conceives of all things as existing within the same universe: a perspective that emphasizes connectedness rather than discrete objects separated for analysis. Moreover, phenomena, not objects, are the fundamental unit of the universe. Phenomena are not things, but actions: ongoing processes of continual change, growth, and transformation. Existence is a process of continually (re)becoming. Within this paradigm, phenomena do not relate in cause and effect, as that implies they are distinct entities. Instead, phenomena relate through *entanglement*. Barad developed this concept from other scholars and her training as a physicist. Entanglement describes how ongoing processes of becoming engage with each other, shaping and transforming in mutual coproduction. Entanglement is eternal and ongoing in a universe in which all phenomena are connected processes, not separate things that may come into contact and interact. Barad replaced “interaction” with *intra-action* to foreground the connectedness of all phenomena. Phenomena intra-act *within* the system of which they are all parts, and these intra-actions are entanglements rather than discrete collisions or intersections. This philosophical perspective has been used across numerous disciplines to conceive of connected, dynamic processes and complex systems. We employ it here to embrace the dynamic, evolving complexities of food systems, community development, service-learning, and collaborations.

Barad’s agential realism is rooted in the physicality of matter, yet it eschews a traditional position of scientific objectivity. Since researchers are entangled with research subjects, a position of objective remove is untenable. Instead, Barad called for an ethical position whereby researchers acknowledge that the structures of research design are not true separations but artificial distinctions made for clarity and investigation, what she called *agential cuts*. We deploy this perspective by adopting the stances of *situated knowledges* and *positionality*, developed across feminist, queer, critical race, and other traditions, to see the subjectivity of

researchers and participants as a strength of insight and familiarity, not a weakness of bias (Browne & Nash, 2010; Daston, 1992; Fine, 1994; Ghaziani & Brim, 2019; Haraway, 1988; Pascale 2010). This informs our use of autoethnographic, collaborative methods in a study of our own experiences.

Finally, this project is framed with an approach of *grounded inquiry*, having no predetermined hypotheses or solutions (Charmaz, 2017; Wise, 1980). This approach draws on historical induction methods (here, our personal recent histories) to gain insight and understanding without the expectation of generalized theory building (Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

Research Design and Methodology

The project was designed as a qualitative study aimed at gaining insight rather than testing theory (Becker, 2009; Creswell, 2014). It was planned as critical-cultural research valuing daily lived experiences, interdisciplinarity, power relations, situated epistemologies, and the application of scholarship in praxis (Horriggan, 2015; Lather, 2003; Lindlof & Taylor, 2017; Pascale, 2010; Pickering, 2008; Saukko, 2003; Stokes, 2021) as well as social advocacy (Messaris, 2010). Our research subjects—ourselves, students, partners, and organizations—were conceived as unstable, dynamic phenomena in processes of continually (re)becoming, drawing on Barad (2007) and approaches in queer methodology (Browne & Nash, 2010; Ghaziani & Brim, 2019). Our design was a longitudinal case study (Buch et al., 2016) situated as entangled with other preceding and subsequent projects. We used participant observation and autoethnographic methods inspired by similar research (e.g., Alexander, 1999; Borrero & Reed, 2016; Bryant & Livholts, 2013; Campbell, 2014; Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Our data collection consisted of three semesters of a service-learning CI class, with two authors serving as co-instructors and the other as the primary client. During this process, we kept notes in various forms and met regularly to discuss the class and broader community goals. Each semester, students were solicited for anonymous feedback using the university’s regular evaluation tool. As Opdenakker (2006) described, asynchronous email and similar communication tools offer viable interview methods with their own unique strengths. At the end of the third semester, each of the authors completed semistructured self-interviews using an identical script of questions and prompts. These were conducted using word

processing software, separately and without having seen the others' responses. Three years later, we repeated the process with a new script. Again, the self-interviews were done without seeing others' responses. However, this time they were conducted as audio recordings. The first author transcribed the recordings using [Otter.ai](#) software for the first pass and manually for final passes.

Data analysis involved the first author performing a precoding review and markup of transcripts, followed by cycles of inductive coding (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019) of all interview transcripts and student evaluations. The categories were designed to capture transformations resulting from the intra-actions and entanglements of the CI course and related projects. The categories used were four levels of change: change to individuals (with subcategories of personal and professional), to the institution (i.e., the university, including students), to organizations (with subcategories of primary client and other organizations), and to the community. Constant comparative method (Boeije, 2002) was employed to refine and revise this categorization. Findings were shared with the second and third authors for review, corrections, and updates.

Findings

The CI course was found to have intra-acted with transformations of individuals, the institution, organizations, and the community. These entanglements had varied dimensions and interpretations, reflecting the complexity of the course and its efforts at social change. Across these categories, we gained insight into how the actors functioned in a food system. Our more holistic approach, we suggest, has benefits compared to an evaluative assessment of whether or to what degree a service-learning intervention "worked." Instead, we found rich descriptions of mutually productive relationships. Specific failures or frustrations, when examined as part of larger entanglements and intra-actions over time, were found at times to have eventual positive ramifications beyond their original design or conception. Applying this perspective also helped mitigate burn-out and fatigue.

Individuals

The three authors reported personal and professional changes based on the CI. Initially, only the instructors reported personal changes based on the CI. These included increased knowledge, such as Scott coming to understand farmers markets as

a more social than retail experience. Hambright-Belue gained a broader understanding of sustainability within the discipline of architecture as "creating a meaningful place within a community, a place where people have a sense of belonging." Later, McGirr acknowledged some personal changes, such as gaining appreciation for the potential quality of student work—an "awesome" "treasure trove of material." He acknowledged the personal impact of the efforts emotionally, describing working with the university as having "taken a patient, tenacious, tiring [laughs] approach." Other long-term emotional impacts among all three included frustration with project components that didn't come to completion, such as the community garden, but there was also the pleasure of increased friendships among them. Later, Scott and Hambright-Belue described emotional impacts that included enjoying the interdisciplinary collaboration, having fun, feeling pride and frustration with students, feeling fatigue, and becoming burned-out with class content. Scott described an emotional impact on his personal relationship with McGirr. He and Hambright-Belue had felt ready to end the CI after two semesters, and he was surprised when McGirr became upset about this:

It was very important for him for Feed & Seed to continue to be involved in [the] university. ... I had no idea that it was such an important thing to him. ... I remember feeling frustrated that the client, who was [now] also my husband, hadn't communicated this to me.

This personal evolution marked a change in Scott's personal/professional boundaries. Scott now felt that he wanted to take a break from working professionally with Feed & Seed after he and Hambright-Belue completed a revised third semester.

Professionally, there was development in terms of career advancement and new perspectives on teaching, research, and collaboration. As Borrero and Reed (2016) argued, service-learning and training can be framed within a model of professional development for faculty, which moves closer to our dynamic notion of service-learning as an experience of personal growth and transformation for all involved. However, "professional development" is a bit of a dry, functionalist term that suggests an often undervalued checkbox on tenure and promotion

applications. The dynamism we found in our analyses of our relationships was much more profound than acquiring new job skills.

McGirr described professional growth from the CI as teaching him “the path by which to best work with the land-grant organization and the power that the land-grant has to provide tremendous resources through applied service-learning.” Scott noted that after the CI, McGirr’s professional focus shifted from Greenville to Clemson for both himself and Feed & Seed. Indeed, after our second round of interviews, McGirr left Feed & Seed and took a job at the university directing a food systems research program.

Throughout, all three saw the CI as supporting Hambright-Belue and Scott’s career growth toward tenure; the program was the subject of two conference presentations and one publication (Scott & Hambright-Belue, 2016). One conference transformed Scott’s understanding of presentations as a more immersive experience: “We had this whole room we got to fill with posters, plots, printouts, and videos. ... That was a unique experience ... and I would like to create more opportunities for things like that.” Scott also described the book they printed of the first two semesters’ work as “a wonderful portfolio piece” displayed in his office. He saw the CI as entangled in his growth as a collaborator, giving him his first experience of coauthoring with a colleague, which he has since continued to practice with greater confidence. “Creating those relationships builds a network, which becomes a tangible infrastructure that can continue beyond the ‘product’ of the project,” said Scott. “This has really had an effect on my teaching.” Scott, tenured shortly after the CI, described the CI as giving him greater insight into assessing junior faculty’s integrated teaching, research, and service. This informed his subsequent research, making him more comfortable with engaged scholarship, collaboration, and experiential learning. Said Scott:

I’m working on a grant application now with two different collaborators to examine what happens to college athletes after they come out as LGBTQ ... with an eye towards identifying best practices. It’s more applied research than anything I would have worked on before working with Feed & Seed.

Later, he reiterated this point. Despite setbacks and frustrations, such as Spinx not coming to a final presentation and some students’ disinterest

in the conference or portfolio book, he grew more committed to the value of the process, rather than the end products, of applied service-learning.

Hambright-Belue described a new degree of professional focus, with the CI being “the first time I have felt that my interests in architecture and agriculture have been brought together in a meaningful way. ... This project helped me define a research agenda and understand its value.” Hambright-Belue also noted how the CI introduced her to many people and organizations in the local food community and increased her thinking about it in a broader, systemic way, all of which benefited her professionally as a teacher, architect, and farmer. She went on to serve on the board of her local Farm Bureau and on a diversified agriculture committee for the statewide committee for Farm Bureau, on which McGirr also served.

Unlike positive or negative effects, entanglements need not be viewed in evaluative terms. Instead, they are best viewed more holistically as part of the ongoing becomings of individuals and organizations. For example, Scott decided later that while he enjoyed and benefited from coteaching, he would not do it again. This was not a negative effect of the CI but an entanglement with the development of his professional priorities, given that his department did not count coteaching as part of his regular teaching load, making it unpaid.

Finally, the third round of reflection, including the writing, review, and revision of this article, continued the processes of entanglement. Scott learned from McGirr how the CI had helped Feed & Seed in ways he previously did not recognize, helping allay some disappointment and doubts he had about the success of the project. Indeed, our theoretical framing here of entanglement reflects our move beyond a zero-sum binary of success and failure. Such a perspective of mutual growth and influence is not only a more accurate reflection of the complex processes involved in community engagement but also a psychological defense against being overly self-critical.

Institution

Changes to the university began with the CI, which centered on a novel topic and cross-departmental collaboration. McGirr described his efforts to help Clemson identify and connect faculty, researchers, and service organizations, and to build and refine networks, leading to future community collaborations. In his estimation, the university became a more desirable partner for

Feed & Seed: “We see enormous benefit and future potential for communication, architecture, and landscape architecture as foundational partners in rebuilding the local food system.”

All three authors described the revitalization of Clemson’s identity as a land-grant university as an important intra-action. They specifically referenced increased interest and activism around food systems and sustainability as well as new opportunities for students. Hambright-Belue positioned the CI as entangled with changes in the university’s interests and priorities: “Before this project, there really wasn’t a lot of talk about the things that this project would address like food hubs, and larger scale agritourism, like the farm mapping project that we did.” Subsequent changes at the university would build upon this momentum, entangling McGirr’s professional career. Scott’s department was reorganized from the College of Architecture, Art, and Humanities to a new College of Behavioral, Social, and Health Sciences. The new dean, Leslie Hossfeld, was hired from outside the university and turned out to be a food systems researcher. Said Scott:

That [has] probably been the single most influential thing with McGirr and I and Feed & Seed, and our work with Clemson. ... One of the first things Leslie did was ask where the food system research was. ... That was the introduction that led to everything McGirr is doing with Clemson now. The CI laid the foundation for the development of [the College of Behavioral, Social, and Health Sciences’ Land-Grant Local Food Systems Solutions, a research program at Clemson that he now directs.

McGirr has since gone on to a new regional role that was based on the work done in South Carolina. He is currently the director of strategic partnerships for the Southern Ag Exchange Network with the University of Tennessee Institute for Agriculture, a part of the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture’s Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network in the Southern Region.

Students are another component of an institution. The opportunity for student-directed, experiential, grounded coursework was unappealing to many students, who expressed in course evaluations that they would have preferred a more traditional, highly structured course format. Others, however, appreciated it. Similarly, some

students found the collaborative nature of the class frustrating, with tensions arising between students of different disciplines and between graduates and undergraduates. However, others enjoyed the collaboration and wished there had been more. In addition to learning about the subject matter, several students indicated they gained professional skills and confidence in presentation development and interacting with clients. This was reiterated recently when a former student, now working for an Upstate housing nonprofit, told us “that CI was hands-down one of the most meaningful academic experiences I had at Clemson.”

The CI combined different disciplines, and Hambright-Belue saw this as influencing the students:

The communication students helped us understand the people aspect that sometimes architecture students don’t get to see. It also taught our students how to do some research. They had to interview people. They had to look at demographics. ... That gave our students a whole other view of how you might do research and how you might have that influence a project.

She also described how the CI provided practical experience for students:

Not only were our students able to work with McGirr, but they worked with all kinds of people, the people from Spinx, the people from Pendleton Place ... the community gardens ... that is extremely valuable for their future careers.

She also described how the CI contributed to greater interest in and awareness of food systems among Clemson students: “This project has created many local food advocates out of the students involved in the project.” These would extend to activism in the university and beyond. McGirr described how a communication Master’s student, Avery Allen, chose to work with Feed & Seed in an applied service-learning project for her thesis. She conducted interviews with African American leaders near Spinx #112 to gain community input on planting options and other garden decisions. After graduation, Feed & Seed hired her to continue this work, demonstrating an entanglement between institution, individual, community, and organization.

Having transformed the instructors, the program also transformed their teaching and therefore made new experiences available to students. Scott implemented more student-led collaborative research projects. McGirr and Hambright-Belue collaborated on a subsequent class in which students developed concepts for converting a closed movie theater into a local food-focused restaurant and brewery. McGirr saw his work contributing to students having more “practical, service-learning experience in their disciplines” and as a “great opportunity to legitimize the work that students ... were doing.” In addition to his subsequent class with Hambright-Belue, he represented Feed & Seed in a communication lecturer’s CI on nonprofit brand communication. Said McGirr:

Since the [first] CI, there have been a number of additional courses ... and several of the organization pilots have turned into working programs. Farm to Belly is now an official partnership between Feed & Seed, Greenville Health Systems, and Head Start, with Dr. Sarah Griffin in public health as the principal investigator.

McGirr and Scott continued to provide food systems experiences and learning for students through their subsequent roles in another aspect of the institutional infrastructure, the Faculty in Residence program, in which they participated for 3 years.

While their efforts were rewarding, all three authors expressed frustration with the slow pace and indirect paths of change at a large institution. These became apparent as they wrestled with frustration over the university’s responses to Black Lives Matter and the COVID-19 pandemic, and they personally observed incidences of systemic institutional racism and ableism at the university.

Organizations

McGirr described the CI as having had a crucial impact on Feed & Seed to a degree that the other authors were not aware of, as it helped the organization grow “organizationally and systematically.” Organizationally, intra-actions with stakeholders, guest speakers, and community members “brought to light aspects of social work, city transit, and collaborative teaching that made the original assignment of site-design a more well-rounded, informed result than a traditional garden

design.” Systemically, as Feed & Seed refined its focus areas, it connected with new Clemson faculty, researchers, and service organizations such as the student-led Food Collective and its annual Food Summit.

“Service-learning,” McGirr said, “has provided Feed & Seed with an invaluable set of resources that would be the envy of many of our colleagues nationwide.” He described very tangible benefits from the CI students’ work:

The visualizations and results of research were some of the first concrete elements Feed & Seed used as credible evidence of our development. ... Our partners in the private sector gained confidence in the quality and direction of the project.

Later, he repeated the importance of this:

We got a treasure trove of material that I still use to this day. I sent three or four of the different visualizations [from the classes] to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention this morning, because they asked for material on Feed & Seed. ... The sophistication of those visualizations gave us a tremendous leg up when communicating what it is that we are doing.

McGirr described how the work with Clemson also helped improve perceptions of Feed & Seed in the community:

Whether it’s a farm-centric program, a brewery, a restaurant event, or an early childhood education project, Feed & Seed is known to be a part of the fabric of our local food system. This would not be the case without Clemson’s service-learning.

Hambright-Belue saw positive intra-action with outside organizations, especially given Feed & Seed’s relatively nascent state at the time. “This is where you can make the biggest difference! Your work and projects can have a very large impact on how the organization will take shape and can help the organization gain the support they need to be successful.” All three described the benefits to many organizations involved in the CI and subsequent projects, including Project Host, Meals on Wheels, Head Start, Greenville Health System, Farm to Belly, Atlas Organics, and local farms.

Scott concurred, gaining an appreciation for how, in a reversal of the ivory-tower benefactor model noted previously, Feed & Seed grew in Clemson's estimation:

It wasn't just what Feed & Seed's Clemson projects were generating, it was that Feed & Seed was deemed by Clemson to be interesting and worthy of 11 or more different projects. I was able to see how a growing organization can leverage these relationships to build new relationships, and also be deemed as more viable in the eyes of attracting new partners.

Later, he could see how the CI was entangled in other projects and the evolution of Feed & Seed:

Feed & Seed has gone through rough patches but stayed alive as an organization and reshaped its mission to be more focused on projects, as opposed to a physical food hub marketplace. ... I definitely played a role in that in conversations with McGirr ... [and so did] the [CI] and its relative success cumulatively. ... [It] helped convince the organization that, while they would continue to pursue a physical marketplace, their primary purpose was about networking, creating research projects, getting farmers into institutional food service systems, not just selling local produce in a consumer public marketplace.

There were also impacts on partner businesses and community organizations. Spinx, in its intra-action with the CI, changed as well. McGirr described one of the CI students' intra-actions with Spinx:

We're standing in front of the new Spinx store with their Chief Marketing Officer. One student asked him to describe a typical Spinx consumer and the demographic, and he said, "Bubba." The kids asked for more definition. He was like, "35–50-year-old, working-class, White man." The students all recognized, because they had been in so many Spinx stores by this point ... that this was a very narrow perspective of what the Spinx demographic really looked like. They were able to articulate, in a very polite and gentle manner, through the visualizations

and presentations made to Spinx and their executives ... a much more diverse demographic, a much more female, much more non-White demographic purchasing food, which is the number one product that Spinx makes money on.

McGirr went on to contextualize this beyond the Store #112 project in the larger development of the Spinx company:

The corporation [was in] transition from [a] very closed, family operation to a more largely professionalized, new blood, new-generation expression of this storied 46-year-old company. ... That was probably one of the most powerful things that the CI provided both Feed & Seed and Spinx. It helped develop that relationship of ours to really have one of understanding where we wished to help serve all South Carolinians and, by virtue of Spinx starting to see that, by working with Feed & Seed, and the manner by which we approach the full diversity of our population, they, too, can understand that diversity better. And have the opportunity to develop stronger relationships with all people who come into their store, not just one segment of their population that they used to only be focused on.

The CI also influenced Spinx's decision-making regarding what they would do with the land in this community. One team's design replaced the convenience store's typical open-pit stormwater retention pond surrounded by boulders and a fence with a pond buried underground, creating usable land for an activity space. McGirr said:

This is a convenience store and gas station chain. They're not dependent on beautiful landscaping. ... However, through the persuasive designs and the interviews several of the Spinx employees and executives were privy to ... [Spinx] went to over a quarter million dollars of added expense. They excavated and installed underground cisterns and capped it with clay. Now our summer interns over this summer planted cow peas and sun hemp.

At the time, McGirr felt optimistic about how this would benefit his organization and the community, as Feed & Seed would help Spinx stores incorporate

produce from the Clemson student organic farm in community-tested recipes, then expand from a pilot program to multiple stores. “That’s when that impact is really going to start to have a great effect, not just on Spinx but on the community at large. It’s years in the making.” However, what came to pass disappointed Scott, as “Spinx seemed to abandon the project.” McGirr, while revising this article, clarified that a more complex set of factors had been involved.

Community

Intra-actions with the community and region were described, but at times harder to capture, even given the project’s longitudinal design. In their own ongoing processes of (re)becoming, several towns and counties of the Upstate were experiencing rapid growth and development, particularly Greenville (the base for Feed & Seed) and the town of Clemson itself.

Changing the community had been the impetus for Hambright-Belue to collaborate with Feed & Seed. She said:

I don’t know if Feed & Seed started or continued the conversation, but a lot of the things that Feed & Seed started to talk about are actually starting to take fruition, and it actually has strengthened the local food community.

She reflected on her role as a member of the local farming community:

As a farmer, it will grow the marketplace for our products and, as a result, our business will become more profitable. It will also make sales easier in that I will not have to spend as much time working with many different buyers.

Hambright-Belue saw additional promise in the third-semester project. She described it as “the most successful project” and noted, “They did an excellent job of looking at the situation of the local food community in the Upstate and understanding the challenges of access to it.” She explained:

What the students found was a very complicated and hard to understand local food community because while you can access it via several websites, none of them are easy to use. ... You can’t look at them on your cell phone and connect with them in a meaningful way. The

students did a great job of visualizing the local food community and adding clarity to a complicated system. They developed a project that would make the local food community more accessible to all types of people.

McGirr also described increased “community enthusiasm” for Feed & Seed:

Our collaborations have resulted in over 220 very low-income families in our subject area receiving 30 weeks of intense culinary, gardening, and nutritional access, with over 40 percent of them increasing their weekly consumption of fresh vegetables. The results have motivated our largest bank and largest hospital system to fund over \$100,000 in renewal of the program, and our 11 community organizations to match this with over \$150,000 of in-kind contributions to expand our project; the purpose of which is to increase SNAP/ EBT/WIC consumption of local produce from within the community.

McGirr expressed great optimism for community impact:

Greenville is going to start feeling the real effect of the CI over the next year as the Feed & Seed facility opens, and we have the opportunity to start directly connecting all of these dots we have been working on, from the [Clemson] organic farm to Faculty in Residence to the brand communication CI that was a direct result of the architecture and communication CI.

When the different organizations and programs that entangled with the first CI came to fruition, he predicted, the region would “really start to see how a land-grant is expressing itself in our food system [and] in our social system in a way that truly benefits those who need it most.”

Scott described his “big learning” from the CI as understanding how the community benefits:

I previously thought of the classroom being in a begging position. ... I didn’t realize that just working with a research university can be a powerful thing for a community organization. They gain prestige in others’ eyes from the relationship.

Conclusion

Our experiences reinforced and supported the model of service-learning as transformative expansion described earlier. Finding relationships as mutually constitutive, not just reciprocal, supported the previous work of Buch et al. (2016), García and Longo (2015), and Horrigan (2015): Each partner helps build and cultivate the other. Whereas, for example, Tinkler et al.'s (2014) model for effective service-learning partnerships operates from a position assuming the partner is a stable entity, we found dynamic transformations entangled in ongoing processes of becoming. The perspective of entanglement more accurately reflects these transformations than all-or-nothing relationships of cause and effect. We do not claim our collaboration to have solely caused any of these changes, but our analysis explores how the collaboration and changes are entangled.

Overall, we found that taking time to reflect on our collaboration years later facilitated an increased understanding of the complex intra-actions involved in service-learning and collaborations. This was especially pertinent to our collaboration's focus on the complex issues of food systems and social justice. Our analysis shows not a discrete intervention to be assessed but rather the CI's entanglements with prior efforts that created a necessary foundation and infrastructure, with future efforts that grew from it, and with the continual (re)becomings of individuals, institutions, organizations, and communities.

From this project, we see entanglement and intra-action as necessary qualities for our success. If it were not for the numerous and varied relationships developed and expanded throughout this project, the experience would not have been as interesting or meaningful. All of the nuances would have been lost. Our goals would not have been developed across the various forms, from the architecture design studio to communication's capstone to CI. The entanglements of the authors led to multiple course offerings and researching the project from multiple viewpoints, thereby increasing intra-action.

This project also shows the importance of focusing on the process and not simplistic views of success and failure. The process of learning for everyone involved—students, instructors, and organizations—was valuable and rewarding. This learning will continue to inform their lives and futures. Measuring success should be nuanced, with a nod to how service-learning projects can impact learning, and not simply focus on concrete

manifestations of success. This was especially important as we experienced the complexity of changing and disappearing actors, as described earlier (Okamoto, 2017).

Complexity is simply a part of social justice work, and this project was complex in many ways. The complexity, while quite messy, was also the reason for much of the value that came out of the project. The richness that was developed could not have been attained with a simple, clear, straightforward project. This complexity also introduced the students to practice in the real world. Projects that are focused on social justice and communities are complex, and students will have to learn to navigate that in their professional lives. This project gave students real-world experience—and gave us real-life transformations.

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