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## Designing Community-University Partnerships for Systems Change: The power of place, stories, and relationships

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**Relating Systems Thinking and Design  
(RSD12) Symposium | October 6–20, 2023**

**Designing Community–University Partnerships for Systems  
Change: The power of place, stories, and relationships**

**Danielle Lake, Sandy Marshall, Rozana Carducci, Nick Gozik, and Tracey Thurnes**

This paper offers methods for facilitating more inclusive, participatory, and place-based social systems change efforts through a case study analysis of the Power+Place Collaborative. Based in Burlington, North Carolina, USA, the Power+Place Collaborative is an evolving community-university partnership that seeks to examine power-laden place-design processes and cultivate participatory practices of community co-creation in the Southern United States. The Power+Place Collaborative includes a transdisciplinary and intergenerational partnership between the African American Cultural Arts & History Center, local community centres, and Elon University. Since 2018, Collaborative members have been working with students and community members on an emergent participatory place-based oral history project aimed at bringing to light the hidden histories and unsung stories of people and places in Burlington's African-American communities.

This project has evolved over time to include participatory oral history and digital story co-design with diverse communities throughout Alamance County, as well as a number of related initiatives, including public poster campaigns, interactive media design projects, museum exhibition curation, youth educational curricula, public screenings, community dialogues, and social media campaigns. To date the Collaborative has involved work with over 50 community storytellers, hundreds of students enrolled in 18 courses, and more than a dozen faculty and staff.

The case of the Power+Place Collaborative contributes to the broader theoretical and applied work of Systems and Design educators, practitioners, and thought leaders seeking methods and processes for unravelling systemic inequities, shifting power, and designing in relationship with communities. Drawing upon case study and narrative methodologies, analysis shows these practices have created unique spaces for public engagement between faculty, students, and local community members, prompting new modes of ethical engagement and collaborative co-design. Participatory oral history and storytelling practices have centred the stories of marginalised communities, highlighted the strengths and resilience of those communities, surfaced existing structures and systems of disenfranchisement, and created spaces and relationships essential to envisioning and sustaining long-term transformation.

The Power+Place Collaborative succeeds by connecting diverse communities, creatively visualising our mutual dependence, and co-designing roles for members across the community to play in shaping place. The goal of systemic design, according to RSD12, is to increase our “ability to influence change through exploration, connection, creativity, and action,”<sup>1</sup> and the Power+Place Collaborative approach to community-based learning and creative co-design does each of these things.

KEYWORDS: place, participatory design, oral history, storytelling

RSD TOPIC(S): Cases & Practice, Learning & Education, Methods & Methodology

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## Introduction

This paper highlights the work of the Power+Place Collaborative, an ongoing participatory, systemic design initiative based in Burlington, North Carolina, USA. As part of this project, university faculty and students work with community organisations to preserve and amplify the marginalised perspectives of community members through oral history and digital storytelling. The Collaborative serves as a vessel of connection across lines of difference and examines power-laden place design processes by

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<sup>1</sup> <https://rdsymposium.org/rsd12-symposium/>

cultivating practices of intergenerational and community co-creation. Set in the Southern United States, this project addresses issues of historic and ongoing racial segregation and inequality, with the ultimate goal of holistic healing and long-term systemic change. At the same time, it suggests ways in which similar community-based projects with a focus on storytelling might be implemented in other settings to address concerns around inequity, racism, and marginalisation.

Drawing from complex social systems change research, the Collaborative recognises that participatory social systems change can and must take place on multiple levels, including individual, relational, and structural (Jones & van Ael, 2022; Kania et al., 2018; Vink, 2022). In this paper, we summarise the initial findings of a narrative case study that examines the individual and relational level changes experienced by Collaborative participants, including community storytellers, students, faculty, and community partners. Through the analysis of interviews and student work, researchers sought to understand which aspects of the Collaborative—as a participatory, place-based, and community-engaged form of learning—cultivated relationships across a social system, shifted power dynamics, and influenced mental models.

Social change can be daunting, especially when situated within a community that continues to experience trauma stemming from a history of slavery, segregation, and ongoing discrimination. Findings presented in this paper offer hope, however, that exploration, connections, and actions on a micro level can cultivate changes across social systems that might not otherwise occur organically. The case described here thus advances our knowledge of theory, design, and practice as it relates to community-based learning, counter-storytelling, and place-based relational learning. Applying transdisciplinary theories and methods also reveals critical strategies for supporting more just and participatory social systems change efforts in diverse contexts. In particular, research insights regarding essential Power + Place project features such as infrastructure and shared power practices are likely to be of interest to social designers and community organisers seeking to establish and sustain boundary-spanning partnerships in the U.S. and beyond.

## Pluralist and participatory design for complex social systems change

Research on complex social systems changes has revealed there is no one catalysing action that flips systemic injustice and prompts change. Many practitioners and researchers have instead emphasised the need to design a diverse array of small, incremental, and intentional interventions across the system (Costanza-Chock, 2020; Escobar, 2018; la Paperson, 2017; van der Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020; Vink, 2022). A number of practitioners are also emphasising the need to design with different forms and levels of scale in mind (Buckenmayer et al., 2021; Lake et al., 2023). These approaches encourage pluralist participatory design processes that encourage more inclusive collaborative changemaking and exert diverse forms of pressure from across spaces over time (Jones & van Ael, 2022; Tseklevs & Cooper, 2017; Vink, 2022).

Kania et al.'s (2018) "Waters of Systems Change" specifically recommends interventions designed to spark change at structural (explicit), relational (semi-explicit) and individual (implicit) levels. Visualised below, design efforts that seek to support structural change aim to shift resources and influence policies and practices. Since these changes are easily visualised and frequently quantifiable, they are often the types of changes pursued by systemic designers, government officials, organisational leaders, and activists. An emphasis on structural change, however, ignores the power of cultivating social systems changes through individual and relational designs.

<b>Structural changes</b>	<b>Relational changes</b>	<b>Individual</b>
Resource flows	Relationships & connections	Mental models
Policies	Power dynamics	
Practices		

Table 1: The "Six Dimensions of Systems Change" Model (Kania et al., 2018)

At the relational level, social systems changes seek to cultivate diverse relationships and connections across the system and shift power flows. At the individual level, designs for systems change aim to transform the mental models under which individuals across the system are operating. These mental models are understood as “deeply held beliefs and assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of operating that influence how we think, what we do, and how we talk” (Kania et al., 2018, p. 4). While a simplistic heuristic, this framework for complex change is valuable for calling attention to the need to explore design initiatives that cultivate internal, individualised transformation as well as collective and structural change, understanding all three as critical for shifting complex social systems.

Given the need to more fully visualise and understand the value of semi-explicit and implicit changes for supporting participatory social systems change, this paper examines the ways in which collaborative participation contributes to shifts in relationships, power dynamics, and mental models. This approach and its assessment are likely to be valuable across the fields of systemic, participatory, service, and transition design since they all explore and assess the long-term value of various forms of placed and relational forms of social systems change efforts.

Honouring the practical, pluralistic, and multi-methods strengths within the field of systems thinking efforts, we next contextualise our analysis within a review of a number of intersecting fields. as well as a detailed description of the Power+Place Collaborative.

## **Literature review**

This paper seeks to understand the ways in which a place-based, community-led counter-storytelling project facilitates participatory social systems change. Here, we summarise the current status of scholarship from across a number of relevant transdisciplinary fields, including community- and project-based learning, place-based and relational learning practices, and oral history and digital storytelling.

## **Toward sustained community-engaged, project-based learning**

Community- and project-based learning opportunities exist along a broad spectrum, from singular volunteer activities to community-led projects that sustain and evolve over decades. In its simplest form, community-based learning involves students learning from and/or with community members in community spaces outside the traditional classroom (Bandy et al., 2018; Shumer, 2015; Soohoo et al., 2018; Warren et al., 2018). Project-based learning is similarly situated in and responsive to real-world situations, requiring students to learn by doing (Arantes, 2019; Larmer et al., 2015).

For decades, assessment and research have shown that community- and project-based learning are effective pedagogies (Gillies & Boyle, 2010; Hernandez et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 1998; Nowrouzian & Farewell, 2013). Meta-analyses have captured a wide range of benefits for student learning (Astin et al., 2006; Celio et al., 2011; Eyler et al., 2001; Novak et al., 2007), showing these practices foster cultural humility (Paoletti et al., 2007), enhance the ability to work across differences (Raykov & Taylor, 2018), prompt future commitments to civic engagement (Deeley, 2010; Miller & Gonzalez, 2009), and support academic and personal development (Kuh, 2008; Lockeman & Pelco, 2013; Reed et al., 2015). Endorsed by the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) as a critical, high-impact learning practice, colleges and universities have increasingly promoted community-based learning.

Today, community- and project-based learning initiatives are often viewed as a way of moving beyond traditional “service” and “service learning” (Hartman et al., 2018,) where engagement with communities may be as short as a few hours (e.g., serving in a soup kitchen or helping to clean up a park or build a house). Such short-term acts are intended to provide benefits but can perpetuate colonial and capitalist value systems and reify social hierarchies and injustice (Anderson et al., 2021; Udoewa, 2022). Community-based learning, in contrast, tends to encourage longer-term, ongoing relationships with communities, where projects are co-constructed with partners. This shift in emphasis is valuable for prompting a focus on designing and assessing social system change efforts that emerge from and respond to community-identified goals (Jones & Kijima, 2018). It also supports efforts to foster trust between communities and designers as well as across diverse institutions. As Peter Jones noted in his RSD 12 “Four Seasons of Design Evolution for Complexity” keynote talk, efforts to recover trust

between diverse communities and institutions are essential for social systems change efforts. Given that project- and community-based learning is necessarily situated in place with others, we turn to an examination of place-based relational learning.

### **Place-based learning: from student-centred to relational education**

In addition to calls for sustained community engagement through community-based learning, there has also been an increasing focus on the specificity of place in community- and project-based learning, where learning by doing with others in place has been shown to improve ambiguity tolerance, collaboration, agency, and sense of belonging (Glassner & Eran-Zoran, 2016). This increased attentiveness to place stems from greater appreciation for the fact that learning is not confined to the classroom (Keppell & Riddle, 2011), an especially salient fact in the Covid-era of virtual and hybrid learning. Growing out of geography and environmental education, place-based learning emphasises real-world problem-solving within a deep understanding of historical, social, economic, and environmental contexts (Gosselin et al., 2016; McComas, 2014).

Place-based learning is now a broad term encompassing outdoor education and field-based learning and may also refer to community-based, experiential, service, project-based, and action-learning pedagogies. The authentic context provided by place has been shown to foster meaningful social and educational connections between students and community members, thus enhancing a sense of civic responsibility and a greater awareness of the needs of people and communities in design processes (Best et al., 2017). The deep connections that place-based learning enables have led MacDonald (2020) to argue that it should be recognised as a high-impact practice in higher education.

Crucially, in place-based projects, place is construed not merely as the static setting of learning but as a dynamic location laden with meaning (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Semken, 2012;). Indeed, insights from political geography question the apparent self-evident nature of who or what constitutes “the community” in community-based learning and where exactly this community is. Notions of community often involve unspoken and contested assumptions about who belongs to “the” community and what values and standards of inclusion undergird the community (Staeheli, 2008; Staeheli & Thompson, 1997). These contestations are even more acute in projects with

public-facing outputs like digital storytelling and public history projects. Such efforts involve questions about whose voices and which stories get to represent the community and who the imagined audience or desired public is for these stories (Marshall et al., 2020; Poletti, 2011). Accordingly, projects that adopt participatory, collaborative, dialogical, and iterative approaches must surface and confront such dilemmas in inclusive ways that shift power and authority over-representation.

Relatedly, place-based learning ideally encourages a shift from student-centred classroom-bound learning towards learning that values relationality. A teaching and research mindset that narrowly centres on knowledge acquisition and disciplinary learning outcomes ignores the colonial histories, complex relationships, and places in which faculty, students, and project stakeholders are embedded. It can and has encouraged the extraction of resources from communities (Udoewa, 2022). A place-based, rational approach to learning decenters faculty and students, encouraging educators to co-design learning opportunities with communities (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Relational and participatory pedagogies focus on fostering empathy through sharing “lived, communal, embodied, cultural, and spiritual experience(s)” (Udoewa, 2022). Explored next, these pedagogies also encourage learning and connecting through the sharing of stories.

### **Oral history and digital (counter)-storytelling**

A growing number of educators, scholars, and practitioners have come to recognise digital storytelling as a powerful dialogical tool for fostering cross-cultural learning, empathy, engagement, and collective empowerment, as well as critical self-reflection (Ribeiro, 2016; Brailas, 2021; Gupta, 2019; Sarica, 2023). Oral history and digital storytelling (DST) have emerged as a set of tools to facilitate relational, community-based co-construction and dissemination of knowledge. With its roots in oral history, public radio, and community theatre, DST refers to the practice of combining voice-over narrative with images, video, sound, and music to produce short digital videos to share with others (Lambert, 2013).

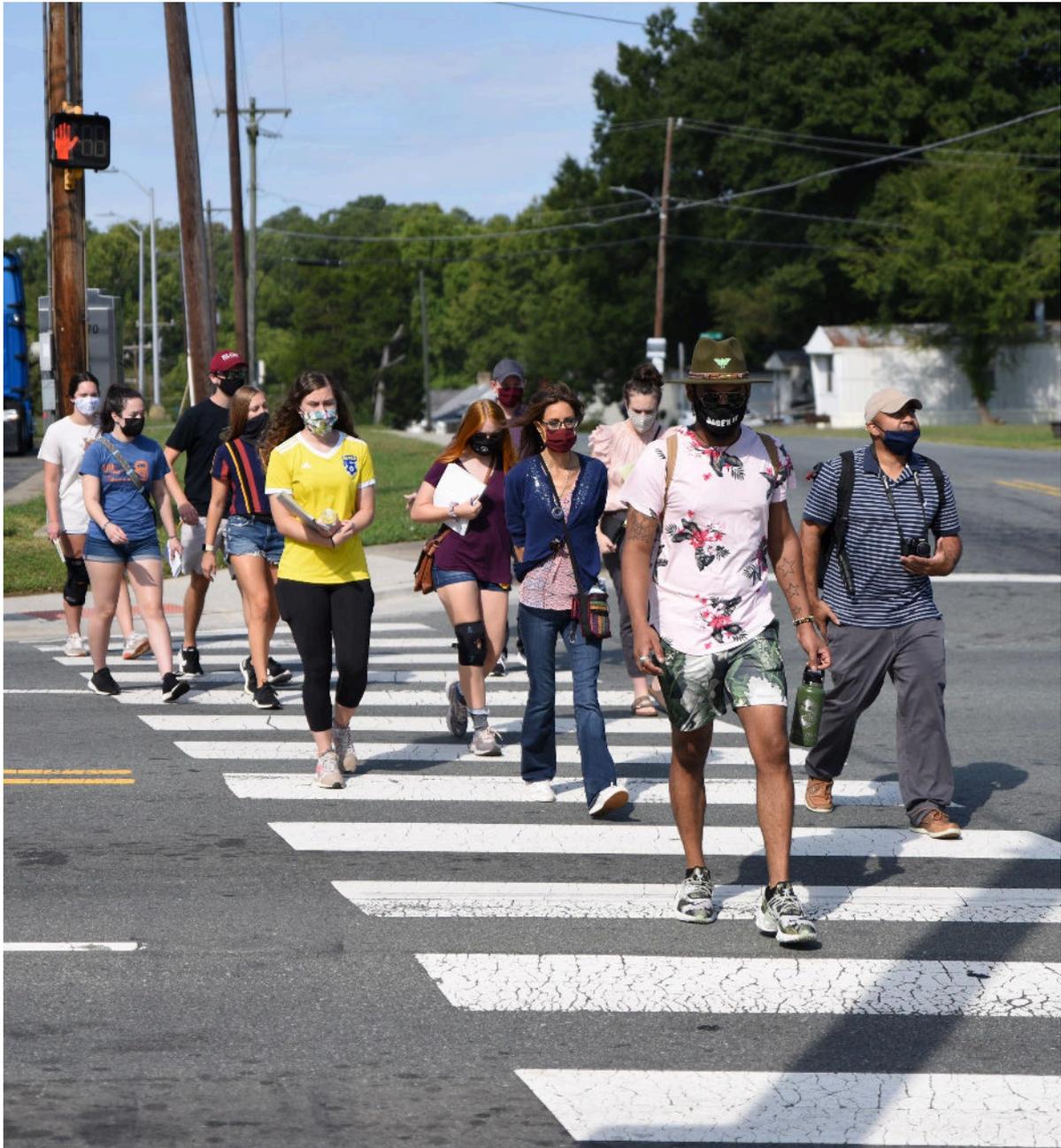
Though oral history initiatives have faced challenges regarding public access to archives of interview transcripts and recordings, digital media, in general, and DST specifically, have opened new avenues for public engagement and accessibility (Burgess et al., 2010;

High et al., 2012). The do-it-yourself ethic of DST makes it particularly well-suited for action-research-oriented media co-creation, and it has proven to be a powerful facilitator of intergenerational knowledge transfer and preservation with indigenous communities (Cunsolo Willox et al., 2013; Lalor, 2009; ). The public-facing nature of DST has proven productive not only in documenting community history but also in fostering community, including generating new connections between community members and local institutions, resulting in increased access to spaces and resources (Conrad, 2013; Detlor et al., 2019; Klæbe et al., 2007).

In addition to its deployment in public history and community-building efforts, DST has also become a versatile pedagogical tool. In the U.S. and elsewhere, it is used in K-12 and higher education to promote student-centred engagement, reflective learning, and digital literacy (Barrett, 2006; Robin, 2008, 2016). The emphasis on narrative and personal experience makes DST especially useful for centring and reflecting upon marginalised identities and invisible power dynamics (Garcia & Rossiter, 2010; Matthews, 2014; Ribeiro et al., 2016; Rodríguez et al., 2021; Scott Nixon, 2009). However, the power dynamics that undergird the use of DST in community and educational projects has received less attention, as have studies that examine the impact of DST not only on students but also audiences.<sup>2</sup> Even though DST has been widely used in both community engagement and education, few studies have examined DST as a mode of community-based learning. Like the literature on community-based learning more broadly (Chittum et al., 2022), most studies on DST rely on the analysis of data from a single cohort of students, with few longitudinal, comparative, quantitative, or mixed-methods approaches to assess educational impact.

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<sup>2</sup> For exceptions see Rodríguez (2010) on the potential for DST to bring short-term study abroad students into meaningful dialogical encounter with host community members in Mexico; Gachago et al. (2014) on how teacher-training students in South Africa used DST as a counter-storytelling tool to confront racial injustice, shed light on the experiences of students of colour, and create spaces for community and healing; and Sunderland et al. (2020) on DST as an “anti-oppressive and anti-colonial” teaching tool that productively disorients non-native social work students working with First Nations’ Peoples.



*Image: Students and professors from Elon join with community members in a walking tour of the Rauhut Street area of East Burlington with tour guides from the AACAH.*

## **The Power+Place Collaborative**

Given the focus of this paper on place-based community-engaged learning, it is appropriate to provide a description of the Power+Place Collaborative and the communities the Collaborative works with. The Power+Place Collaborative started as a partnership between the African American Cultural Arts and History Center (AACAHHC) located in Burlington, NC and a cultural geography class at Elon University entitled “Power, Place, and Memory.” The AACAHHC is an educational and cultural organisation that started life as a youth training and empowerment initiative before turning its focus to celebrating Burlington’s significant Black history, itself a resource for youth empowerment.

The town of Elon, home to Elon University, forms part of a larger conurbation with Burlington. The institution was originally founded as Elon College in 1889 with a United Church of Christ affiliation. Since 2000, Elon has grown from a regional college to a comprehensive, unaffiliated national university. As is common in town-and-gown relations, many Elon students at this predominantly-white/Christian residential university describe the Elon campus as a “bubble” and may rarely take advantage of opportunities to engage with community members or resources beyond university borders. At the same time, many Elon student, staff, and faculty leaders are actively seeking to enhance existing community engagement efforts in alignment with articulated institutional priorities. It was out of a mutual desire to create broader publics for the sharing of Black stories, reduce division in the community, and enhance Elon student community engagement that a community-based learning and research project was forged in 2018.

The project was piloted as part of a human geography class that examined issues of race and the politics of commemorative landscapes through a global comparative lens. For example, it linked discussions on addressing the public presence of Confederate statues in the U.S. South, including the “Silent Sam” statue at the University of North Carolina, with worldwide movements aimed at removing monuments to proponents and practitioners of slavery and colonialism, including the movement to remove the

Cecil Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town in South Africa.<sup>3</sup> In the spring prior to the fall 2018 semester, AACAH Director Jane Sellers and the course instructor devised a course-embedded community-based public history project that would involve students using oral history interviews along with the photos and documents from the AACAH to digitally map stories of important places in Burlington's African American communities. Due to the loss of several significant community elders over the summer before the pilot project launched, however, project priorities shifted to capturing the voices of prominent older Black community members throughout the county. Although the initial aim was to capture these voices as audio oral histories, eager students with access to professional film equipment in the university's school of communication helped capture the interviews on video and then edited them into short digital stories for public screening and sharing.

Following the untimely passing of Jane Sellers and a period of institutional transition and adjustment, the AACAH assumed new leadership under Shineece Sellers, Jane Sellers' daughter. The partnership with Elon rekindled, fueled by increased energy and capacity for community engagement brought by new faculty members from Design Thinking and Human Service Studies. The partnership also grew to include the Mayco Bigelow Center at North Park. Once Burlington's historically Black park, this municipal space remains a vital hub of Black cultural, community, and civic life. The partnership, newly minted as the Power+Place Collaborative, was redesigning a version of the original oral history and digital storytelling project when the COVID-19 pandemic was declared.

After deep deliberation about whether the project could still be carried out safely and ethically, there was a strong sense among community partners that efforts to preserve the stories of older members of the community and to connect people across lines of racial, geographic, and generational difference had only increased in importance in the context of the pandemic. As such, the project was reimagined as a remote oral history interviewing project combined with outdoor historical walking tours and virtual story

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<sup>3</sup> For more on the debates surrounding Confederate statuary, see Forest, B., & Johnson, J. (2019). Confederate monuments and the problem of forgetting. *Cultural geographies*, 26(1), 127-131. For insights into the "Rhodes Must Fall" movement, see Buire, C., & Staeheli, L. A. (2017). Contesting the 'active' in active citizenship: Youth activism in Cape Town, South Africa. *Space and Polity*, 21(2), 173-190.

screenings. Despite the challenges of COVID-19, the community response was positive, and the project was repeated in fall 2021.

In fall 2022, this project expanded to include a new community partner, the Burlington Masjid, serving the area's small but growing Muslim population. Fall 2022 also saw the creation of a new live "Night of Intergenerational Storytelling" event. The collaboration has also grown to include other courses from communications to art history and arts administration, as well as new partnerships with local schools, and has resulted in a wide array of outputs, including digital videos, web exhibits, social media posts, a digital archive, community poster campaigns, booklets, lesson plans, and more.

To date, the Power+Place oral history and digital storytelling project has documented and shared the stories of over 50 educators, civil rights activists, parks and recreation staff, civic leaders, non-profit organisers, artists, athletes, entrepreneurs, politicians, and faith leaders. A fall 2023 project will include organisations and community members representing the county's large and diverse LatinX population. The findings presented in this paper draw upon data collected from students, faculty, community partners, and community storytellers engaged at various points along every phase of this partnership between 2018 and 2022.

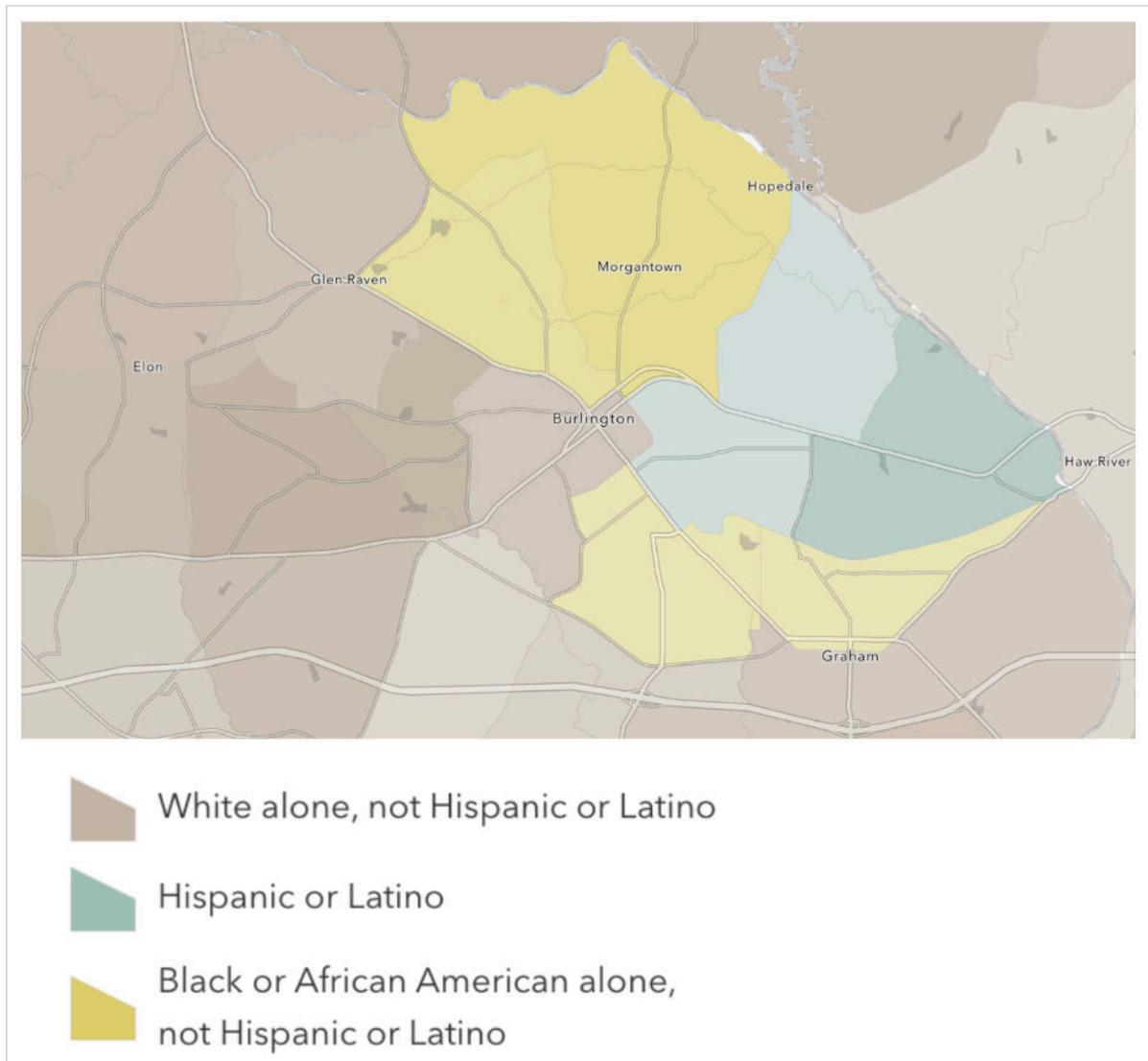


Figure 1: Map showing racial demographic distribution in Elon and Burlington, NC. Race and Hispanic origin by census tract, 2017-2021 (ESRI 2018).

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## Power and Place Collaborative builds bridges with community

By Trajan Warren, staff | November 10, 2022

A photograph showing a group of people sitting around a round table covered with a black tablecloth. They are engaged in conversation and eating. The table is set with plates of food, glasses of water, and some papers. In the background, other people are visible, some standing and some sitting at tables, suggesting a larger community event or gathering. The setting appears to be an indoor space, possibly a gymnasium or a large hall, with a wooden floor and blue walls.

*Image: News article advertising Power + Place Night of Intergenerational Storytelling.*



*Image: Visual of community storytellers' interviews.*

## **Research overview**

While organisers were able to gather significant anecdotal evidence for how the Power+Place Collaborative had impacted individuals and the community, in fall 2022, it was deemed important to undertake a systematic study to more fully capture what had (or had) not been gained through participation. In this paper, we provide an overview of the initial findings derived from this research.

The analysis presented draws upon Kania et al.'s (2018) Systems of Change framework, examining the ways the Power+Place Collaborative's approach to participatory, place-based, and community-engaged learning facilitated systems change at the implicit (mental models) and semi-explicit (relationships and connections as well as shifts in power dynamics) levels. An important contribution of this research is the longitudinal nature of the study, capturing insights from participant engagement spanning four years. Before presenting the study's findings, we describe the methodology guiding data collection and analysis activities.

## **Methodology**

Informed by extant literature and a commitment to understanding the ways in which sustained community- and project-based forms of learning affect diverse stakeholders, this research project was guided by a qualitative narrative case study methodology. Consistent with foundational principles of case study inquiry, the research team aimed to develop a deep understanding of a “bounded system” (Jones et al., 2022), the Power+Place Collaborative, through the in-depth collection and analysis of multiple forms of data (e.g., interviews, documents) (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Case study research also emphasises the importance of examining the contextual conditions that shape the focal case; the careful consideration of context aligned with the research team’s interest in learning as a place-based activity.

To gain insight into the ways the Power+Place Collaborative approach to community- and project-based learning influenced people and systems, the research team coupled the case study framework with narrative methodological principles. Narrative inquiry, the “study of stories or narratives or descriptions of a series of events” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 4), framed the examination of how Power+Place participants made meaning of their experience. Asking for and analysing participant stories of their engagement with the Power+Place initiative helped the research team explore the ways in which the design of the Collaborative shaped their understanding of self and others (mental models), their perceptions of power, as well as their relationships and connections to both people and place.

### **Data collection**

The findings presented in this paper are primarily drawn from semi-structured narrative interviews with a diverse array of 33 Power+Place participants, including faculty, former students, community partners, and community storytellers (see Table 1 for a summary of research participants). A list of previous Power+Place participants in each project role (e.g., students, community storytellers) was shared with the research team, and all past participants were invited to schedule an interview. Research team members interviewed all who expressed a willingness to participate in the study. An intentional effort was made to ensure participation from community partners and storytellers as well as students and faculty from multiple Power+Place affiliated courses that spanned diverse

academic disciplines, calendar years, and student status (e.g., sophomores, seniors, alumni). Each interview was approximately 30 minutes long and guided by an interview protocol that invited participants to share stories and reflections on their experiences of engagement in the Power+Place Collaborative. Participants were also asked to describe the ways their participation in this community- and project-based learning initiative shaped their understanding of place, knowledge, and/or relationships. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for accuracy.

<b>Role in the Power+Place Collaborative</b>	<b>Number of Participants (N = 60)</b>
Community Partners Individuals representing organisations that form part of or partner with the Power+Place Collaborative	3
Community Storytellers Community members who were interviewed for the Power+Place Oral History Project	6
Faculty Elon University faculty who taught classes affiliated with the Power+Place Collaborative	6
Students Elon University students enrolled in Power+Place affiliated courses	45 <sup>4</sup>

*Table 2: Summary of Research Participants.*

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<sup>4</sup> Research team members interviewed 18 students and analysed written assignments from an additional 27 students.

In addition to interview data, the research team collected written assignments (i.e. discussion board forum posts, written reflections) submitted by students enrolled in Power+Place Collaborative courses, spanning three years and six courses between 2020 and 2022. The final data set included written assignments, including reflections and discussion board posts, from 45 students. The combination of rich interview data and written student reflections allowed the research team to examine how students narrated stories of meaning and lessons learned at different points in time while enrolled in the course as well as after completing the course.

### **Data analysis**

To generate insights regarding the ways that engagement in the Collaborative affected both individuals and systems, the research team engaged in multiple rounds of systematic coding and thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2021). In the first cycle of coding, all data were uploaded to a cloud-based qualitative data analysis software platform, a small subset of transcripts were selected (ensuring the inclusion of diverse stakeholder roles), and the research team engaged in multiple rounds of open coding, collaboratively developing a list of apriori, in vivo, and open codes that captured the full range of experiences, emotions and impacts stemming from engagement in the Power+Place approach to learning. After refining the codebook through engagement in “intense group discussion” (Saldaña, 2021), researchers coded the same three transcripts in the interest of developing a consistent approach to code application. In the second round of coding, researchers individually engaged in focused coding of transcripts and student written work. The process of conducting multiple rounds of individual and collaborative coding ensured the research team developed a shared understanding of the focal codes as well as consistently applied them throughout the data analysis process. The findings presented below are drawn from a thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2021) of data identified as addressing concepts associated with relational and individual levels of systems change.

## **Initial findings**

Analysis of codes examining shifts in mental models, relationships, and power dynamics yielded initial findings about what has changed for participants across the initiative thus far, but also about how those changes unfolded. We document these next.

### **Building relationships and cultivating connections**

Data analysis revealed that relationships and connections are at the heart of the Collaborative. Analysis of the relational data around the themes of relationships, difference, collaboration, emotions, and feelings suggest that the project structure, storytelling practices, and the creation of conditions that support participant vulnerability are particularly meaningful with respect to fostering change at the level of relationships.

A common note across all the interviews and student reflections was that, without the structure of the Power+Place Collaborative project in place (facilitated and structured interaction between community members and university faculty/staff), many of the rich relationships and cross-community connections developed between and among students, faculty, and community members would not have occurred organically. One faculty member noted, "I'm really deeply worried that a lot of our problems are because we're not doing that as humans. We're not getting out of our spaces and connecting with others, and caring about and coming to understand and see them." Such separations historically have been reinforced by racial and socioeconomic dividing lines within Burlington, as well as the tendency for students (and to some extent faculty and staff) to remain relatively isolated within campus life or the "Elon Bubble".

By coming together, participants in the Collaborative repeatedly noted that there was an opportunity for community members to share stories that often have not been chronicled, as one community partner observed: "We rely heavily on community stories amongst the African American community because there's not always documentation. So it's important for us to collect the oral histories and the memories of what people have." The interviews and videos produced as part of the project create an official archive to catalogue this history while also serving as a pedagogical tool for helping participants understand and appreciate how community leaders, broadly understood, have helped to create social change in their communities.

The trust and rapport developed through the Collaborative also enabled participants to be vulnerable in ways that allowed for increased understanding to come about. Community members sometimes shared painful memories, including around segregation, discrimination, persecution, and hate crimes. Students, too noted that they were pushed out of their comfort zone by engaging with these topics, as well as in interacting with people who were different from them. One noted, "Hearing of immigrants moving into the town I used to live in scared me a little as I did buy into the idea that they were not safe... Having the interviews and hearing some of the stories about immigrants and migrants, changed me and makes me want to be a better person." In this way, initial discomfort yielded transformative insights thanks to community members' willingness to share personal stories and the students' willingness to listen deeply to these stories, supported by sustained collaboration.

At the same time, not all relationships were of the same depth or led to the same level of new mutual understanding, offering indications of how the project might be adjusted over time. Many faculty involved in the project described the development of longer-lasting, deeper connections with community storytellers over time; however, student interactions with community members were more limited due in large part to COVID-19 restrictions. For the future, one community storyteller recommended that students who are interviewing someone should "go out and spend the day ... just to see what their week is like. See what the community is like. See what it feels like with them." This recommendation, which the Collaborative has worked toward in subsequent iterations of the project, underscores the value that participants see in relational, place-based learning.

### **Shifting power dynamics**

The deep and sustained relationships formed between faculty, community members, and students who participated in the Collaborative, for many, yielded insights into structural, social, and spatial inequalities and barriers that often prevent the formation of such connections. Data excerpts identified as addressing themes of power, empowerment, racism, and identity/positionality were analysed for insights regarding the nature and mechanisms of shifts in power stemming from Power+Place engagement. Analysis reveals that the place-based and relational nature of the project, combined with the emphasis on narrative storytelling and the establishment of project

infrastructure that fostered sustained engagement and shared power among stakeholders, proved particularly salient. Specifically, this project prompted shifts in knowledge and critical awareness of racial and economic inequities that structure relations between the university and local communities, as well as a shift in those power dynamics toward centring the experiences, perspectives, and priorities of community members.

For many students, the placed-based learning aspects of the project, specifically community walking tours, served as a means of critically examining dominant narratives of place embedded in the physical landscape. As one student reflection recounts:

The tour of Rauhut St. was a game-changer for me. [...] when we walked by the Alamance Training School that [is believed to have been] burned down by the KKK, and I read the language on the sign, and it was not even mentioned [...] the class shifted thematically with my realisation, and I started getting into a discovery of power imbalances in urban planning.

In addition to learning about the power that racism and structural violence have in shaping place as well as dominant narratives and perceptions of place, students also recounted learning about the power of community storytelling to provide a more inclusive historical narrative.

For many community partners, it was the opportunity to share their personal experiences and perspectives through oral history narrative that initially motivated them to become involved in the project. For one community storyteller, the project served as a means to address the “underrepresentation of the Black and Brown population in Alamance County” and to counteract the “intimidation and fear” that people face when “sharing their stories.” For others, the project was also about correcting and expanding community history. In describing her motivation to get involved with Power+Place, a community partner shared stories about the city’s historically Black park: “I was like, ‘these need to be recorded!’ Once these people have gone on, these stories, they still matter, and it’s still, you know, a significant piece of the history of Burlington.” Moreover, sharing these stories in place with others means “having new people in the space to learn about our history,” thus challenging narrow or

negative narratives of place as well as expanding audiences and concepts of community.

In this way, students, as well as community members, reported not only becoming more critically aware of structural inequities but also reported experiencing shifts in power toward more mutual and participatory forms of knowledge production. For example, students reported that the relational and co-created nature of the project differed from other more extractive or paternalistic forms of research or service learning they had experienced in other contexts. As a human service studies student recounts:

The thing I did really like about this project was that it was the community partners who were saying, 'This is a project we want done and this is why it's important to us.' [...] And so it's rewarding to know [that] you're doing something the community actually wants to be done. You're not just going in saying, 'I think you need this.' It's a way of them sharing their history in a way that they want to share it.

An interview with a community storyteller echoed this point:

If you don't understand what you're doing. You don't understand the people. You don't understand the community. You don't understand the situation. You don't understand the feelings. It's virtually impossible to come in and say I have the answers. You can't have the answers. If you don't know what's going on. And I think, with this project, that's a start to finding the answers.

As this and other community members suggested, the involvement of university students and faculty in a community-led initiative of this nature can help to "slowly" support change in the local county despite significant headwinds.

At the same time, this shift in power was, for many, fraught, uncomfortable, and incremental. One community partner recounted the occasional "lack of connection" and "hesitance" she witnessed in some of the student-led oral history interviews, prompting her to be more vocally involved in the interviewing process. Students were also critically aware of this power dynamic and the need to shift it: "Not everyone [in Burlington] loves everyone at Elon. It's really...that's challenging... confronting that." However, the discomfort that arose in confronting this challenge was itself an indication of personal

growth and shifting power dynamics; as one student suggested, “with frustration comes the greatest possibilities for growth.”

Shifts in knowledge and experience of power were also influenced by the creation of a project infrastructure that fostered sustained engagement and shared power among the diverse stakeholders. In contrast to more common models of university-community partnerships in which power is concentrated with the university stakeholders in the form of decision-making authority over the nature and scope of the partnership, resource allocation, and time commitments, the Collaborative has established a set of organisational practices that foster sustained, yet fluid, engagement and shared decision-making, both of which contribute to the establishment of more equitable power dynamics among faculty and community partners. The important role project infrastructure plays in the cultivation and practice of shared power is illustrated in the following observation from a faculty member:

I mean, one of the big issues with community archiving projects is that they can often kind of peter out or not have sustained engagement if it's sort of a partnership that's built around one particular project or some particular initiative. And then, once that initiative is done, you know the relationship might kind of weaken over time between the different partners and stakeholders involved. Having some mechanism like Power+Place ... to sustain that engagement over time is a big difference. The scale of time is more of a cause of having these mechanisms in place for assisting engagement.

In this quote, the faculty member specifically highlights the structure of sustained cooperation as critical for establishing a strong university-community partnership characterised by shared decision-making and visioning power. Community partners and faculty interviewed for this study identified a range of organisational practices that facilitate sustained collaboration, including supporting fluid participation among stakeholders, open exchange of ideas, collaborative identification of organisational priorities, and a willingness to expand the scope of the project as new partners are identified.

The adoption of organisational practices that allow for fluid participation across time and projects was particularly important to the establishment of sustained collaboration

and the cultivation of shared power. Specifically, rather than expecting year-round involvement from all faculty and community partners, stakeholders were allowed, even encouraged, to join and step away from Power+Place as their capacity and interests evolved. For faculty members who organise their time and community engagement around the rhythms of the academic year, the model of fluid participation allows them to sustain their participation across multiple semesters rather than excluding them from participation based on an “all or nothing” expectation of commitment. The importance of fluid participation norms is captured in this quote from a faculty member who has been able to maintain her Power+Place involvement across multiple years despite the need to step away during the summer months.

I cannot work in the summertime like that....and I know that the work continues. I can only do things that are class-related right now because that's the time that I have....And while that has been challenging for me to negotiate because I don't want to feel like I'm not pulling my weight, but at the same time, it's been important for me to define my role in the collaborative.”

Anchored by a core group of faculty and community partners who collaboratively manage project operations year-round, Power+Place has established norms of fluid participation and shared power that allow participants to negotiate the nature of their participation across time, extending the life of the project as well as strengthening relationships rooted in mutual respect and trust. This duration and durability of the project, combined with the diversity of stakeholders, enables power to be shifted over time.

### **Transforming mental models**

The fluid yet stable nature of the collaborative was also found to be essential to providing the space necessary for shifting participants' mental models. To trace shifts in thinking, the research team analysed interview excerpts focused on participants' assumptions and expectations, impacts, and motivation. Themes emerging from this analysis include the role of Power+Place in deepening intrapersonal connections to place (the Burlington City/Alamance County community), cultivating beliefs in the power of individual and collective actions to foster change, and reshaping understanding of how change unfolds.

Analysis shows that the Power+Place model of community-engaged and place-and-project-based learning is highly effective at shifting mental models of community storytellers and partners, students, and faculty. In particular, interviewees articulated a change in their connection to place and their belief that individual engagement and collective actions can prompt real social change. As one storyteller shared, "It [the Power+Place Collaborative] gives me the belief that there's work to be done as far as the community coming together." A community partner echoed these sentiments, "it has made me have more of a connection to the community... like, I'm from here, I'm going to continue to invest in this community." Another partner offered, "I am now thinking about this in every area of my work... how does this type of work impact young people?" This partner went on to say, "It's making me think deeper about the significance of even small things, like small experiences that our participants have in our work. What will this mean for them later?" Insights like these from project participants highlight how shifts in mental models can impact a locality over time.

Students and faculty also indicated that this form of learning shifted their perceptions of how social change efforts unfold. A first-semester senior said they "figured [the class] would be a 'one-and-done' cool class... kind of just one of those things that we did... Now I think it's been a very intentional part of what I do, and I think it has kind of also shaped me." Reflecting on their fellow students more broadly, another said, "A lot of students don't tend to go off campus as much or just engage with the community... So it was really cool, being able to see my peers, like, go out into the community and find joy and love for the community." Citing their work in the project as the catalyst, this student turned down opportunities to enrol in two graduate school programs in order to commit to a post-graduation year of service in the county designed to build bridges of understanding across divides. This central position provides additional opportunities to transform the locality.

Analysis of the data indicated that participants consistently articulated that it was the place-based relational engagement and the sharing of stories that prompted the shift in their thinking. This was true even for core community partners. One partner was surprised to find out "so much about somebody who... was a friend of my mom's... I was just like, Wow! ...He's been to my house. I've been to his house... like, I didn't know all these things..."

Initial findings indicate that (a) significant shifts in mental models occurred across diverse participants and (b) that the relational, placed, and project-based approach was the primary contributor to the noted mental model shifts. Since changing mental models is often the most powerful condition for cultivating social change efforts over time and the most resource-intensive, we suggest this finding is particularly valuable.

## **Discussion**

Participatory and placed social systems changes are stymied by a long host of structural, procedural, relational, and social factors. Our initial findings reinforce the importance of pluralistic and participatory project designs that are situated in place and time, embedded in relationships across systems, and committed to long-term, emergent co-creative processes that seek out and value individual and relational changes across a system. Our analysis visualised three particular project design components likely to be of value to systemic design practitioners since they supported efforts to cultivate semi-explicit (relationships and power) and implicit (mental models) changes across divided social systems. These practices included (a) being in place and in a relationship together, (b) the sharing of stories, and (c) a commitment to flexible, ongoing engagement.

### **Place-based/relational learning**

Participants in this project, including students, faculty, and community members alike, reported that the project allowed them to cultivate new connections and relationships with people and places and to create new spaces for relating to others. Within Kania et al.'s (2018) "Water of Systems Change" model, such relationships serve as semi-explicit mechanisms for social change that are essential to envisioning and sustaining long-term transformation. Moreover, by learning in place with others and by gaining exposure to diverse narratives and experiences of place, students, in particular, gained a greater understanding of how structures of power shape place and place perception. This critical understanding of place led to changing mental models about place as well as participants' place in the community. Findings also showed that this implicit shift in thinking impacted subsequent actions, positionality in the system, and their relationships.

### **(Counter)Storytelling**

The chance to challenge dominant narratives of place that marginalise Black stories and history motivated many community members to get involved in the Power+Place project. Centring counterstories revealed hidden stories from marginalised communities, highlighted the strengths and resilience of those communities, and surfaced existing structures and systems of disenfranchisement, but also strategies for creating change. For students, place-based storytelling helped to bridge connections between abstract concepts like structural racism and embodied experience in physical spaces. Students also reported that talking openly about critical issues such as history, race, discrimination, and historical segregation, while sometimes deeply uncomfortable and challenging, led to their own growth, resilience, and ability to have these difficult discussions in other spaces.

### **Sustained engagement**

Eschewing traditional service-learning models characterised by semester-long partnerships between an instructor and a community partner, the ongoing, collaborative approach to design and implementation undertaken by Power+Place enables new modes of sustained, ethical engagement. As indicated in the analysis above, this long-term, horizontal collaboration enabled trust and relationships to deepen and extend over time, creating new mental models about the possibilities of campus and community partnerships and shifting and strengthening the power in such partnerships.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Through the case of the Power+Place Collaborative, an ongoing participatory, systemic design initiative based in Burlington, North Carolina, within the U.S. South, this paper sheds light on the ways that intentionally designed participatory, place-based, and community-engaged learning collaboratives may facilitate change at the implicit (individual) and semi-explicit (relational) levels.

Social change can be daunting, with a supposition that great, symbolic gestures are always necessary. However, drawing on Kania et al.'s "Water of System Change" model (2018), this analysis of the Power+Place Collaborative demonstrates that meaningful

change can take place at the local level when time and effort are dedicated to the establishment, and perhaps more importantly, the maintenance, of a project infrastructure that reflects shared power and trust, fosters meaningful engagement in place-based relational learning, and centres the (counter)stories of historically marginalised communities. Collectively, these design features can facilitate implicit and semi-explicit change, resulting in the acknowledgement and preservation of powerful oral histories and in reshaping faculty, staff, and students' understanding of place and power.

This examination of systems change stemming from engagement in the Power+Place Collaborative highlights several key points of potential interest to systems designers seeking to establish or strengthen participatory, place-based, and community-engaged learning initiatives:

- a) The notion of "community", which is widely used in the literature, is not self-evident; any project in a locality will depend on the history and pre-existing social fabric and on how members of different institutions are perceived by members of the community.
- b) To move forward with any collaborative project, long-term work on trust and mutual understanding between different groups is needed. This requires a commitment on the part of both community members and the institution involved. It suggests having dedicated staff to ensure that partnerships continue even as faculty and students rotate between classes and projects. Lastly, it requires that projects be co-constructed by both community members and institutional staff.
- c) Not all participants will experience similar levels of implicit and explicit change. The depth of interactions and personal impact depend on the structure and time involved. It is valuable to have students, faculty, staff, and community members spend more time together before and after the oral history interview, with space carved out for meaningful reflection.
- d) It can be tempting to expand a project to build upon successes. Community members in this study noted that other groups and organisations could and should be included and that the parameters of the project could be extended

beyond the county, yet they felt that this project should nonetheless maintain its focus on local communities for maximum impact.

This paper also raises important questions that merit future consideration. We are particularly interested in continuing the longitudinal examination of systems change, seeking to understand how engagement in the Collaborative continues to (re)shape participants, Burlington, and Elon University over time. Additionally, we see value in the same or similar projects being implemented and studied in other locations. Replicating the design features highlighted in this study in diverse places will help us understand the policies, practices, and structures that are most effective in leading to systemic change at the local level while also appreciating how cultural, societal, and historical contexts impact this important work.

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