# A Reflective Conversation: Community and HEI Perspectives on Community-Based Research<sup>*</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper is a reflective correspondence between a community partner and a community-based research coordinator in a higher education institute (HEI). We asked each other questions about our experience of collaborating on two community-based research (CBR) projects, in order to share our learning from our collaboration, and to relate this to the wider context in order to develop recommendations for others – community partners and HEI staff – who would like to initiate CBR projects in the future.

**Keywords:** Community-based research, higher education, adult education, community education, collaboration, community, university, science shop.

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## Introduction

In 2011/12, three postgraduate students in Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) each embarked on collaborative research projects in response to research questions which had been proposed by members of the AONTAS Community Education Network. This collaborative research approach is known as community-based research (CBR), or 'science shop' research (the latter is a European term which is better translated into English as 'knowledge workshop'). CBR or Science Shop research involves collaboration for mutual benefit between community partners, who propose the research idea, and student researchers and supervisors, who complete the research, often as part of the students' accredited studies. The community partners support the research in progress, and receive the final research report which they can use and disseminate to support their ongoing work, and to lobby for policy change where relevant. Students are supervised, and assessed, by academic staff in the normal way, while liaising with the community partner, in particular in defining the research question and in the early stages of planning the research, and identifying participants for data collection. The research project has real-life application which should be of value to the community partner. When a project finishes there is usually some form of evaluation/debriefing, to assess the process and outcomes and to plan for future collaboration.

This article is the transcript of a written correspondence between Niamh O'Reilly (AONTAS) and Dr. Catherine Bates (DIT). The suggestion to co-write this paper came from AONTAS, in response to the call for papers for this issue of AISHE-J. We had previously discussed the possibility of writing about our experiences of working together, in order to share our learning. This dialogical process acts as a tool for critical reflection, both personally and through the eyes of the collaborative partner, in order to examine the projects we engaged in and explore our experiences of the collaboration. Therefore, the article is not an academic piece based on research, rather the learning and recommendations offered are grounded in personal opinion gained through the act of creating this paper. Although the limitations of this approach are evident it offers an appropriate space for evaluating the partnership process, rather than the

product, which is essential for future effective partnership work. Furthermore, the format of this paper worked well given our respective time constraints. As a collaboration between an academic and community partner, this paper goes some way towards addressing the paucity of research into the community perspective on such collaborations identified by Tryon and Stoecker (2008). The format of this paper also avoids the positioning of community partners as 'objects' of research, as we both have equal voices here.

**Background and context.**

AONTAS (National Adult Learning Organisation) is a voluntary membership organization that exists to promote the development of a learning society through the provision of a quality and comprehensive system of adult learning and education which is accessible to and inclusive to all. In order to build the capacity of one large cohort of the membership, community educators, to raise their voice and advocate for their needs the AONTAS Community Education Network was established in 2007. With over 130 members, the Network engages in capacity building actions to facilitate evidence-based, strategic lobbying activities in order to strengthen the community education sector.

Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) supports and promotes collaborative curriculum-based projects between students and communities through its Programme for Students Learning With Communities (SLWC), part of the DIT Access and Civic Engagement Office. SLWC was set up in 2008, following a previous 3-year pilot project in this area. Between 2008 and 2013, over five thousand students in DIT engaged in collaborative projects with communities as part of their coursework.

Most of these students were involved in class-based community-based learning projects, which tend to have a focus on process, but a smaller number of individual students chose to become involved in community-based research projects, usually for their thesis or major project module, where the emphasis was on the research output as much as the process. These students

choose a topic from a list of research questions compiled by SLWC staff from ideas submitted by a wide range of community partners (these ideas are collected at meetings with interested community partners, which take place on an ongoing basis, with annual check-ins to ensure that project ideas are still live). After submitting an application form to SLWC, students have a meeting with SLWC staff and their lecturer to discuss their ideas and the module learning outcomes (on which they will be assessed). Then a further meeting involves the lecturer, community partner, and student, facilitated by SLWC staff, collaboratively agreeing the research question, the broad research process, the timeline for future contacts, and a deadline for the completion and handover of the research project. The student submits for ethical approval as per standard DIT guidelines, and they may also require approval from the community partners' ethics committee (if there is one). If the research design will involve significant contact between the student and community members, the community partner normally provides an informal induction into the community for the student, as well as introductions to relevant community members. In 2011/12, three of the research ideas selected by students were from AONTAS Community Education Network. Two students on the MA in Child, Family and Community Studies selected relevant topics, as did one on the MA in Higher Education. One of Child, Family and Community Studies students decided to change their research topic at an early stage, but the other two students completed their projects.

Community-based research involves three key principles which differentiate it from mainstream academic research, as articulated by Strand et al (2003). It is 'a collaborative enterprise between academic researchers (professors and students) and community members. CBR validates multiple sources of knowledge and promotes the use of multiple methods of discovery and dissemination of the knowledge produced. CBR has as its goal social action and social change for the purpose of achieving social justice' (p. 8). Reflection is a central part of CBR, as it allows students to tease out and clarify their own learning from the process – their personal learning, academic learning, and also the social insights they develop as a result of the research and collaboration (which hopefully lead them to work for social justice and change) (Strand et al 2003: 121-2). As practitioners involved in this area, we felt that we too

should be reflecting on our experience to tease out the relevant learning, which is where the idea came from for this paper.

Although the partnership would not be considered a teaching process, our involvement in higher and community education lends itself to engage in a critically reflective process in order to analyse and improve our practice. In Cunningham's exploration of reflective practice, she noted that the goal is not to address a specific problem, as in practitioner research, but to observe and refine practice (2001), which is in keeping with the aim of this reflection. Brookfield (1995) sees critical reflection as ideological, stemming from values of justice, fairness and compassion in the pursuit of democracy (p.27) as it identifies underlying issues of power. However, within this partnership the relationship appears to be on an equal level as both partners have experience of working in both community education and higher education, and we also have equivalent levels of education, which reduces imbalances of power. We feel mutual respect and value for each other's contribution.

Within the context of this collaborative partnership by engaging in critical reflection through a written conversation we can draw on two of the four lenses of critical reflection which Brookfield identified[1], namely autobiographical and through our colleague's eyes. This facilitates the exploration of the partnership process between the main link partners, however, a fuller reflection would involve the views of the student and community group and framing the findings in theoretical literature, i.e. the use of all four lenses. As such, this email conversation[2], acts as the starting point to a potentially fuller exploration as a form of evaluation, however this is outside the scope of this article which focuses on a reflective written conversation.

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1    (1) the autobiographical, (2) the students' eyes, (3) our colleagues' experiences, and (4) theoretical literature (Brookfield, 1995, p.37-38)

2  This email correspondence took place between July and September of 2013.

**The conversation.**

Catherine (DIT):

Why did you want to get involved in collaborative research projects with DIT students?

Niamh (AONTAS):

As the national co-ordinator of the AONTAS Community Education Network, I was keenly aware of the challenges facing community education groups and the need to advocate through evidence based lobbying, however, relevant, responsive and free research was in short supply. The Network members had a wealth of ideas, and needs, regarding research but due to limited funding, groups were restricted in engaging in research. Furthermore, an objective of the Network was to create greater awareness about what community education is: its ethos, methodologies and issues. Therefore, the opportunity to collaborate in a meaningful research project that would also help spread the word about community education, particularly in a higher education institution, was welcomed.

Catherine (DIT):

How did you find the process of getting the partnership/collaboration up and running?

Niamh (AONTAS):

Initiating the process was straightforward, there were two key staff members in DIT Access and Civic Engagement (Catherine and Sinead) involved and communication; by email, phone and in person; was supportive, frank and clear. The Network were asked for a selection of research questions that they found pertinent to their work and a list was compiled, shared with DIT Access and Civic Engagement Office staff, and used as a basis for selection by Masters students. The students who chose a topic from the Network's list met myself, DIT Access and Civic Engagement Office staff and their supervisor, in order to clarify what our understanding of the topic was. Overall, the process was quite simple, which could be attributed to the

knowledge and experience of the DIT staff particularly in terms of their understanding of community education.

Can I now ask, in your opinion, what was the driving force behind the students' decision to take up a collaborative research project? Particularly one regarding community education?

Catherine (DIT):

The students saw this topic on the list of social science research questions from community partners, and chose to research topics relating to understanding and facilitating the transition from Community Education to Higher Education. One student had come through adult education themselves, and wanted to do some research on this area that would be useful to others. Another had worked in the community sector before starting on the part-time MA in Child, Family and Community Studies. This student felt that researching this topic would help them to re-connect with the issues and current thinking in community education, which would be beneficial in terms of their future career, as well as contributing to the work of the AONTAS Community Education Network.

Niamh (AONTAS):

Were there any challenges in engaging academic staff with the topic of community education?

Catherine (DIT):

In both cases the students' interest in the subject area was the main driver of the project, and the means by which the academic supervisors became involved. The students submitted a thesis proposal focused on this research question, and identified a supervisor based on their ideas. One of the supervisors hadn't been involved in supervising a CBR project before, but was interested in the approach, and seemed to find it helpful that we could send them a

general CBR process map and also a template of a collaborative research agreement form that we use for these projects[1]. We met with the supervisor and the student first, to explain the process and answer any questions they had, and then you joined the meeting. This meant that you, the supervisor and the student could jointly discuss each of your goals, so we could agree a broad research question and timeframe that would allow the research to benefit all the participants. You each seemed enthused about the collaboration, and the project took off from there.

Now for you, these projects are supposed to be designed to mutually benefit all participants. How would you say that you, the students, and the supervisor benefitted from this collaboration, and would you say that it was equally beneficial to all of you, or was there any imbalance?


Niamh (AONTAS):

I found the project very beneficial on a number of levels, in terms of: creating a space to reflect on the research topic in more detail; consider the challenges of researching community education from an external researcher's perspective; gaining a valuable research report and, importantly, working in collaboration with a higher education institution.

I think it is difficult to say how beneficial the collaboration was for the student or the supervisor. However, as I worked more closely with the student I would speculate that they enjoyed working on a topic they had a strong interest in and benefited from the knowledge and experience of all the partners: AONTAS, the community group, in addition to the DIT staff. I would suggest that the supervisor benefited from the support the student received from the

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1] These documents were both adapted from models used by colleagues in University College Cork and Queen's University Belfast, with whom we collaborate as part of an EU-funded project PERARES, which is designed to encourage public engagement in research and researchers' engagement with society. Part of that project involved partners sharing tools and processes related to community-based research with each other, and piloting them in other institutions. The DIT documents are available at:
http://dit.ie/ace/slwc/caniseecurrentideasfromcommunitiesforprojectsresearch/

partners which strengthen the research project and the fact that the topic had real significance to community groups which would afford the research a greater lifespan after submission for the Masters. Perhaps, academics would find such a collaboration useful to contribute to social justice work and link theory to practice in a meaningful way.

I would suggest that there is an imbalance in the benefits gained, however, again I must reiterate that I am speculating as to the benefits received. As the project is effectively an academic year in duration, the results are not immediate, therefore initially the project partners benefit to a different degree. At the outset the student benefits, then the supervisor but ultimately the community group partner must act upon the information it receives at the end of the project in order to inform their practice or advocacy work. I believe community partners need to look at the bigger picture and consider such collaborative work for long-term gains rather than immediate.

Catherine (DIT):

What was the most challenging aspect of this collaborative research project for you?

Niamh (AONTAS):

In hindsight it would be useful to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of all partners at the outset of the project, this would allow clear boundaries to be established. The lack of clarity for all parties was a challenge, the potentially problematic blurring of lines between the role of supervisor and community partner did arise as the respective roles were unclear to the student initially. However, due to the open relationship with the coordinating body, the DIT Access and Civic Engagement Office (SLWC), the issue was handled with great sensitivity, honesty and directness which resulted in a timely resolution to the issue in which all parties were satisfied. I think this is testament to you and your commitment to the project and skills, both interpersonal and communicative. With that said, however, the challenge provided the most significant learning for me from the whole project and has strengthened my faith in future collaborative

work with DIT Access and Civic Engagement Office.

I would actually like to ask you the same questions – What was the most challenging aspect of this collaborative research project for you?


Catherine (DIT):

I agree that both of these projects revealed a lack of clarity about each participant's role, in our processes and structures. We learned a lot at the time from your thoughtful reflections on this issue, and with some discussion we were able to clarify those roles together. Following these projects, Sinead McCann (SLWC staff) developed a resource called Guidelines on Roles for CBR Projects (now on our website) which outlines the roles that each participant can expect to adopt during the research process, including useful tips. I think that the subtleties of the different types of community education (adult education being delivered in communities, versus community-devised education programmes) proved quite a challenge for us in DIT to grasp. As this is your area of expertise, as coordinator of the AONTAS Community Education Network, you might have found the to-ing and fro-ing on this subject, to clarify exactly what groups the student was going to conduct research with, a little frustrating (although you never showed it), but it was essential to ensure that the research was really relevant to your concerns.


Niamh (AONTAS):

How would you say that the community, the students, and the supervisor benefitted from this collaboration, and would you say that it was equally beneficial to all, or was there any imbalance?


Catherine (DIT):

I would hope that the benefits were mutual on this project – the students produced high quality qualitative research, to their own benefit and that of the AONTAS Community Education Network, and the student who wanted to re-engage with the community sector also got to do so in the process. I agree that having the student engaged with a community partner adds value to the process for student and lecturer, and you brought your considerable expertise to both these projects - providing relevant reading lists, helping the students tease out the focus of their projects, and offering an introduction to relevant groups who would take part in focus group research. I think the point you make about the timing of the benefits differing for all parties is very interesting. We might build that into our project start-up meetings from now on, just so everyone is clear on when the benefits will accrue to them (we currently agree deadlines for submissions of research reports, but the issue of the timing of benefits is slightly different).

Niamh (AONTAS):

As the process is quite organic, would you consider putting more structure into the project given your experience of this work? Or is it better to be fluid rather than prescriptive and respond to each individual project as appropriate?

Catherine (DIT):

We keep asking ourselves this question. Because we work with such a range of discipline areas, levels of study (undergraduate and postgraduate), and community partners, we feel that every project has to have the scope to develop in a way that will suit those particular collaborators, and we work to support the process in a fluid way. Having said that, we realized over time that some essential structures were required by each project, so we developed templates for those: a community-based research process map and a collaborative research agreement form, which covers things like deadlines, contact points, and intellectual property agreements, as well as a 3-stage application process (as mentioned above, available on our

website). These are currently constants across all the projects which we support, although we regularly review and develop our practice, often in response to projects that work less well than others, as we try to adapt our structures to cope with any new challenges that emerge. Challenging projects offer more learning opportunities than those that run smoothly, as you have already pointed out, although we might wish that all projects would run without a hitch. Other than these templates, which we use at the early stages, we like to let the projects evolve, which does seem to be a feature of CBR internationally, as outcomes and even goals tend to be emergent rather than fixed.

How did *you* feel about the structure we had in place for the project, and also for the dissemination process afterwards?


Niamh (AONTAS):

I felt the structure was flexible enough to provide space for the project to develop, but it also had enough milestone actions e.g. research agreements, to ensure that we kept the work on track and ultimately had clarity that this is a collective piece of work. Initially, I thought that an extra structure was needed, another layer of agreement for example, that should be discussed regarding the roles and responsibilities of partners. However, on reflection given the multitude of programmes which are in progress under the DIT Access and Civic Engagement Office a more fluid approach is required. Furthermore, I think structure is secondary to creating a process which cultivates an open, trusting relationship with partners. Like adult education, process is essential and the resource produced by Sinead is an excellent tool to support an effective collaborative process, which rather than being an administrative agreement is a useful outline to revert to over the course of the project. It reminds me of setting the ground rules for an adult learning group, it outlines how the group will work together but is a living tool that is used to keep the processes in check.

Unfortunately, I don't feel qualified enough to comment on the dissemination process as I was on leave from work when that part of the project commenced. The dedicated section of the website for downloading the reports is very clear. Perhaps a final discussion around a

dissemination strategy by all partners could be organized for future projects, this could act as a way to close the project and agree methods for ensuring the longevity of the research.


Catherine (DIT):

If I can just respond to this, I think it's a really good idea to have a dissemination discussion at the end of a project with all partners. We do address the issue of dissemination briefly at the start of every project, where all partners discuss how they would like to disseminate the work, but we don't currently revisit this at the end. With CBR there can be emergent and unexpected outcomes, which could benefit from different dissemination strategies than those originally discussed. It would be very useful learning for the students, too, to think about putting the results of their work to practical use, such as lobbying for policy change or other developments. One applied research project involved a youth club collaborating with interior design students to redesign the centre's rooms. At the project start-up meeting, we discussed the possibility of finding money to implement some of the design solutions that would emerge, and considered asking the students to fill out funding applications to cover the costs of paint and materials. This kind of task could offer students a really interesting insight into ways to fund interior design projects, and force them to develop arguments for the value of interior design to persuade the funders, further benefitting the youth club by saving time and effort on their funding application. We should have more conversations on dissemination as part of these projects, as you say, in order to contribute to social change.

Can I ask how you plan to use the research reports – for example, you mentioned the issue of social justice above, could they be useful in relation to that goal? And are there things we could do to help you to put them to good use (resources permitting!), rather than just handing them over to you, and putting them on our website, and leaving it at that?


Niamh (AONTAS):

Linking to the last answer, I have not initiated using the reports as of yet. However, I will raise it with the group who generated the research question, the AONTAS Community Education Network, and invite the students/researchers to present their findings, which will spark a collective discussion on their future uses. As collaborative partnership work is not the main focus of the AONTAS Community Education Network (CEN) there is a risk that the research produced through the community based research (CBR) project becomes an aside, in that it is an add-on activity which could be forgotten about on completion. This leads me to think that there is a need to integrate collaborative partnership work into the ongoing work of the Network, thus allowing greater use and benefit from the outcome of such CBR projects. I envisage this research coming under the 'evidence' strand of the next phase of CEN strategic planning, which will be used to support advocacy and promotion of community education. The challenge of moving from practice (CEN), to theory (DIT project), to action (using the research report) needs constant reflection and collective agreement, which I believe is ultimately the responsibility of the community partner. However, this can only be achieved by embedding CBL into the ongoing work of the CEN.

Can I ask you, in line with the discussion on the final phase of the project, i.e. dissemination, how do you see this kind of research being valued, recognized and promoted in the academic research community?

Catherine (DIT):

In general terms, collaborative research projects are currently promoted and recognised within the academic research community in the same way as more traditional, individual research projects: conference papers, and/or article or chapter or book publication, and/or research funding are all indicators of value. This is partly driven by the international context (e.g. global ranking systems for Higher Education Institutions, that use publications in peer-reviewed journals as a key measure of research activity in a HEI – e.g. Strand et al 2003: 14), and also partly related to the fact that CBR is a relatively new approach to research in Ireland.

I think those of us involved in this area will need to work collaboratively to raise the profile of this work across the HEI sector. In some more traditional areas there can be a fear that academic freedom, and curiosity-driven research, might be compromised by encouraging researchers to respond to research questions from society. Our experience, however, (and that of our colleagues across Europe and elsewhere, e.g. Gall et al 2009) is that these collaborations make research more relevant, more immediate, and more responsive to society's needs, increasing the researcher's understanding by adding the community partner's expertise to the research process, and involving the researcher in areas, and with groups, that might otherwise be closed to them. A researcher will only pick up a question from a community partner if it interests them and relates to their own research goals and intellectual curiosity[1]. We need to find new ways to value,  recognize, and encourage collaborative research within the academic community, to highlight the added benefits and challenges of doing real-world research in collaboration with communities outside the HEI.

Niamh (AONTAS):

I understand that community –academic partnerships and service learning activities are the exception rather than the norm in Ireland and could be viewed as a peripheral activity of the Academy. Would you agree with this and how would you see this becoming more

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1  One could argue that, in light of public funding for researchers and academics, researchers should be required to engage in projects that address questions from society (community organisations being a sector of society), and in the UK and across Europe there is increasing emphasis on societal impact and public engagement in research (see http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/pe/embedding/ for example). As researchers are unlikely to do effective research unless they are working in an area that interests them, however, making this a requirement for all researchers could be counter-productive, until appropriate databases of research questions from all areas of society were available for all academic disciplines. It could be very effective, however, to require a gradual growth in the level of research which responds to questions from society, in particular in HEIs where there are structures in place to collect questions from community partners. This could redress the current imbalance where communities have to wait for lecturers and/or research students to take an interest in the projects they have suggested. This, however, is beyond the scope of this reflective paper.

'mainstream'? Furthermore, what could the community do to support the future of this work?

Catherine (DIT):

I agree that this type of activity has been the exception in the past, but community-engaged learning and research are becoming more normalized, particularly in HEIs which have been fortunate to secure funding for coordinators for this work (such as DIT), where community-engaged approaches are now seen as an accepted way of teaching and learning, and researching. Irish HEIs are currently looking for better ways to engage students in their programmes, and community-based learning is being actively promoted by many learning and teaching units, and in institutional strategies, as an effective way to show students that their studies are relevant to society, and to engage them in real-life projects. Community-engaged work also helps to widen participation in higher education, and can relate to issues of Access, which is another national priority for Higher Education in Ireland (Hunt 2011). Community-academic partnerships can help fulfil several Higher Education strategy goals, which means that these partnerships are likely to become even more mainstream. In terms of what communities can do to help with this, we in DIT have had huge support from all the community partners who work with us, and particularly from the community partners on our advisory board, who give us advice on our plans and make sure they are relevant and workable from the community perspective. I think that it can be a little difficult for community partners to influence HEIs, as their structures and governance don't necessarily include community representation (although they should!). In order to work together to make community-academic partnerships more mainstream, we in HEIs have to invite our community partners in, give them some influence and power within our structures, and develop processes and mechanisms to pool our ideas and expertise to lobby for continuing change.

Following on from the above, if we can find more ways to invite you in to HEIs, how do you think community partners can help us make the case for mainstreaming engagement?

Niamh (AONTAS):

I think mainstreaming engagement can only be made possible when it becomes the norm, rather than being a peripheral activity, therefore a whole institution-wide approach is required. In order for this to become a reality, I think HEIs need to be exposed to the knowledge and experience that the community can contribute to a research partnership. Within the work that we have done together, the value of the practical and academic knowledge brought by the different partners was treated as equal, again this may be attributed to our mutual experiences in both community work and HEIs. This may have led to a more productive collaboration, in that we had mutual respect, good communication, receptivity to feedback without any elements of competitiveness, as there were fewer issues in terms of power. There was no one authoritative voice in the partnership, however not all collaborations are as effective potentially because, amongst other issues, each other's position and context is not initially understood.

I believe that the practice experience of community groups is of equal value to academic knowledge; different but equal in CBR. Community knowledge can help bring theory to life for students, can inform academic knowledge about local history and experiences which have not been documented and can also provide an insight into a community which may have been overlooked or voiceless. Thus, I believe an understanding and valuing of different 'knowledges' is required in order to create a partnership that is on equal terms.

Community representation on advisory boards is a positive step to normalizing community engagement activities, however in order to reach the whole of the Institute, I agree that this should also include governance structures.


Catherine (DIT):

Are there ways in which HEIs could help to build community capacity for this work?


Niamh (AONTAS):

I think capacity building could be initiated on a number of levels: offering incentives to engage in partnership work; provide opportunities to take up authentic leadership positions in the HEI and support to engage in such activities on an equal basis.

One of the main challenges facing community groups is the lack of resources, therefore, time and capacity to engage in extra activities can be difficult. Consequently, as resources are limited, the value of engaging in partnership work needs to be promoted and tangible outcomes highlighted to potential partners. Perhaps further incentives could be offered that would be amenable to both partners, e.g. sharing resources such as the use of a room for an event. In addition to finding community partners, new projects and promoting community engagement work; community based research could also act as a starting point for developing trust, communication and for opening up the academy to the community in terms of access and engagement.

At HEI level, the opening up of spaces of real impact and influence at a structural level is vital, however, the genuine involvement of the community needs to be supported. This could be achieved through leadership development work at local level, as although many community members are experienced at board level, information on the HEI landscape and how it functions would be useful. Furthermore, reciprocal board level involvement between HEIs and the community could also be a mechanism to embed partnership work.

**Conclusion.**

*Limitations of this paper.* While we feel that we have learned a lot from this process of reflecting on our collaboration through our dialogue, and that this learning could be valuable to others, there are some limitations to this paper. As mentioned previously, other lenses of critical reflection could be employed for a more rounded exploration. The voices of the students and the supervisors have not been included in our correspondence (due to practical limitations of time and space), and these could offer further valuable insights into the collaborative process

from their perspectives. We have generally not related our conversation in depth to the Irish policy context, or to existing literature on CBR, both of which are covered elsewhere. This was partly due to time and space limitations, but largely to allow our thoughts and conversation to flow without external input, in an open, respectful, enquiring conversation between two practitioners.

*Recommendations for community partners*. Community partners can explore the possibility of engaging in research to meet your goals, or even better the collective need of other organisations in your field. It is important to look at community based research as a long-term investment, the tangible rewards are not immediate however, there are knock on effects - e.g. links to HEIs, potential education progression routes for staff and learners, increasing your network in the broader education sector, promoting your work - which may also happen. Ultimately the partnership builds your research base, and that of the community sector which is oftentimes in a state of uncertainty in terms of funding and stability. With this challenging backdrop consider research as one strand of advocacy work, in which you can engage on your own terms, rather than having terms identified for you by external bodies. Identify HEIs engaging in service learning/community based research and ask for information about their work. You could also consider this partnership as a way of influencing and shaping the education system outside the community and adult education sector; the walls of the academy can be become windows and doors for your work, your research and importantly your learners.

*Recommendations for HEI partners – academic supervisors and coordinators of CBL/CBR.* At the level of starting and running collaborative research projects, an open process of dialogue is essential to allow all participants to understand each others' motivation and expectations at the start of such a collaboration. The initial conversation should result in a clear agreement on the scope of the research question, the timeline for the research process, the broad roles of each partner in the process, and plans for dissemination of the research. These may all need to be renegotiated as the research develops, and all participants should be prepared to call for a review meeting if they feel the need for this. A mid-point meeting between all partners is a good

way to check if the research is still meeting the needs of all participants, and an opportunity to re-evaluate the project timeline and goals and dissemination plans, if the early research findings suggest that this would be helpful.

At a broader level, committed community partners offer many resources to staff and students in HEIs, which can enhance research, and learning and teaching, through collaboration. Further benefits to HEIs could follow from these partnerships, including making their learning environments, research agendas, and strategic direction more relevant to society. This will depend on HEIs inviting community partners to become more involved in their work, and not merely in an occasional, 'advisory' capacity, but by giving them real power and influence, from ground level projects to participation at strategy and governance level. Collaborating HEIs must also recognize that most community partners face severe limitations of resources, and offer them wider access to the resources of the HEI, and develop tailored capacity-building measures that will be relevant to them, to ensure that this potentially very rich collaboration can be genuinely for mutual benefit.

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