AI CIRCLS Community Partnership Takeaways

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Building on the ideas discussed during the CIRCLS'21 convening, AI CIRCLS hosted a discussion series focused on building effective community/practitioner-research partnerships. The discussion series contained opportunities to learn and act; we hosted speakers with experience in community partnerships and asked participants to bring in their own questions, concerns, and experiences with establishing community partnerships.

We hosted sessions centering on partnerships with schools, formal learning environments, and community organizations that create opportunities for learning outside of school. Discussions were approached through a lens of equity and social justice in establishing community partnerships, grounded in the RETTL context (with a particular focus on AI and education) where partnerships are likely to involve use of emerging technologies. The summaries provided in this document only skim the surface of equitable community partnerships — we invite you to read more about each project's/speaker's work to take a deeper dive.

Series Speakers

We hosted a number of incredible speakers and project teams, whose work we describe in this document. Our sessions included:

1. **The Noise Project**
   Featuring Makeda "Dread" Cheatom, Marily Lopez Fretts, Karen Purcell, Berenice Rodriquez, Phyllis E. Turner, Bobby Wilson

2. **School Partnerships**
   Featuring Jamie Lewsadder and Emily Nestor (CTO at La Canada United School District and Technology Specialist at Talladega County Schools, respectively)

3. **Informal Science Centers**
   Featuring Andres Henriquez (formerly NY Hall of Science)

4. **Daigwade Project**
   Featuring Breanne Litts, Rios Pacheco, Patty Timbimboo-Madsen, Lilly Martinez, and Brayden Gulso

5. **Chicago Beyond**
   Featuring Jon Ervin

Session 1: The Noise Project

[The Noise Project](#) is a team of researchers from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and several Independent Community Based Organizations (ICBOs) working to redefine the way research is done with communities. The project has worked to co-create equitable processes, research frameworks, working agreements, and non-negotiables for doing research more equitably, especially with communities historically excluded from the sciences. Several partners from the Noise Project presented at the Community Partnership Series:

> Makeda "Dread" Cheatom and Berenice Rodriquez from WorldBeat Cultural Center
> Marilu Lopez Fretts and Karen Purcell from Cornell Lab of Ornithology
> Phyllis E. Turner and Bobby Wilson from Metro Atlanta Urban Farm

Working agreements and non-negotiables are crucial for equitable processes

The Noise Project conducted a multi-day in-person meeting to create working agreements and establish their ICBO non-negotiables for conducting research. The group emphasized that creating agreements takes time and is a constantly evolving process. Even if you are not working with community partners, consider creating norms for your team; equitable research cannot be done without internal equity. (See the [NOISE Project Norms](#) and [National Equity Project Community Agreements](#))

Equitable research requires exploring different 'ways of knowing'

The Noise Project emphasized that co-creating research with communities outside of academia requires re-thinking the value placed on different methods of knowing and disseminating information. This can include ways of collecting data that are based in the arts or disseminating information in new formats such as zines or podcasts.

Avoid a "deficit" model of thinking about partnerships

In their work on co-created research, the Noise team found that it's common for institutions in partnerships to think of their work as filling a "deficit" in the community they work with. The team encouraged session attendees to think about how their own research practices are enhanced by the communities they work with, not only how partnerships help communities,

Co-creating research takes time and fair distribution of resources

Over the course of the Noise Project discussion, several speakers and attendees voiced that equitable practices take time and may move slower than the typical research cycle is used to. They encouraged attendees who are up against institutional barriers to have clear documentation of shared truths, request in-person meetings with institutions, and continue to stay true and persistent with their values. The Noise Project team also advocated for a rethinking of IRB processes and for teams to examine when the IRB protects institutions instead of the communities they work with. (More information on IRB's under the Daigwade project).

Session 2: School Partnerships

Emily Nestor is a Technology Specialist in Talladega County Schools, AL. Jamie Lewsadder is the Chief Technology Officer in La Canada United School District, CA. The community partnership series brought them together to speak on their experiences partnering with research institutions.

Emily Nestor's Big Three for working in research-practice partnerships

Emily explained that the strongest partnerships have involved the following components:

1. Shared goals and visions for all partners
2. Shared project leadership that honors expertise and balances expectations between partners
3. Open, ongoing, communication with a "critical friend" mindset

Jamie Lewsadder's 10-item checklist for initiating research with schools

Jamie created a 10-item checklist for researchers to go through in the process of initiating and conducting research with schools. The checklist involved the following process:

When designing your study:

1. Connect your research to the district's missions and visions, for example, if the district is emphasizing social learning, how does your project address that
2. Avoid loss of instructional time by considering when you conduct your study and whether it is best accomplished in the classroom, after school, or elsewhere
3. Create data collection procedures that ensure confidentiality for students and teachers

When communicating with schools/districts/families:

4. Clearly describe all modes of recording data (e.g. audio/video/surveys)
5. Clearly state data that will or won't be collected as dictated by FERPA
6. Communicate the purpose and benefits of the research project to families
7. Provide a memo to the school board on the research partnership
8. Provide background information on researchers (follow district procedures for visitors)

When conducting research:

9. Follow up on the research process after the completion of the study to close the loop in the classroom. Are there relationships, promises, and ideas that need to be completed for the school to walk away satisfied?
10. Gain permission from **all** student and adult participants

Session 3: Informal Science Centers

Andres Henriquez presented in the community partnership series on his former work with the New York Hall of Science (NYSCI) where he worked closely with communities and families to connect museum experiences to ongoing studies.

Conduct research in spaces and teams that build trust with the community

Andres shared that in his work with NYSCI, he came to realize that some spaces are inherently intimidating or unwelcoming to certain minoritized groups due to long histories of exclusion. Instead, he recommended thinking about where the community usually gathers and how you can meet people where they are when working with specific communities. You might also consider partnering with an institution or group that has a base level of trust already developed and take that group's leadership on community preferences. Finally, think about whether your research team reflects the community you work with. How can your team better represent the community without tokenizing any team members?

Adjust research questions with community input

Andres recommended maintaining a level of flexibility with your research aims and questions while you are still developing trust and getting to know the community you work with. Over the course of a partnership, you may come to realize your research questions are irrelevant to constituents' everyday problems and should be open to shifting focus as necessary.

Consider multi-generational use cases when designing educational technologies

When approaching a research problem, you may want to think about the broader ecosystem of users or people who may be affected by the problems you are studying. In educational technology, it's likely that parents or grandparents may be involved in a student's education, or in professional development settings, multiple generations may come in contact with the technology you're designing.

Session 4: Daigwade Project

[The Daigwade Project](#) is a team of researchers from Utah State University and the Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation designing a co-created project that aims to translate Tribal knowledge into educational tools. This is a multi-year and multi-grant partnership that, like the Noise Project, aims to upend a typical model of knowledge-building in academia. Several partners from the Daigwade Project presented at the series:

> Breanne Litts from Utah State University
>
> Rios Pacheco and Patty Timbimboo-Madsen, Tribal members of the Northwestern Band of Shoshone
>
> Lilly Martinez and Brayden Gulso, Utah State University and Tribal members of the Northwestern Band of Shoshone

Consider who IRB regulations serve and how they can be modified or re-created

The Daigwade team, much like the Noise Project, decided that a university's typical Institutional Review Board practice was not serving the needs of their research and community partners. The team created an [investigator training for community partners](#) that is designed to work through as a collective team. This training includes a module on the historical context of research with Indigenous Communities and a module on power and vulnerability.

Reconsider who is a 'researcher'

Early in the session, Breanne Litts mentioned that it has been freeing for her and the team to stop placing limits on who is or is not a researcher. This means that anybody interested in conducting work on the project gets to define their own status as a researcher. The idea of anyone being included as a researcher was reflected in the team choosing to present together, regardless of anybody's role, title, or institutional affiliation.

Take a relational approach to partnerships

Throughout the session, the team focussed on how their partnerships take a relational perspective rather than a transactional one, meaning that instead of a focus on what the team can do for each other, they have a more general emphasis on building relationships as a foundation for their work.

Technology to carry on legacies instead of reinvent them

Rios Pacheco spoke on his vision for technological innovation to carry on the legacy of the Northwestern Band of Shoshone. This included an initiative to capture knowledge of native plants into identification applications and coloring books. Lilly Martinez also shared that she leads beading workshops on Zoom that allow time for both cultural and research exchanges. In these ways, the team captured the potential for technology to weave together multi-generational legacies.

Funding and Power Dynamics (or "Why am I always being researched?")

Jon Ervin from Chicago Beyond spoke in the community partnership series on how the organization has seen power dynamics play out in their own funding and research relationships. For an in depth review of the organization's work on power dynamics in research, see Chicago Beyond's guidebook titled "Why am I always being researched?"

Power can be hidden in relational and institutional practices

One major discussion point in this session was that power can be hidden in different practices. Funding and grant agreements, consent forms, and other documents can be a "power move" on behalf of the person giving out the form. Power can also be hidden in somebody's socioeconomic status, role at an institution, age, etc. In addition to taking the time to reflect on your personal power, you could reconsider how institutional practices can be reworked to mitigate power dynamics, for example allowing participants to suggest modifications that researchers must agree to in consent forms.

Seven power dynamics that can affect research/practice partnerships

Jon Ervin summarized seven key power dynamics identified by Chicago Beyond. While the following dynamics may not represent every possible indication of power, they might be a useful place to start for reflection.

1. **Access**: Could we be minimizing our potential impact because of who we are allowing to meaningfully lead the work?
2. **Information**: Can we effectively partner to get to the full truth if information about options, methods, inputs, costs, benefits, risks is not wholly shared?
3. **Validity**: Could we be making uninformed decisions because of who or what we are allowing as valid inputs?
4. **Ownership**: Whose ownership is assumed, whose must be earned?
5. **Value**: Who or what do I deem valuable? Whose costs and risks matter, whose are invisible?
6. **Accountability**: Are we holding the right parties accountable if our strategies create harm or do not work?
7. **Authorship**: Whose voice is shaping the narrative being told, whose voice is not represented?

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