

Community-University Engagement in a time of COVID-19

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Can a virus do more quickly what humans have been slow to accomplish? One of the narratives emerging from the interaction of COVID-19 with higher education is the collapse of the boundaries between town and gown. With so many students, academics and staff working from home, there is no longer a physical separation between community and higher education. Community University engagement is moving ahead at an accelerated pace, not as an academic fashion, but because bringing together all manners of knowledge from community wisdom to epidemiology is a matter of our very survival. COVID-19, it could be said, is advancing a new architecture of knowledge.

Since middle of March, all colleges and universities have been shut down in countries around the world. The corona virus has affected every part of the world and every sector of society.

Universities everywhere have responded to COVID-19 in creative and remarkable ways. In some parts of the world where COVID has been more contained, universities have reopened to face to face teaching. But in the majority of countries universities have mobilized a vast array of digital platforms to provide on-going teaching to their students over internet-based 'classrooms'. The results of recent ACU's digital engagement survey highlights the digital divide and its impact on universities' current capacity to deliver teaching and research. The findings show clear disparities in terms of internet access: while 83% of respondents from high income countries had access to broadband, this figure was only 19% for respondents from low income countries. Despite being more likely to experience challenges when remote working – including data costs, internet speed, and internet reliability – colleagues in lower income countries were also less likely to receive institutional support through contributions to data costs and devices.

Examining science's place in society

The disruption of “normal” life caused by COVID-19 is transforming science's place in society, even its standard practices. For example, researchers are launching partnerships with associations to advance their work and their research networks are offering multiple webinars to all internet users instead of in-person seminars for peers in “closed” research centres. Citizen science movements are also taking on a more influential roleⁱ, as demonstrated by [Just One Giant Lab](#), which brings scientists and non-scientists together “to develop innovations to adapt to the COVID-19 epidemic (detection tests, syringe pumps, etc.), all at a lower costⁱⁱ. Fablabsⁱⁱⁱ and other makerspaces are imagining new ways to produce masks^{iv}, syringes and prototype respirators^v, while non-governmental organizations and scientists are bringing society

into the fold by launching community-based, participatory research projects to fight inequalities^{vi}.

COVID-19 is creating new learning forms of community engagement

The breaking down of boundaries between formal and academic science that is illustrated in the previous paragraph is just one of the new forms of openness for knowledge sharing evident from the pedagogical impact of the corona virus. We have also learned that survival and resilience in many parts of the world has occurred because local knowledge and wisdom has been brought to bear on the pandemic. In the face of a virus with no cure, the only way forward has been the combining of local knowledge, family practices and everyday wisdom with science. Importantly attention to the accumulation of local knowledge has meant more respect for mother tongue languages, Indigenous or traditional knowledge and cultures where such knowledge is embedded.

Another lesson being learned from COVID-19 is that solutions are not disciplinary. Universities historically have grown comfortable with dividing knowledge into specific discourses or disciplines for which they fight for resources within academic institutions. But is the pandemic simply a matter of epidemiology? Or has the impact of our teacher, COVID-19 revealed that survival is also a question of gender, of attention to issues of race and discrimination, of dramatic levels of inequality in income, land, food, digital access and more? And further our contemporary experiences in engaged, community-driven scholarship have challenged our understanding of knowledge cultures including the ideas of impact, usefulness, and speed. A typical academic study can be relatively relaxed if results and publication take 3-6 years to come in some form to the public. COVID-19 tells us that engaged scholarship needs to bring benefits to us all as soon as possible. And we have been encouraged to drop our dependence solely on academic journals and conferences as the spaces to get findings out. Community-based participatory research is now moving at previously unheard speeds and is finding its way directly to the community, shortcutting the knowledge supply chain by years or even decades.

Planning for the future:

- Redesign the curriculum of current courses to introduce a component of field study to monitor current situation in those communities and neighbourhoods nearby
- Engage with local administration, community organizations in identifying poor and vulnerable families and persons who have not been able to access various government benefits, and share the same with such relevant agencies
- Undertake widespread multi or trans-disciplinary studies on public health practices and situations in such communities (both rural and urban) in partnership with local communities, including competencies and skills of frontline workers and community leaders, and innovate solutions for the same

- Participate actively to support frontline health and sanitation workers in spreading awareness and behavior change communication
- Review domain knowledge systems in light of pandemic's long-term message for changes in the architecture of knowledge recognizing an ecology of epistemologies

ⁱ Dinneen, J. (2020, April 17). Covid-19 can't stop citizen science. *Undark*. <https://undark.org/2020/04/17/covid-19-citizen-science/>

ⁱⁱ Meghraoua, L. (2020, April 22). *Covid-19 : la science participative, une troisième voie pour la recherche scientifique?* Usbek & Rica. <https://usbeketrica.com/article/covid-19-science-participative-troisieme-voie-recherche>

ⁱⁱⁱ Lhoste, K. (2020, April 27). Les fablabs apportent des solutions concrètes et locales à la crise du Covid-19. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/les-fab-labs-apportent-des-solutions-concretes-et-locales-a-la-crise-du-covid-19-136277>

^{iv} Makerspace. (2020). *Make a "No-Sew" Covid-19 mask*. <https://www.makerspaces.com/make-a-no-sew-covid-19-mask/>

^v Belga. (2020, March 25). *Coronavirus en Belgique : les Fablabs wallons développent des prototypes, dont un respirateur, pour lutter contre le Covid-19*. RTBF. https://www.rtb.be/info/dossier/epidemie-de-coronavirus/detail_coronavirus-en-belgique-les-fablabs-wallons-developpent-des-prototypes-dont-un-respirateur-pour-lutter-contre-le-covid-19?id=10467504

^{vi} Garg S, Bhatnagar N, Gangadharan N. (2020, April 16). A Case for Participatory Disease Surveillance of the COVID-19 Pandemic in India. *JMIR Public Health Surveill*. 2020;6(2):e18795. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32287038/>