

Chapter 5

Virtual Vines: Using Participatory Methods to Connect Virtual Work with Community-Based Practice

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the somewhat unexpected relationship between participatory research methods, virtual work, and community-based practices. More specifically, the authors' contribution outlines different conceptual foundations and methodological approaches related to participatory and community-based research. Embedded within this review, they address two key connections between participatory methods and virtual work. First, participatory and community-based methodologies provide a useful set of concepts and practices that can be applied in virtual contexts. Second, virtual work can facilitate participatory initiatives and achieve community-based goals. The chapter also offers two short case studies that illustrate how community-based groups often rely on virtual work to move their local initiatives forward.

INTRODUCTION

Work involves not only paid labor, but also the activities of volunteers and community-based organizations as they work to move their local interests forward. The proliferation of Community-

Based and Participatory Research (CBPR) across both organizational and health communication research (e.g., Basu & Dutta, 2008; Deetz, 2009; McDermott, Oetzel, & White 2008) demonstrates that work within communities involves unique and often innovative communication practices in and of themselves. This chapter examines those unique and innovative practices, especially as they

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-0963-1.ch005

pertain to the ways in which community-based work is carried out virtually.

The potential for virtual work to provide a versatile platform for dialogue, interaction, and collaboration across time and space has been well documented (e.g., Long, 2010; Whitman & Woszczynski, 2003). Indeed, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported data from 2009, claiming that 24% of employed people do all or part of their work from home (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010). Moreover, data from the Pew Research Center suggests that 82% of American adults who also use social network sites—and 85% of Twitter users, in particular—are not just members, but active participants in some form of voluntary group or organization (Rainie, Purcell, & Smith, 2011). In other words, employees are orienting their activities to ever-changing structures of work, and individuals are relying on virtual platforms to meet their needs for community and collaboration. However, our contribution is about much more than the concepts of remote workplaces or virtual communities; rather, we encourage the reader to consider how CBPR methods provide useful resources for scholars and practitioners who study virtual work.

At first glance, CBPR and virtual work might seem like an odd pairing. The former tends to rely on practices of community engagement that imply face-to-face dialogue and interaction, while the latter draws from different Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to enable work practices. At the same time, virtual work presents a unique opportunity to engage in participatory and community-based research. By weaving together the relationships between participatory, community-based research and virtual work, this chapter adds a unique and somewhat unexpected take on the spirit of this book. We begin by emphasizing important concepts and techniques that underlie a CBPR methodology. Following this description, we situate those methods alongside virtual work practices, and we offer two mini-case studies as illustrations. Finally, we consider some

of the research implications and future directions of this focus on virtual work and community-based methods.

COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Before delving into the details of community-based research and virtual work, we find it necessary to situate this chapter in the methodological practices that have given rise to CBPR. As both organizations and individuals realize the need for more inclusive systems of democracy and participation, government agencies and researchers are exploring the possibilities of taking a community-based approach. The United Nations, for example, has considered ways to incorporate the perspectives of non-state actors and community members into their conversations about policy, information, and society (Cogburn, Johnsen, & Bhattacharyya, 2008). Additionally, agencies including the National Institutes of Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation have established funding opportunities that encourage community partnerships in the design and implementation of research projects. CBPR practices have gained a great deal of momentum across disciplines; therefore, it is necessary to mention the research traditions and methodologies that have fueled their development.

The increased interest in CBPR can trace its roots to a range of critical, organizational, and health research trajectories. Early work on action science and research (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985; Argyris & Schon, 1991) focused on moving research out of controlled laboratory settings to consider how knowledge can solve practical problems in the field. Related methodological positions advocated a co-operative or collaborative research approach through which researchers carry out work “with” participants as opposed to “on” participants (Heron, 1971; Heron & Reason, 1997, 2006; Reason, 1994). Subsequent writings (e.g., Gatenby & Humphries, 2000; Kemmis &

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