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Engaged Scholarship Methods for Positive Social Change

By George Villanueva

One of the main attractions for me in coming to Loyola University Chicago in 2015 was its Jesuit mission rooted in faith and justice and its commitment to the “scholarship of engagement,” a term coined by Ernest Boyer, who describes it as the application of university research, teaching, and service to society’s most pressing problems. Like most Jesuit universities, Loyola explicitly commits to growing the university’s social justice ethos, and I felt blessed by the opportunity to come to Loyola’s School of Communication to further develop my own engaged scholarship.

This focus on research, practice, and social change has led me to consider three criteria in my projects: they must be place-based, collaborative, and public. By “place based,” I mean situating projects in the physical neighborhoods that are most impacted by any change interventions. Second, “collaborative” means ensuring that projects integrate and partner with stakeholders (e.g. residents, community organizations, local businesses, etc.) in the communities of concern. Lastly, “public” refers to considering alternatives to academic journals when thinking about the dissemination of research in these communities. My desire to keep these three criteria in play in my scholarship and teaching has led me to Jesuit education.

Los Angeles Roots

My dissertation work at the University of Southern California examined the impact of engaged communication scholarship projects I spearheaded, with the goal of positively reimagining the urban environment of South Los Angeles. South L.A. continues to be stigmatized because of the legacy of the 1965 Watts rebellion, the 1992 civil unrest, and a mainstream media that depicts the area as a place of violence, gangs, and drugs. USC is also situated in South L.A., and even the campus community often

discussed the area as dangerous. But from my years of contact with community organizers in the area trying to effect social change, I knew that was not the whole story.

In each of my projects, what was central to my method was bringing university researchers, community organizers, residents, and local media together. These multiple actors participated in community-based research that positively reimagined the area based on what I defined as “communication assets” – communicative spaces that help maintain and create positive social change – as seen by the local community.

For example, one project called “South L.A. Democratic Spaces” brought in the collaboration of 15 community organizers to map out communication assets and to tell stories of spaces in which their democracy-building work takes place. Organizers identified spaces such as specific schools, parks, community theaters, community centers, and neighborhood art. Results were shared through multiple communication platforms that included a print map, videos, a photo exhibit that ran for 18 months on USC’s campus, and events in which organizers were invited onto campus to dialogue about ways to collaborate for positive change in the area.

Another project called “Ride South L.A.” was a bike tour to the Watts Towers that involved creating a mobile participatory activity with university and community partners. The activity engaged residents, bicycle clubs, community organizations, university students, faculty, and staff to use their phones to document communication assets along the bike route. Afterward, we invited riders to a workshop to co-design a print and digital map that highlighted assets and local advocacy campaigns. We handed the map over to the bicycle clubs and community organizations to use in future Ride South L.A. rides to the Watts Towers. Both projects were successful in revealing the

everyday positive spaces that contribute to South L.A.'s vibrant community, while working against the negative narrative that the mainstream media continue to circulate.

The Chicago Present

Now as a professor at Loyola, I have continued my engaged scholarship by collaborating with community organizations to replicate communication asset mapping and promote positive change. The "Chinatown Anti-Displacement Map" is an intervention in response to the current threats of economic and cultural gentrification there. Recently, national news outlets such as the *Chicago Tribune*, National Public Radio, Next City, and Hyperallergic have discussed the threats of and resistance to gentrification in Chinatowns across major cities. Through our collaboration with the Coalition for a Better Chinese American Community (CBCAC) in Chicago's Chinatown, we developed the "Chinatown Anti-Displacement Map." The map was sourced from community-based focus groups with local residents, youth, seniors, community organizations, and ethnic media that mapped communication assets they found of value and as resources for positive change. Our project wanted to be proactive, inviting the community to become aware of current development trends and advocate to be part of a shared vision for the future planning and development of Chicago's Chinatown.

Notably, the Chinatown Anti-Displacement Map deploys methods that incorporate the three criteria I highlighted above. It is place-based because of its focus on Chinatown's physical neighborhood. It is collaborative because of community partnerships with CBCAC. We expanded this collaboration by recruiting a Loyola graduate student into the collaborative design and involved undergraduate students from my course, *Designing Media for Social Change*, to help with the design of future community engagement events for the map, thereby making the work more public. In April, we will be holding an event that will release the map to the community and also take attendees on a walking tour of assets from the map. Simultaneously, Chinatown residents leading



the tour will underscore the local advocacy campaigns that community organizations are leading to effect positive social change.

Key Takeaway

Unlike much engaged scholarship in universities, the mission of Jesuit higher education prizes the integration of academic and theoretical work with the communities we serve. It's crucial that engaged scholars do "in community" work, but find ways to reflect, theorize, and evaluate engaged scholarship in academic journals. And what is best, it also creates positive social change within universities, because it bridges academia and communities that can benefit the most from knowledge.

George Villanueva is on the faculty of Loyola University Chicago as assistant professor of advocacy and social change. He studies questions about the changing global context of community, civic engagement, sustainable urban development, the city, and visual communication practices, among other fields.