

Mobilizing Ethnography for Evaluation, Immersion in CommUniverCity San José

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ABSTRACT *The applied anthropology graduate program at San Jose State University includes curriculum for ethnographic evaluation, but graduate faculty and students had few opportunities to employ it. When asked to conduct a qualitative—that is, ethnographic—evaluation of CommUniverCity, I jumped at the chance to get, and give our student ethnographers, such experience. Ethnographic evaluation combines the open-endedness and richness of ethnography with the pointed focus of concrete assessment; it is anthropology with a deliberate purpose. In this paper, I will outline the project, highlight the challenges and discuss the outcomes of our experience. The ethnographic portion of the process employs traditional methods. Holistic stakeholder analysis remains the core of what we did as a team. To evaluate an organization, however, means stepping outside of a neutral analytical framework and boldly stating what works, and for whom, and what does not work, and for whom. Respectful and thorough assessment means questioning many of the working assumptions of an organization, without doing violence to the organization itself. In particular, I would like to recapitulate my thinking as I struggled to frame community relations using a concept outside of the strict framework of social capital. Putnam's notions are the dominant theoretical framework used by CommUniverCity itself, although we broadened to scope to include other theorists of social capital. How did using different theories change how we thought through the primary goal established by the partnership, which is to build social capital and the community's capacity to improve itself? [Keywords: ethnographic evaluation, methods, applied anthropology]*

This paper introduces a set of papers by Maribel Martinez, David Valpey, and Aracelis Velaquez Rivera as they explore a distinctive applied anthropology project. Along with other members of the investigative team, we evaluated a dynamic partnership between the community members of a low-income urban neighborhood, San José State University (SJSU) and the City of San José--CommUniverCity San José (CUC).¹ At the behest of the organization, we began with data collection in Fall 2008, and presented our results to the partnership in September 2009 (English-Lueck et al. 2009). After we rolled out the report to the CommUniverCity Steering Committee, we discovered our evaluation reinforced some of the leadership's existing thoughts, but also challenged other assumptions. The leadership subsequently engaged in a series of retreats to consider, among many other issues, how the insights and recommendations posed in the report might inform their strategies. To capture that impact, we conducted a series of follow-up interviews with various stakeholders including the organizational leadership and staff.

In this paper, I will outline the project, highlight the challenges, and discuss the outcomes of our experience. The partnership already had a dominant theoretical framework in which it worked. The mission of the partnership was to enhance social capital, and the organization's structure and activities were designed to enhance that capital. Robert D. Putnam's notions, which suggest that social capital is a function of community engagement, are the dominant theoretical framework used by CommUniverCity itself, although we broadened the

scope to include other theorists of social capital (2000). Putnam decries the decline of social capital in late 20th century America, interpreting it primarily through the lens of overt civic and organizational engagement.

How did using different theories change how we thought through the primary goal established by the partnership, which is to build social capital and the community's capacity to improve itself? David Valpey, an undergraduate double major in anthropology and German, with a linguistics minor, explores the world of social capital in his paper. Aracelis Velazquez Rivera, a graduate student in our applied anthropology program, will discuss the methodological logic, and challenges we faced. The ethnographic portion of the evaluation employs traditional methods. Holistic stakeholder analysis remains the core of what we did as a team. To *evaluate* an organization, however, means stepping outside of a neutral academic analytical framework to boldly state what works, what does not work, and for whom. Finally, Maribel Martinez, a graduate student at San José State who is also doing an ethnographic evaluation for her major project, looks at how the community is defined by CommUniverCity and explores the implications of thinking about community through particular lenses.

SJSU APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGY

Our graduate program in applied anthropology is a relatively new addition to the corpus of Californian offerings. We conceptualized the program to be based on a dynamic interplay of theory, skills, and opportunities for hands-on application. Built around the intertwining domains of

health, immigration, sustainable communities and applications in Silicon Valley's business and industry, students do projects in user-center design, health disparities, or community engagement. Early on, we invited Stanford's David Fetterman to be a distinguished visiting professor to help us design our curriculum on evaluation; his co-creation of empowerment evaluation has had a huge impact on community activism and evaluation (2005). His ideas informed our approach to evaluation—a deeply ethnographic endeavor that brings in community members as agents of evaluation. The community is not the object of study, but the agent of self-analysis and change. Anthropologists offer insights, provide a process for reflection and become involved with the community.

San José State University's curriculum includes ethnographic evaluation, but graduate faculty and students had few opportunities to employ it. When asked to conduct a qualitative—that is, ethnographic—evaluation of CommUniverCity, I jumped at the chance to get—and give our student ethnographers—such experience. Ethnographic evaluation combines focused assessment with the richness and open-endedness of ethnography; it is anthropology with a deliberate purpose.

CommUniverCity San José began five years ago, rooted in Town Gown partnerships in which anthropology was involved. Dr. Chuck Darrah, in his field methods course, worked with the CommUniverCity and the Health Trust to examine health disparities.² The community also asked me to begin an oral history project, San José Stories, Neighborhood Lives that documents the life stories of its residents, particularly noting the immigrant heritage of the community. Medical anthropologist Guadalupe Salazar is working with community organizers to work on easing health disparities, especially for Latino immigrants. Anthropology's involvement with CUC is multifaceted and complex. These ties both instruct, through deep organizational immersion, and complicate the process of evaluation. Ethnographic evaluation involves a familiar dilemma. We must both be immersed in the organization we evaluate and step outside ourselves to view the actions of the organization holistically. In other words, we must be both insiders and outsiders.

Our team is drawn from people who had existing ties with CommUniverCity as well as those who did not. We actively engaged in the organization as ethnographers with a stake in the community. Several members of the team, particularly Maribel Martinez (Associated Students, Cesar Chavez Community Action Center), Mayra Cerda (Center for Service-Learning) and myself, a service-learning/community research faculty, had other connections to CUC in their work lives. Mayra Cerda, Aracelis Velazquez Rivera and David Valpey had lived in or near the neighborhood. This multiplicity of connections lent itself to a form of “indigenous evaluation,” cre-

ating insights to the constraints and assets of participating in CUC that harnessed a “native” point of view.

CAPITALIZING ON SOCIAL CAPITAL

CommUniverCity has a pre-existing theoretical rationale. The partnership is organized around the idea of enhancing social capital. In this case, that activity is translated into building partnerships that draw on expertise from San José State University to allow the City to amplify the community's capacity to “to create positive assets—get educated, build capacity, to enhance the city-wide crisis prevention efforts, and coordinate so they aren't working in silos” (Paul Pereira, NAC Meeting, June 23, 2009). Quantitative assessment efforts have been aimed at capturing changes in social capital in the community. Our qualitative assessment was geared toward CommUniverCity's organizational and structural capacity to facilitate social agency, to mobilize action to empower the community.

The CommUniverCity stakeholders are familiar with social capital as a concept, and use it explicitly and implicitly to think about themselves. As the ethnographic evaluation team, we spent time thinking through the many approaches and definitions of social capital, reaching back to the works of social theorists Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman.³ Bourdieu, who largely located social and cultural capital in the individual, examined the amplification of an individual's capacity to effect change by harnessing social relations, in what sociologists and anthropologists would identify as “social networks.” Much confusion has ensued in trying to translate social capital onto whole communities. David Valpey discusses this in his paper in these proceedings. It is the capacity of individuals to collectively amplify their own agency—to empower their ability to effect change—that is at the center of the transformational power of social capital.

We also placed the organizational life of CommUniverCity San José in the center of our analysis. This approach is consistent with dominant models in ethnographic evaluation, which we studied to inform our practices.⁴ We conducted several daylong analytical sessions to create six overarching themes, based on our observations and interviews. CommUniverCity consists of complex ethnic and socioeconomic communities and partnerships between organizations with very different missions.⁵ Beyond the obvious markers of class, ethnic identification and language, there are other, less obvious divides. There are many structural social divides based on language, education, homeownership, and mobility. Class is obvious, but it often translates into home owners, mobile home dwellers, and renters, the latter finding it difficult to penetrate into the local activist community. Because of their absentee nature, landlords do not reinforce the connection to renters to neighborhood. Renters

may reside there, but the locus of economic ownership is elsewhere.

Communication reflects layers of interaction from low to high-tech. Fliers reach the residents while the City and staff members live on their Blackberries. Meetings are important planning venues where communication happens as a form a theater. This aspect of meetings needs to be recognized as critically important. Generation is another subtle divide. Community activists are largely middle-aged, while staff, students, and volunteers are young. Each age cohort may view the purpose and range of options in very different ways leading to multiple cross-conversations.

Education is another marker of class. Penetration into the University has been most effective in education, and social and natural sciences where there are well-developed applied practices and programs. More abstract disciplines, such as art, contrast with art education in how readily they are willing to participate in the local community. This has meant that particular Colleges and Departments are developing a culture of participation and recognition, but others are not. Arts and Engineering are conspicuous in their absence. Language competence also creates barriers, which are both self-imposed, and a reality of the density of information that takes place in meetings and events. The presence of these divides, gross and subtle, at once speaks both to the deep diversity that can be an asset to the organization, and the need for conscious engagement with those differences.

Rules for interaction are ambiguous and mixed messages abound. Partnering relationships are built from the exchange of ideas, materials, and actions. An organization such as CommUniverCity is built on reciprocity. Reciprocity is a key process in building the trust relationships that build social capital. However, different stakeholders do have divergent understandings of the rules behind exchanges. Hence, people may have a sense that the exchange is somehow unfair or unbalanced. To what degree does residential participation “earn” benefits? Does consistent meeting attendance put a household in the queue for services? In some cases (such as Safe Halloween), it might, in others, such as Day of Service, it does not appear to do so. Are people selected on the basis of need, or as a reciprocal award? The process of selection appears not to be consistent or transparent.

Academics see the service as an opportunity for civic learning. Their emphasis is on the learning. City staff and residence provide services; they stress the importance of service. This is a constant negotiation that sometimes remains below the surface, and at other times erupts into conflict.

In addition to the challenges that face the organization, listed above, we observed that there are narratives—cultural stories—that have been integral to CommUniverCity’s growth as an organization. Dramatic growth dem-

onstrates a narrative in which the organization is reaching into many new communities, but the emphasis on growth may come at the cost of connection or coherence between events. As illustrated in the quantitative evaluations, CommUniverCity San José has grown phenomenally in the last few years. From 2006 to 2008 residential participation has grown from 1219 to 3109, student involvement from 417 to 948 (de Andrade 2009:3-5). As CommUniverCity’s reputation has grown, 49 percent more events have occurred, and some, such as the Day of Service, have a marked political and media presence. The sustainable presence of the McKinley office has created a predictable and stable identity for the organization. The institutional framework of CommUniverCity and its constituent institutions (City of San José, San José State University and the geographically and politically defined territory of Five Wounds Brookwood Terrace—FWBT), gives it a solidity that allows individuals to “yo-yo,” to drift in and out of activism, with little overall effect on the continuity of the organization.

CommUniverCity tells stories about itself that define the organization to themselves and others, but may leave out critical information. For example, the “dramatic growth” story is intertwined with numbers—ever increasing numbers of people who participate and the dollars that volunteerism entails. Yet, the use of these numbers masks some vulnerability. The same people, the usual suspects, participate again and again. So it seems that the reach of the networks is widening to new constituencies, but it is deepening instead. Moreover, the use of numbers drives the creation of big events, rather than small events that might have a more significant impact.

CommUniverCity has key members; we called them super-bridgers and super-bonders, referring to their networking abilities, which are critical to the organization’s success. However, in good evolutionary thinking, success can create vulnerability if it inhibits variation and experimentation. The “super-bridgers” excelled at translating different organizational cultures to one another, mobilizing new resources, and expanding the reach of the CUC. Other members solidified the identity of CUC within their stakeholder group, rallying City, SJSU or neighborhood participants and making them feel part of the larger effort. These effective network virtuosos have been an incredible boon to the organization, allowing it to expand and develop a distinctive identity. However, there is an implication for stability that comes from this pattern of organizational growth. Organizations are vulnerable to the sudden loss of their “supers” if the ability to make connections and implement actions is not more diffusely distributed throughout the organization and, to some degree, routinized.

CommUniverCity San José is clearly successful by the definitions of most of the stakeholders. We found that CUC excelled in building relationships, and yet

could improve as an organization in reaching particular constituencies. Based on a holistic assessment of the organization, as seen from the position of multiple stakeholders, we boldly made recommendations for change. This was a difficult task for me. I had to overcome decades of reflex rooted in cultural neutrality. Yet evaluation, even ethnographic evaluation, is based on the premise that we can give insights that can lead to actions.

Accordingly we suggested that CommUniver-City deepen rather than broaden its efforts, consciously think about growing in a way that is sustainable, builds resilience so that it can fail safe and intensify efforts to reach new ethnic communities and extend its efforts into parts of the neighborhood that have been underrepresented. Specifically, we recommended that they identify what is working and concentrate efforts there. We encouraged them to concentrate on creating pools of reliable competence and train a new generation of “players” with intentionality, not serendipity. Diverse people attend meetings and events and they could reframe their barriers into bridges, by recruiting community members to build new ties into language communities. Organizationally, we encouraged them to create conscious, distinct, and defined outreach strategies, and a set of tactics to go with them. That might mean including staff from the City of San José and students and faculty in the University who have not participated in the past. The time had come to make systematic self-analysis a sustainable practice so that the organization always knows where it is in relation to their strategic vision.

Note that most of these suggestions stem from two sources—listening to the different points of view articulated by different parts of the community and assessing the dynamics of the organization as a network of networks, one based on social capital as a principle but not necessarily harnessing the potential of its own meta-networks. These were lessons illustrated with copious quotations from interviewees and observations from the field.

In response to these suggestions a number of changes occurred. Terry Christianson, former director and ongoing leader commented, “Probably the most immediate change that has come is a restructuring of the steering committees so that it includes more resident representatives...now it is neighborhood by neighborhood, not just three people for the whole area.” Other changes, attributed to the discussions that emerged from our report include expanding outreach to parts of the community that have been overlooked in the past. When new projects are proposed, the steering committee is more consciously considering which part of the community is involved. CUC is working with potential youth leaders who could come to CUC and grow professionally. The goal is to have these leaders come back one day and mentor future generation. They are generating projects that

involve practicing English with mothers who speak Spanish, turning barriers into bridges into that community. The CUC Assessment Committee has being resurrected to create a sustainable qualitative and quantitative evaluation effort to inform policy.

However, not all stakeholders are delighted with our suggestions. Criticism can turn ethnographic rapport into defensiveness. No matter how constructively and diplomatically we tried to frame it as a discussion of what works and what doesn’t, the discussion made staff uncomfortable. I can see now, with hindsight, that by focusing on the organization, the partnership, and the arena of the Five Wounds Brookwood Terrace neighborhood, the larger context was seldom taken into consideration. San José City and State University are subject to the dysfunctional California economy and are experiencing the impact of a major recession, with massive budget cuts to municipal governments and the State Universities. Those cuts are causing pain and took place just as the report was being rolled out to the organization. The report may have had an impact on how those cuts were managed. However, in the minds of some of the stakeholders, the report is inextricably associated with organizational changes that were already happening—a hardening of organizational lines, an intensification of work and a contraction of the labor pool. So, for some, our evaluation was blamed for these changes. Given that we did not foresee and facilitate discussion of the impact of these larger economic forces, our gaze—like that of the leadership—was directed inward to the core activities, and so we missed an important opportunity in our evaluation to relate the organization to the larger societal context.

NOTES

¹English-Lueck, J.A. and Mayra Cerda, Carl de Soto, Mary Koskovich, Maribel Martinez, Michelle Nero, David Valpey, and Aracelis Velazquez Rivera comprised the ethnographic evaluation team from San José State University’s Anthropology program. Additional assistance was provided from graduate students Douglas Jones, and Priyanka Mehan, Christine Moellenberndt.

²In this ethnographic study, Darrah (2008) notes both the use of community as a metaphor, rather than a concrete social group, and of the perception of transience in the area.

³For a discussion of the differences between group-based or individually-based models of social capital, see Alejandro Portes, “The Two Meanings of Social Capital,” (2000) and Alejandro Portes and Patricia Landolt, “Unsolved Mysteries: The Tocqueville Files II: The Downside of Social Capital (1996). These articles explicitly explore the seminal ideas of Bourdieu and Coleman.

⁴Jacqueline Copeland-Carson consulted with us at vari-

ous times in the project, and we are grateful for her personal communication, and the creation of a NAPA Bulletin devoted to ethnographic Evaluation in 2005. Particularly useful were Stanley Hyland and Robert Brimhall's "Evaluation Anthropology in Community Development/Community Building," and Eve Pinsker and Michael Lieber's "Anthropological Approaches to the Evaluation of University-Community Partnerships." We also framed our process using Linda Camino's "What can Anthropologists Offer Ethnographic Program Evaluation?" (1997).

⁵ The mission statement from CommUniverCity San José's website, <http://communiversitiesanJose.org> identifies a list of priorities, including:

- 1). Continue streetscape improvement and traffic calming measures along 24th Street.
- 2). Implement a traffic calming strategy for cross-town routes and key intersections.
- 3). Increase law enforcement and crime prevention.
- 4). Create a "College-Going" culture in the neighborhood.
- 5). Improve and redevelop existing sites at 33rd Street and McKee Road.
- 6). Complete the trail network through the neighborhood.
- 7). Produce a plan for the redevelopment of the BART site.
- 8). Increase opportunities for youth and teen activities.
- 9). Increase the availability and outreach of healthcare services.
- 10). Expand housing and rehabilitation programs and outreach.

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