Reconciling the roles of "plantation owner" and university professor: Negotiating the terrain of community-engaged research and action

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Summary

Kathy Schultz writes about the research she conducted as a professor and school board member in an urban district. Her reflections lead to important questions about public scholarship.

Kathy Schultz escribe sobre una investigación que realizó como profesora y miembro de la junta escolar de un distrito escolar urbano. Sus reflexiones sugieren preguntas importantes sobre la investigación pública.

Keywords: public scholarship; community; school board

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Like many of my colleagues, I am frequently asked to contribute in one way or another to schools and communities around educational projects because of the presumed expertise I have as a scholar and former teacher. At times, this has meant joining advisory boards, leading professional development sessions, or talking to groups of parents or teachers. When I have felt that the work was important and that I had something unique to contribute, I have often agreed to participate in the event or project. This has led me to engage in work across the United States, primarily in urban communities, as well as in global contexts. As an educational anthropologist, I nearly always document my work, at times staying up late after long days of work to write extensive field notes. Although these notes are initially for my own records, they often lead to some form of publication, whether it is an essay, op-ed piece, or scholarly article. In this essay, I discuss my work as a school board member in a high poverty city to highlight some of the questions and dilemmas I have about the relationship of work in the public sphere to scholarship. In particular, I wonder aloud about the role of public scholarship in a situation where my primarily role was to join my colleagues on the board, along with the most engaged members of the community, to work toward the transformation of the teaching and learning conditions in a small urban district.

My work in this district and my subsequent writing about our work raised several questions for me about publicly-engaged scholarship and gave me the opportunity to reflect on my role and responsibilities as a university faculty and community member including: What is (and should be) the nature of collaboration in publicly-engaged scholarship? Who are the audiences of the work? What are the challenges and potential hazards of engaging in this work that sits at the intersection of scholarship and public service? Where is the line between scholarship and action, and how does that change over time?

I begin this essay with a brief description of the city and its politics. Next, I turn to a discussion of how we conceptualized the research and collected data. I highlight my positionality as both a board member and researcher and touch briefly on our fleeting accomplishments, as well as our failures. Finally, I reflect on how this experience informs my understanding of public scholarship.

Joining a School Board in an Urban District

In 2007, I was asked by a governor to serve as a member of a three-person Educational Empowerment Board, or school board, that oversaw a school district of 5,000

students located in a small high poverty community outside of large city. I was invited to be a member of this board because of my knowledge and experience as an educator involved in research and work in urban public schools. When I was asked to serve on the school board, I saw it as an important chance to put my beliefs into action and work toward changing conditions for learning for young people and families in this community that was adjacent to where I lived. As someone deeply concerned with the failure of most urban districts to provide equitable educational opportunities to all children, I felt compelled to join the board. It appeared possible to improve the educational conditions for youth in this city through this avenue, and I felt I had an obligation to use my knowledge and understandings to work toward change in a concrete way.

From the beginning, I sought to understand more about the district by talking with and learning from local activists and members of various community groups. I invited community members to talk with me about their central concerns for the district and sought to understand the complicated politics that guided decisions in the city. The politics in this city were particularly complex and somewhat unusual; the city is predominantly African American with most residents registered as Republicans, because of the role Republicans play in controlling hiring and services in the suburban county in which the city is located. This meant that, until recently, the mayor and other elected officials, including the elected school board, have been Republican.

Because of its dire financial circumstances and abysmally low test scores, for the greater part of two decades, the district had been overseen by governor-appointed school boards, whose authority superseded the elected school board. In addition, the political party governing the state has changed every eight years, which has meant that the educational strategies to address the struggling schools has also changed, without significant advances in the quality of the schools or changes in the status of the district. The board that I joined was appointed by a Democratic governor and comprised two African American males in addition to myself, a white female. None of us were residents of the city, although one board member had been a high school teacher, basketball coach, and superintendent in the district and had lived in the community for a short period of time. This meant that we were all considered outsiders. From the beginning, we knew that we were only going to be in our positions for a short time and that our goal was to improve conditions within the district sufficiently to allow governing authority to be returned to the local elected board.

During the time when the district was run by appointed boards, an elected board continued to meet, though with limited powers as mandated by the state. This dual form of governance meant that there was ongoing tension over who represented the community: the appointed board, the elected board, or the activists who attended every meeting. There had been ten superintendents in the district during the prior twelve years; our board hoped to support our superintendent to stay for at least two to three years so that we could work with him to achieve some measure of stability in the district. We also worked from the beginning to collaborate with and build leadership among the elected board members, though that

proved to be more difficult than we anticipated. As I describe in this essay, power was woven throughout all of our interactions.

"You Are Plantation Owners"

I begin with description of an interaction that occurred during our first board meeting that highlights issues of power when outsiders enter into a community, as well as some of the challenges of inviting community members to engage in research. We had been told that the community was angry at the previous board members, most recently because of their role in the closure of a district-run public school and its subsequent replacement by a for-profit charter school. Board meetings during this prior time had been contentious, often lasting late into the night, with frequent screaming matches and occasional fights. The board had built a low wall in front the stage between where they sat and the seating area for the community, demarcating a separation between the community and themselves. One of our first acts was to remove the wall. The most engaged community members believed that the former board members – who they considered outsiders – were profiting from their community. When our board was appointed to replace this prior board, there was a failed attempt to find a community member to sit on the new board. Several people were angry that there were no community members on our board and they made it clear that they wanted us to change it. Their anger over our outsider status and their distrust of a state-imposed board trumped the fact that, in general, we shared their priorities and vision for the district.

The meeting began when chair brought down the gavel and called the meeting to order. Some of the community members welcomed us to the district and informed us of their priorities and concerns. Parents spoke about the lack of textbooks, the deplorable conditions in the schools, the prevalence of fear and violence, and the large number of substitutes who were in positions that they believed should go to full-time teachers. We promised to visit the schools to better understand their strengths and challenges and assured them that it was our intention to procure funds to improve the conditions so that the children of this community would have the opportunity to be educated in a fair and equitable manner.

There were stories of the past era when this community had stronger, more vibrant academic and musical programs. Individuals noted the recent closing of schools and proliferation of charter schools with a sense of urgency. The district would collapse, community members explained, if the charter schools continued to expand. Nodding in agreement, we promised to take these concerns seriously and explained that we were already beginning to look into alternatives and responses.

Toward the end of the meeting, the comment of one community activist and pastor brought silence to the room. This older African American woman stood before the board, shaking with anger, and declared, "You are plantation owners." She proclaimed that we should not be allowed to dictate the policies of the district, arguing that at least one of us should step down from the board to make room for a resident who could speak for the

community. She elaborated, "Outsiders come in and they let us down. …We have to sit on this end and watch you all make decisions about us. …We understand [this community] better than any of you." In the ensuing months, when we proposed new programs and new configurations of the schools, her refrain was, "You're making decisions for this community and in five years *we* are going to have to live with those decisions." It was hard to disagree with this assessment; although we had a sincere interest in changing the educational opportunities in the district, our commitment was time bound and our knowledge limited by our outsider status (field notes, March 2007; Schultz, in press).

This story captures our initial entry into the community. As appointed board members, we did not have a role in composing the board. When I brought up this concern with the governor's staff who had led the selection process, they replied that they had hoped to choose someone from the community to be on the board, but could not find a person who had the "necessary qualifications." Only ten percent of adults in the city had more than a high school education. Because of the dual focus of improving the quality of teaching and the academic curriculum for the children and youth of this city, as well as the need to solve a severe financial crisis in the district, their assessment was that there was no one in the community who had the necessary expertise. When I carried the response back to the pastor who issued the challenge to us, her reply was simply that one of us should step down. We did not think that move would address the problem, because it was clear that the governor would simply appoint another person from outside rather than inside of the community. Still, I thought about that concern each time I was in the district, and constantly wondered if I should step down as she suggested. I was always conscious of the power and privilege inherent in my position and my decision to remain on the board.

From the beginning, our goal was to listen to the community, inform them as much as possible by making processes transparent, and engage them in as many decision-making processes as we could. We attempted to make up for the fact that we were outsiders, and while we may have succeeded with some members of the community, the pastor never completely trusted us. Although our guiding commitment as a board, repeated often, was that our decisions were centered on what was best for the children and youth of this community, that commitment was not enough.

The story highlights the power imbalance between the community and ourselves, as well as the distrust that was critical for us to address in order to work together. Community-engaged scholarship depends on collaboration between university-based researchers and community members who are interested in contributing to all aspects of the research process, including its conception and later its dissemination to a wider public audience. Although collaboration does not necessarily depend on equal contributions, it is certainly essential to understanding how knowledge and experience is differentially valued across individuals and groups engaged in the work. In this instance, our work was not primarily research, rather it was public service. My collection of data was meant to primarily document the process, rather than to inform our actions. However, because we documented

so many of the processes and intentionally talked to a wide array of people, soliciting their perspectives and understandings, our actions were necessarily shaped by our documentation.

Our Research Process

A graduate student, Katie McGinn Luet, joined me in this emergent research and together we interviewed more than fifty stakeholders in the district. These stakeholders included journalists, teachers, administrators, former board members, parents, students, and community members. We documented the public meetings as well as the smaller meetings that we each attended, with a focus on documenting how participation was understood and enacted. While most people did not express concerns about the research, we did not engage members of the community in the collection or analysis of data, primarily because of time and their lack of interest in this role. It is critical to note that this was foremost an opportunity to play a role in the community rather than conduct a research project. The unpaid work of serving on the school board often added another twenty hours of work each week on top of my full-time position as a faculty member and director of teacher education at a nearby university. And while I approached the most activist community members to discuss the possibility of their working with us on a collaboratively designed project, they did not see an immediate benefit to doing so and I did not have funds to pay them.

As a result, our collaboration can be characterized as research conducted *on* the community, potentially *for* the community, but not *with* the community. Later, when we analyzed the data and wrote up the research—as book chapters and journal articles, a dissertation (that Katie wrote), and in essays such as this one—the audience was not the community. At the same time, I used the data we collected to inform my statements in public meetings in the city, including a variety of forms of hearings about closing charter schools and opening a proposed charter school as a public school. My decisions as a board member, including our meetings with the governor's staff to procure more money for district projects, were also directly shaped by the data we collected. These uses, however, had limited public audiences.

As a traditional research project, Katie and I conceptualized the work as an investigation of the historical, social, political, and economic events that preceded the three-year term of our school board; to record a range of stakeholders' understanding of the events in the district; and to follow the key events that occurred during this period of reform (2007-2010) (Schultz & McGinn, 2013). We used a traditional set of qualitative methods to collect and analyze for this project. This was useful for my mentorship of Katie as a graduate student and also for my promotion as a university faculty member, as I was an associate professor at that time. Given my longstanding commitment to public scholarship, I was also interested in understanding this work as a form of publicly-engaged research. As I have described, it was difficult for me to enact this as collaborative research, when I was embroiled in the politics of the district, given my role and the power that was inherent in that role. It was also challenging to reconceptualize the project as public scholarship in the

midst of becoming a board member—which literally happened overnight—and without the opportunity to build relationships with the community, or even with my fellow board members—before I began my work in that role.

While there was general understanding that the research aspect of my engagement in the district would serve the district, and the board and superintendent officially approved the research project in the first month that we began our work together, two people did express disapproval of the work to Katie. For example, another local pastor told us that he found the idea of the project "distasteful," and that while he liked me, he worried that I was exploiting the district by doing this research (Interview, April 24, 2008). One of my fellow board members also expressed frustration with the amount of research that has been done in the school district over time to both Katie and me. Although he officially approved of this research project, he added the following caveat: "one of the things that I will not vote for again is more studies of this district. This district has been a laboratory for more experiments than I think any district should have been. …We've been prodded and poked enough to last a lifetime" (Interview, November 5, 2008). As a result, although I knew that the research was useful in the decision-making, I also understood the fault-lines and the general distrust of research because it is so often used against, rather than for or with, communities. My colleague's comments echoed those of the pastor when she described our board as plantation owners.

There is no question that my fellow board members and I had the community's interest in mind when we agreed to join the board for this district. The chair of the board was an attorney with close political ties to the governor. He had worked for several public agencies, including the local port authority and the city housing agency. The secretary/treasurer worked closely with the state secretary of education to implement the secretary's vision of standards-based curriculum reform. People often commented that he had been in and out of the district for years and that they never knew when he would show up again—or leave. He has recently become the superintendent of the district almost ten years after our term ended. I came to the board as a university professor committed to preparing teachers for urban schools and addressing inequities in high poverty urban school districts. I brought knowledge of teaching and learning, an anthropologist's perspective on understanding structural inequality, and a commitment to listening and working closely with the community to identify how to work with them to improve their schools. I believed that my commitment to work with, rather than for, the community would overcome the visible distrust we encountered on our first day. Each decision that we made illustrated the power we held because of the ways that we were positioned, and the stance we claimed, in the district. As a group, we worked tirelessly to improve the educational conditions in the district. Our close relationship with the governor meant that we had access to more funds and were able to accomplish things that were out of reach in the past.

Reflections on Public Scholarship

While I used my knowledge as an ethnographer to systematically understand the context in order to ground our decisions in local understandings and knowledge, in the end, most of our decisions were made in the heat of the moment and guided primarily by the superintendent's immediate goals. We frequently had to make rapid decisions in public meetings, such as whether to support the superintendent to buy computer programs and textbooks to bolster the failing curriculum and how to negotiate an agreement with several unions to restore back pay while addressing the budget shortfalls and the enormous payments on loans that were paralyzing the district. We discussed whether to pursue legal strategies to shut down charter schools that were failing to educate children and siphoning money out of the district, despite support for those schools among some vocal members of the community. For a variety of reasons, we ended up aligning our strategies with the activist group that opposed the growth of charter schools, creating distrust we never addressed between some members of the community and ourselves (Schultz, in press). Each of these decisions had to be made relatively quickly, drawing on the facts at hand, while taking into account a complex and shifting political environment.

My role was primarily as a board member and through our research, I hoped to inform our decisions and also learn from the experience in ways that might inform others. Although, in the moment, the research was entwined with my actions, in the end I have shared most of what I learned with academics in books, journals, and conferences, and in some cases a wider public audience, rather than with the community itself. In retrospect, I wish I had paid more attention to how to conduct research with the community and how to disseminate information in places and formats that may have benefitted them. All the same, I am not sure that in this case, research collaboration would have made a difference in the ultimate outcomes.

I continue to return to the metaphor of a plantation owner to understand what it can teach me as I think about how to conduct and support public scholarship in my current roles as both a researcher and dean of a school of education. While the pastor used this term to indicate our status as outsiders who were appointed rather than elected by the community, there is clearly a deeper significance to this term, especially as it applies to my role as a scholar and the power signified by that position. I wonder how I embodied the metaphorical role of a plantation owner, as we harvested data from the community rather than working more closely with them in its collection and analysis. In what ways did I (or we) wield power over them with the data that we did not invite them to analyze with us? To be sure, they had little or no interest in doing this work; however, what are the ways we could have shaped the research so that it felt important or consequential to them. How did we eclipse their learning by keeping it for ourselves? Finally, I believe we might have done a better job of sharing the data with them in other ways. While it may have informed my decisions over the long run, I did not make it public in a way that it could inform their decisions and perspectives. I continue to wonder about the venues or formats I might have used for this purpose.

Public scholarship is a notion that simultaneously suggests engagement and distance, mirroring the role that the academy has relative to society at large, especially in public universities such as my own. Universities are a critical part of society in their mission to educate the public, prepare students to take on various roles in the larger community, and through applied research provide knowledge for the use by, and potential betterment of, society. At the same time, universities are often seen as apart from society, occupying rarified positions as elitist institutions, with their work largely in the clouds and far away from real world issues and concerns. The pastor, who claimed we were plantation owners, was fundamentally questioning the presumption of the governor and his staff that we had salient knowledge to bring to bear to help solve the challenges in the school district. She was questioning whether the cumulative knowledge and experience the three of us had, was more critical than her lived knowledge and experience gained by residing in and serving the local community. Research was likely immaterial to her goals, and the goals of her neighbors. Their priority was to attain better opportunities for the youth in their city.

As public scholars, we too often assume that we have knowledge, perspective, insights and ability to formulate questions, gather and analyze data and that if we engage the local community in this process, our research will yield critical findings that will ultimately translate into a brighter future. Once we left the district, it became all too apparent to me that the pastor was right. The three of us may have had university degrees and knowledge of finance, teaching and learning, and educational policy, but at the end of the day poverty and entrenched politics were the dominant forces at work in that community. From her own experience, she had no doubt that would be the case.

We came to the city as board members with good intentions, did all the right things in terms of garnering money for the district, addressing a few of the most salient challenges, changing conditions in the schools. We met with a wide range of people. We listened, and tirelessly worked to get things done — against all odds. I know there were moments when the pastor ultimately came to value those efforts and more, though I cannot say for certain. For me the greatest lesson was about the limits of public scholarship in the face of larger societal forces such as poverty and racism.

I now understand more about how the research I conducted, as well as my stance as a researcher, shaped my participation as a board member. At the same time, I recognize that my stance as a public scholar did not give me the tools to make the kind of lasting and transformative changes I hoped to make when I agreed to join the board. I now realize how public scholarship is useful for informing a larger and broader audience about issues that are salient to their lives. At the same time, I understand more about the limitations of public scholarship—and of myself as a scholar interested in engaging in local issues—in complex and seemingly intransigent situations, such as this one.

Our term on board lasted two and a half years and my colleague, Katie Luet, remained in the district for at least one more year. By most research standards, that is a long period of time for data collection. While we used this time to build strong relationships

with many members of the community, it was not enough time to build the requisite trust we needed to truly engage community members in the research or to convince them of its merit. In the end, I am left with questions about how to combine public scholarship with public engagement. At the same time, I know more about how I would approach this kind of opportunity or role, explicitly framing it as public scholarship from the beginning. In addition, I know that in the future I would use my position differently to conduct research with and for the community. The notion of public scholarship, in part, is transforming conventional notions of research. How might it also transform traditional ideas about taking on leadership and activist roles in the community?

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