Reflexive Narratives as a Tool to Confront University Researcher Roles in Engaged Scholarship

Mellinee Lesley, Whitney Beach,
Elizabeth Stewart, and Johanna Keene

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to develop a deeper understanding of what it means to be an engaged scholar by examining reflexive narratives written by university researchers about their experiences conducting participative research. Writing reflexive narratives provided tools that permitted the researchers to parse the types of emotions and assumptions that may lead to unspoken and even unconscious bias in research. Implications for utilizing reflexive narratives in engaged scholarship research are discussed.

Just as there is never one narrative that captures an individual's life (Kim, 2016), there is never one narrative about conducting research. Each research situation is unique and fraught with shifting uncertainties. This is particularly true in engaged scholarship, where decisions hinge on a sense of trust between the partnership's stakeholders. Power imbalances between participants and researchers are a factor in any study. Even within participative research such as engaged scholarship, colonizing methodologies can be present (Strumińska-Kutra, 2016). Although democratically constructed and transformative knowledge is a goal of engaged scholarship, it can be difficult to realize, as "scholars' social and institutional position affects how their engagement is understood" and enacted (Kajner, 2015, p. 15). In published research, such issues are often discussed under the heading of "challenges" or "barriers" faced and overcome in a partnership. Rarely, however, are narratives gathered as data to address researchers' positionality and ontological bearings in conducting engaged scholarship (Swick et al., 2021). As researchers, we are often in a position to tell participants' stories, but we are seldom in a position to tell our own story of carrying out a study.

Due to its innate interpretive qualities, the act of writing is a process of discovery and method of inquiry (Langer, 2016; Richardson, 2003). Writing is also a tool for fostering reflexivity (Smith, 2006). Reflexivity entails a "mindfulness about the way researchers' understanding and experiences intersect with their research at all levels" (Blair, 2010, p. 423).

Reflexive writing requires researchers to locate themselves in the research setting and to consider how their actions contribute to their understanding of events (Lesley, 2021; Ryan, 2014). A growing body of work touts the importance of researchers writing about their subjectivities in order to unearth underlying tensions and truths in conducting research (Saldaña et al., 2022; Mills, 1959/2010; Smith, 2006). Such reflexive writing fosters the evaluation of assumptions, implicit bias, and theoretical connections; it is essential for examining power imbalances because it opens a space in which multiple narratives and perspectives can overlap and coexist. Additionally, reflexive writing challenges the positivistic notion that researchers should be separated from the act of carrying out research (Langer, 2016; Lesley, 2021). Reflexivity intertwines researchers' stories with the data being collected, which enables them to write about the study from different vantage points (Saldaña et al., 2022). In this manner, reflexive writing can help researchers mine the depths of what their experiences reveal about various research methodologies.

Given the transformative goals of engaged scholarship, we wondered if writing reflexive narratives could help us as researchers understand our roles in developing democratic partnerships. As such, the purpose of this study was to examine our reflexive narratives about conducting participative research to develop a deeper understanding of what it means to be an engaged scholar. In this study, we bring together narrative inquiry and reflexivity to shed light on our work for other researchers who may be grappling with engaged scholarship and looking for a way to parse emotions and assumptions that may lead to unspoken or unconscious bias.

The reflexive narratives presented in this article are based on two different engaged scholarship studies conducted in the same high school. Each project involved different teachers and spanned multiple years. The school's student population consisted of 49% African American students, 47% Latinx students, 2% white students, and 2% students of two or more races. Most students (92%) were considered economically disadvantaged. The school also had a historically high teacher turnover rate. Because of engaged scholarship's inherent goal of co-learning and its respect for multiple ways of building knowledge, we felt the obstacles confronting the school made conducting engaged scholarship that much more poignant. Writing reflexive narratives helped us sort out our relationships with each other and with our partners. Thus, this writing became a humanizing experience, giving us as researchers an opportunity to process the unspoken.

Theoretical Framework

Because we wanted to understand the breadth of influences on our learning in order to conduct scholarship that was collaborative, democratic, drawn from multiple perspectives, and relevant to K–12 contexts, we grounded this study in sociocultural perspectives of literacy (Perry, 2012; Street, 2014). Similar to engaged scholarship, sociocultural literacy theories recognize the ideological nature of knowledge construction and view literacy as a fundamentally social practice (Street, 2005). Street (2005) explained:

> Engaging with literacy is always a social act, even from the outset. The ways in which teachers or facilitators interact is already a social practice that affects the nature of the literacy being learned and the ideas about literacy held by the participants, especially the new learners and their positions in relations of power. (p. 418)

Thus, sociocultural literacy theories helped us contextualize our collected data, our roles, and our assumptions within social and cultural phenomena and amid an understanding of knowledge construction as a context-specific process.

Within the constellation of sociocultural literacy theories, we drew on critical literacy to frame our approach to engaged scholarship because it best aligned with our goal of fostering equity in developing new knowledge (Luke, 2012). Critical literacy seeks to expose dominance in discourse, institutions, and practices. Like engaged scholarship, it seeks to disrupt hierarchies of power and to enact social transformation. Critical literacy theories emphasize the power of words to reshape social realities, and so they accentuate social, cultural, and political aspects of languages, texts, and contexts (Lankshear et al., 1993). As such, critical literacy aims to broaden definitions of texts and examine power relations in order to disrupt hegemonic literacy practices (Behrman, 2006). We drew on critical literacy theories for this study because they provided a lens through which to critique ideologies of power and examine the interplay of authority in implementation of literacy pedagogy.

Methods

We used the methodology of narrative inquiry to gather and analyze data in this study. Fundamentally, narrative inquiry is driven by a desire to understand lived experiences (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). As a research methodology, it seeks to capture stories "in the midst" of events that are situated temporally and depict rich and nuanced details within a physically tangible (i.e., embodied) realm (Caine et al., 2022). Relationships are pivotal to gathering, understanding, and describing stories. Clandinin and Caine (2008) explain:

> In studying and understanding experience narratively, researchers recognize the centrality of relationships, the relationships among participants and researchers, and the relationships of experiences studied through and over time and in unique places and multilayered contexts. Amidst these relationships, participants relate and live through stories that speak of and to their experiences of living. (p. 542)

In many respects, narrative knowledge is driven by a dialogic understanding of the role of relationships in lived experiences (Wortham, 2001).

Through narrative inquiry (Andrews et al., 2013; Caine et al., 2022; Kim, 2016), we examined our actions in carrying out engaged scholarship predicated on qualitative methods. Personal narratives are at the heart of reflexive inquiry because the rendering of stories about the conduct of research exposes nuances that may otherwise go unexamined (Saldaña et al., 2022; Maynes et al., 2008). Similarly, narrative inquiry reveals

both "internal individual states" and "external social circumstances" (Squire et al., 2008, p. 6). The process of writing *narratively* is particularly important in building personal stories that divulge subtle truths. For instance, Alison (2019) examined narrative writing from the perspective of patterns in form and motion. She viewed narrative text as an unfurling of words that web together through diction and syntax. Alison noted that even at the sentence level, patterns create movement and texture, and a complex sentence can portray a "mini story" (p. 33). In this manner, the process of choosing words to capture experience produces knowledge (Lesley, 2021). Similarly, Caine et al. (2022) argued that narrative inquiry is the experience of the researcher alongside that of the participant in the study. This perspective invites narrative inquirers to ask themselves where they are located in others' experiences through the development of "personal knowledge" (Caine et al., 2022, p. 33).

To help make personal aspects of our participative research transparent, reflexivity was key to our inquiry (Attia & Edge, 2017; Blair, 2010). Further, the nested process of studying our individual reflexive stories required us to use methods that captured phenomena from multiple perspectives and registers of experience, a process that helped us avoid "complexity reduction" (Biesta, 2020, p. 40). To address the complexity of conducting participative research, the following research questions guided our inquiry:

1. How do we interrogate our positionalities and epistemological assumptions as engaged scholars?
2. How do we navigate the emotional landscape of engaged scholarship through reflexive writing?

Our team consisted of a faculty member and three graduate students working together on two engaged scholarship projects. One student was a fifth-year doctoral candidate with 5 years of experience conducting engaged scholarship as part of this team. One student was a third-year doctoral candidate with 3 years of experience conducting engaged scholarship as part of this team. The other student was a first-year doctoral student with 1 year of experience conducting engaged scholarship. All of the doctoral students held funded positions as research assistants and were assigned to work on these projects. As we compared field notes and shared our experiences, we felt the need to take a deeper look at our work. Consequently, we decided as a research team to engage in reflexive narrative writing across the two projects to enhance our depth of understanding about engaged scholarship. All four of us are white and identify as female, but we vary in age and come from different regions of the United States.

Primary data sources included our reflexive writing in response to the prompt: "Write a two-page honest narrative about your experiences so far with engaged scholarship. Try to capture what it really looks like for you. Consider what this research has inspired you to do and the knowledge you have gained." From this prompt, we each crafted two narratives based on our field notes, responded to one another's narratives, and analyzed our writing for common themes. We also debriefed about our experiences during weekly team meetings to be able to collectively examine our ongoing thinking. These debriefings added to the reflexive aspect of the narratives as we noticed shared themes and discovered deeper significance surrounding what it means to engage in participative research. As part of this process of writing and sharing, we developed narratives in stages through questions we posed to one another that helped elucidate the significance of our collective stories.

Using inductive qualitative coding techniques informed by grounded theory (Saldaña, 2013), we analyzed our narratives about conducting engaged scholarship through first and second cycle coding methods. To engage in first cycle coding, we read each other's narratives and identified codes arising in each narrative. These open codes were based on conceptual motifs in the stories. We shared our open codes with each other and compiled them into a table. For the second cycle coding, we first individually looked for ways to combine the codes based on common patterns (Saldaña, 2013). We then met and compared each other's second cycle codes to refine them into selective codes and ultimately findings for our study. Through this process of "dialogic intersubjectivity," we identified common themes or ways our experiences and perceptions overlapped (Saldaña, 2013, p. 35). For example, we combined open codes developed individually of "Feeling like not the ultimate authority in the classroom," "Never knew what we were walking into (a plus and minus in terms of assumptions and surprises)," "Imagining what could have been," "Sense of powerlessness," "Imposition (are we imposing on school partners' time, space, etc.?)," "Unexpected events," "New research assistant and new teacher together in the same space," and "Vulnerability on multiple levels" to the axial codes of "Coping with uncertainty about events when

entering the community site," "Navigating the tension between judging partner behaviors and imagining different outcomes," and "Collaboration as navigating competing needs, goals, motivations, and perspectives." As we looked at this cluster of axial codes, we combined them into one selective code of "Serving as a university researcher in a school-university engaged scholarship study is a vulnerable space."

As we met and discussed the implications of our narratives, we further refined these codes into findings. Thus, the coding process was recursive in nature as we continually questioned and revisited our thinking. (Please see the Appendix for a breakdown of the codes.) Excavating the crevices and shadows of the quotidian and unique events of our work provided us with an opportunity to immerse ourselves in understanding our roles as university researchers in engaged scholarship.

Reflexive Narratives

In what follows, we present narratives about the process of becoming engaged scholars—the epiphanies and challenges we experienced—to illustrate the undulations of developing insight that reflexive narrative writing brings forth. Through these narratives shaped by reflexive wonderings, we ventured into what it means to conduct engaged scholarship and the tensions we navigated within ourselves.

"First Day of an Arranged Marriage" (Johanna)

I walked into the high school with wide eyes and a nervous stomach. In my 12 years of being an educator I had never taught high school, and honestly, never really wanted to. I left my comfortable world of elementary education and became a first-year doctoral student and researcher. As a former literacy coach, I often went into classrooms and took observational notes, which then led to "coaching conversations," where I could encourage the teacher with positive elements from the observation and have focused comments on an area to improve. But suddenly I'm no longer a literacy coach; I'm here as a researcher. How do I manage the tension of researcher yet former practitioner? How do I deal with high schoolers? With all of this running around my brain, I took a deep breath, and I walked in.

I went into an English I classroom where the teacher was brand new, having recently completed an alternative certification program. She welcomed me with seeming enthusiasm, and I wondered if she could sense my own trepidation. If she did, she didn't say anything, for which I was grateful. She cleared a spot for me to sit, and I took out my computer in an attempt to capture everything that was about to take place in this classroom. Students trickled in, chatting and joking around. The teacher engaged with the students in conversation, which made me miss my days as a teacher, getting to know my students as unique individuals. I started to feel a bit more comfortable. These high schoolers are just like my fourth graders, just in much larger bodies and with much more angst on the cusp of adulthood. She began her lesson, and I began typing.

As the lesson progressed, I was impressed with the teacher's enthusiasm and her desire to see students be successful. Learning was palpable. I kept thinking about how incredible it would be to work with this teacher as a literacy coach. *Maybe I'm finding my groove here*, I thought. I kept furiously typing, as the rate of conversation was high and there was so much to capture. I started to notice the teacher tripping over her words at times but didn't think much of it because who doesn't do that from time to time? At one point in the activity, the teacher came to a multisyllabic word that she was struggling to enunciate. The kids laughed with her as she remarked on her seeming inability to say the word. I smiled and recalled all the times in my own experiences as a teacher I couldn't seem to say words that I knew perfectly well, and those days where it just seemed like my mouth and brain weren't communicating properly to engage in spoken word. The teacher then made a comment that struck me: *Sorry guys, I'm just nervous today!* She then looked at me for confirmation of her pronunciation of the word, which I affirmed and attempted to ease any nervousness I was causing through effusive smiling.

I got lost in my own thoughts. *Am I making her nervous? Doesn't she know that I'm a former teacher, and even now am brand new to this world of high school and research? How can I make her feel more comfortable? What am I doing wrong?* That confidence I felt earlier—long gone now. I was making this passionate and fantastic teacher nervous, which couldn't be further from my actual desires. In fact, all I could think about was how much potential she had as a brand-new first-year teacher. *How do I get her to understand my purpose for being here, especially as I sit here typing as she conducts her lesson? I mean, this engaged scholarship project is called Literacy Champions—we're a team in championing this school and to help everyone find success.* As class ended and students noisily filed

out, I made sure to engage the teacher in collegial, informal conversation. I told her how impressed I was with her enthusiasm and passion and that my job in her room today was to document and capture everything that was happening. *These are just my field notes, I'm attempting to type out everything you and the students say and do.* I think I helped alleviate her nervousness, expressing and explaining to her my own previous work as an educator and my own fears and anxieties about high schoolers and conducting research, but I'm still not quite sure. For whatever reason, I overestimated my relational capital with this teacher—in my mind we were equals, both new and without a clue as to what we were doing—but she didn't seem to perceive our relationship this way. I had to find connections with her to build up our relationship, so she could and would trust me. I had to reveal to her my own vulnerabilities and fears. This was definitely going to be a process.

"Here We Go Again" (Elizabeth)

Boy I am really dreading today. And I've so been looking forward to this.

I close my eyes and lean my head back against the headrest in my SUV, praying for the day to go by quickly and to go well. My alarm went off too early at 7 a.m., and as usual, losing that hour of sleep has left me cranky since I still have not yet managed to force myself to go to bed earlier on nights before we visit this school. To make matters worse, I am extra cranky this morning due to yesterday's visit, and I am in no mood for a repeat. Between the blatant disrespect of the students the day before and them waiting until the last minute to start their exhibit boards for their projects, which are due today, I am not in a good mood this morning. On top of this, their teacher was out sick with COVID-19, but thankfully yesterday was their last day of quarantine. I know the timing of this illness was not the teacher's fault, but it certainly did not help the situation. Due to yesterday's events, I feel unwilling to park and immediately exit my car this morning as per my usual custom.

Today, though, should be different. Today is Judging Day for National History Day projects, and today, it will not be just this teacher and me slogging through the prepared lessons all day, attempting to excite students about this project. Today, I will spend all day in the library, and students will be in and out. Today, plenty of other adults will be around, including other teachers, representatives from Central Office, my professors, and my fellow research assistant. Today, though, I am not feeling the joy I thought I would feel when this day finally came. Today, I am left numb.

I decide to wait in my car until my fellow research assistant arrives. She has only been a doctoral student and research assistant for a few months, but she has very quickly proven herself to be a wonderful coworker, and we have become very close friends. I figure that a couple of minutes of conversation with her will be enough to turn my mood around. Plus, being the sweet and thoughtful person that she is, she will have Starbucks for me, with the extra caffeine being a bonus to improving my mood.

While I wait, I think back over the last few months, and I wonder where we could have possibly gone wrong with students and these projects. The following thoughts run on repeat:

> *Why are these students so disinterested? Did we just not try hard enough to tell them how amazing this project is? Is this a result of COVID-19? Why on earth did most of these kids wait until the last minute to get started on their exhibit boards? What have they been doing in the meantime? Did the YAG* [Year at a Glance pacing guide] *and testing come into play yet again, so these projects just got pushed aside by the teachers until we were in the classrooms each week?*

I close my eyes again and try to push other, even more frustrating thoughts aside: thoughts of how I would have managed balancing the YAG with the requirements of this project as a teacher, and thoughts of how I would have managed student behavior and had students produce work instead of playing on their cell phones. I have to tell myself: *You're not teaching anymore, so just take a deep breath. You did the best you could. Besides, this year is better than last year*. That final thought comforts me a little bit, but I am left unsatisfied knowing that students could have done better.

Oh good, my colleague is here. Time to go to work.

We walk into the library, where the judging is taking place, and I just feel … nothing. I see student posters and the cupcakes as rewards, and I hear congratulations from those who haven't been as involved in the project and only see and are thrilled by this mediocre end result. I see students sneaking cupcakes before presenting, and I can't bring myself to stop them. Instead, I take a sip of my coffee and pray, yet again, for the day to go well.

"White Knuckles" (Mellinee)

I wish I could tell my dean good news. I know he wants to hear that our latest Memorandum of Understanding with the high school has struck the perfect balance of research and pedagogical innovation. I cannot let him walk into the end-of-year presentation and be blindsided by the less-than-optimal results. *Why has it been so difficult to get some traction with writing instruction? Why have I not been able to effect change?* Usually when I walk into a school, I am greeted as an expert and my advice is sought. But this experience has been different. This school has been scorched by a revolving door of expendable experts, teachers, and students, so I have had to adopt a new role and vision for my work. The handful of times I was able to work with students in small groups, they demonstrated immediate and consistent growth. That was December. Now it is May, and several students have regressed in their writing skills. I hope that warning him of the failure will lessen the blow.

"I need to tell you you're not going to see positive results."

"What do you mean?"

"We haven't been able to engage students in much writing since December. The teacher keeps changing her instruction and focusing on reading. We plan lessons and walk into the class only to find a different lesson being enacted. So, the results of student writing are not going to be good."

My dean has been deeply invested in this project as a piece to a grant he was directing. I tell myself he needs to know the truth even though his days on this earth are dwindling. We still haven't turned around student writing or found a cure for his cancer. There is no real inspiration in failure, only stark truth.

On the day of the presentation, I am nervous. The dean looks tense. I see him gripping the table periodically, white knuckled from disappointment or the debilitating physical pain he is enduring, I cannot tell. My research assistants and I trot through segments of student attitude survey data, student focus group data, pre/post student writing samples, and district assessment data. The teacher who thwarted writing instruction is not present. She must have known what we would reveal from our multiple angles and measurements. She moved away at the end of the school year, leaving us with more questions than answers. I spent the summer months pondering what my role in the collaboration would look like when school resumed.

Five months later, my dean passed away. I went to see him a few hours before he died. He was lying in a bed of crumpled blankets, stirring periodically as he slipped in and out of a morphine netherworld. Hospice had mercifully arrived early in the morning after an agonizing night of pain and scripture to flood him with numbing relief. He tried to talk to my colleague and me but was so medicated his words could only form strange vowels. It is painful for me to think about the dismal results of the presentation and the fact that this was the last meeting he would attend at a school, something he had treasured as an educator deeply invested in making public schools better places for students. One bad ending to another bad ending.

But something shifted after that presentation. When school resumed in August, the literacy coach was insistent on not wasting a minute of time. She calculated the number of minutes students would receive instruction each day and implemented a pedagogical schedule so that writing instruction would never again receive short shrift. This was a big step toward creating a culture of writing at the school. And, all of us—including my white-knuckled dean—were part of this pivotal change, even though it felt like we had lost a year and failed at our mission. In reality, our first year of this project served to expose one of the foundational problems that needed to be addressed before anything else could change. The literacy coach immediately sprung into action, and a partnership predicated upon mutual goals was distilled, as was my role in this work. My initial vision of collaboration was replaced with a more significant impetus, allowing new life to grow from loss and failure.

"The Incident" (Whitney)

It is late Sunday night. I am making sure the front door is locked and the dogs have enough water. My phone rings. I instinctively look at the number, ready to decline the call if it is yet another telemarketer, but it's not. It is my research team supervisor, my boss, my mentor. *I wonder why she is calling me on the weekend. I wonder why she is calling me so late.* It is not until I hear the tenor of her voice that I wonder, *What have I done wrong?*

"I'm sorry to call so late. Do you have a few minutes? We need to discuss something before we go into the school tomorrow. Last week after our meeting, I received a phone call from Brandy. She said that the comment you made at the stakeholder meeting really did not sit well with some people."

I know the meeting to which she is referring. The day of the meeting, I had consoled a teacher whose classes I observed every week because she had felt publicly embarrassed and shamed. I had been in her classroom when a school leader came in and angrily posted students' low passing percentages on a district-wide assessment on her whiteboard. I was stunned, as this was done in front of her entire class. I had watched as the school leader admonished both the teacher and her students in an attempt to motivate them. Instead, it made them feel stupid. As I sat there horrified and mute, I thought: *This is outrageous. This is not okay*.

As a new doctoral student and research assistant, I am less than 1 year removed from being a classroom teacher myself. My memories of dealing with a difficult principal who had attempted to make himself appear strong by making me appear weak were still fresh. I remember how it felt to pay a price even though I had done nothing wrong. So, I vividly recall going to the meeting feeling it my responsibility to represent the teacher in a room full of district administrators and university personnel.

"Is it okay if I speak honestly? Recently, I was observing in a classroom when a teacher, in front of her class, had her students' passing percentages on a district assessment written on the whiteboard. The teacher was visibly upset. I really think that the teachers are getting discouraged by the constant focus on poor test scores. I wonder if the teachers received some praise or encouragement, if it might improve morale."

I take a deep breath, wondering what news Dr. Moore, one of the people I respect the most both professionally and personally, has to share next. I also begin to anticipate that this call is the one where I am informed that I am being fired.

"Brandy told me that if you were not so new to the program, what you shared at the meeting could have put the entire partnership in jeopardy. She let me know that your position is that of a research assistant. You are there to observe and gather information related only to our research. She also said that their methods are never to be questioned."

I am counting down the seconds until she delivers the death blow. She is going to tell me that I have two ears and one mouth for a reason. She is going to remind me of the pregnant pause that followed my dying declaration in the meeting. Instead, I am shown grace.

"It's okay. We've all been there. When there are that many people and personalities and so much at stake, it is difficult to know what to say. Everything is going to be alright. I just wanted you to understand how sensitive this situation is. I know that you didn't intentionally try to damage anything. It can be hard to figure out where you belong, especially when you are a new researcher. Maybe tomorrow you can apologize to Brandy and tell her that you did not mean to offend anyone, and we can all chalk this up to growing pains."

I feel combined waves of relief and guilt wash over me. I have not avoided being let go; she has given me a second chance. There is a difference.

"Overwhelming Powerlessness" (Johanna)

The class is totally and completely out of control. Students are rapping, arguing, cussing, and playing on their phones. I'm at a loss. *If this were my class, my students would never act this way*. I look to the classroom teacher, who is sitting at his desk, ignoring the chaos. My frustration grows. I'm supposed to be here collecting field observations while students work on a project; a project that is supposed to be high interest and student directed. Yet, the students have no interest whatsoever in completing this project or even pretending to work on it. I consider all the things I would have done if this were my class, and I don't understand why this teacher is doing nothing, why his apathy is just as palpable as the students'. I feel powerless to do anything—these aren't my students, and I don't have any sort of real authority. Every day, I dread going to this classroom because the teacher seems to be just as unmotivated and unconcerned about academics as the students. I wrote in my field notes, "It's challenging for me to stay motivated, as I feel like I'm the only one who seems to care. I just want to throw in the towel" (field note reflection, 2021). I feel like I am there to do his job, teach and motivate and care for and encourage and inspire these students. But that's not my job. I'm there to capture field notes about the students' processes and thinking regarding the project-based learning they are supposed to engage in.

Try to see this from his perspective. Give him grace—he came into this project later than his colleagues, and he is just as tired and worn out as I am, if not more. He deals with these students and their lack of motivation every day, in addition to dealing with parents, paperwork, and principals. Who am I to judge him?

I realize that, just like the students, standardized testing, virtual learning, the pressures of learning loss, and the overall tension that defines a public school also affect the teachers. As a novice researcher, I feel the very real tension

between my goals, the teacher's goals, and the state's goals. While there is some overlap, there is also so much dissonance that it challenges and frustrates me. I feel overwhelmed—I don't know how to help this teacher or his students and try to meet unreasonable and irrational state testing goals while trying to interest students in project-based learning.

"What in the Heck Is Going on in This State?" (Elizabeth)

I did not write this down in my notes, but it was an important thought. It was one of my first professional development sessions at a high school in the fall of 2019, and I was still in a state of mild shock at uprooting my life and moving halfway across the country to begin a doctoral program. I knew that Texas was different from Virginia, and I knew that I did not know how much my home state and my new state differed from one another. I was afraid of just how much they differed; however, I was in for a very pleasant surprise.

During my 12 years of teaching in Virginia, a literacy coach at each school was an unheard-of commodity. Instead, I was used to having a person in charge of each content area for the district, one who sat in the ivory tower at Central Office and who, once a semester, met for meetings with content teachers to tell us what we were doing wrong in the classroom and how to fix it before disappearing back to the ivory tower again for another 18 weeks. I had no idea that in Texas, pedagogical knowledge and content knowledge are so valued, and that each school takes the time to truly train their teachers in how to best teach their students and to allow them to keep learning for themselves.

Wow, are they talking about books they read? In a meeting? And they're not in trouble? Wait, they get to decorate the outside of their journals? Why couldn't I ever do that? Virginia is good, and yet we're missing out on so much. Wow, this literacy coach is totally amazing to care like this. I wish I'd had someone like her to help me when I was still teaching.

These thoughts only added to my initial and overall positive impression of this partnership, and my last thought is a recurring one. I was in awe of this literacy coach, and I just could not believe it, her, and this partnership as a whole.

I listened as best I could in that meeting while frantically trying to type as much as possible about what was taking place. I knew I would have to go home that night and reread my notes to take in more details; I was so excited. A literacy coach who was taking the time to model for the teachers what she wanted them to do with students, and who was actually allowing them time to practice what she was modeling, was a new thing to me, and I did my best to observe without staring. This was a far cry from the content coaches I had known in Virginia.

The strategy that this literacy coach discussed with the teachers that night, the "Claim, Evidence, and Explanation," was new to me, and I found myself constantly wishing I'd had someone like her to take the time to teach me about options for my students in the classroom. In Virginia, I was taught to teach my students to take notes, write an outline, write a rough draft, and finally write the final copy of a paper. I thought back to several of my students, especially my seniors, for whom the outline in particular just was not helpful. This process was arduous to them. It was nice to be around someone who finally seemed to understand that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to teaching all stages of the writing process to students.

I also wanted to continue learning about our partnership with this high school, as the literacy coach and the teachers were clearly comfortable with the university side of our team present. This democratization of knowledge was something that I had never been fortunate enough to know with a university partner during my own teaching career. As a result, I was excited to observe both how this important balance was maintained by both sides of our team and how to continue this balance in the future. This balance was clearly key in this partnership's success. I knew that night that I had wandered into something extraordinary taking place at the start of my doctoral journey.

"The Care and Feeding of a Writing Teacher" (Whitney)

Today, the teachers have been asked to bring student writing samples for analysis. Anna, the literacy coach, asks the teachers to share their insights into areas where students can improve their expository or persuasive essays. One teacher suggests that students need help analyzing the prompt. Another states that students need help developing their ideas. Both of these answers are no surprise. I have analyzed some of the samples today, too, and do not disagree.

I am ready for more answers opining on the lack of transitions or on how students need help with organization when the next teacher takes the floor. Honestly, I don't remember his critique of the students' essays; it is his comment that follows that takes me off guard:

> I think we should let students analyze more fiction. Students like reading fiction and if we let them analyze the text through the lens of a writer, I think it will help with expository writing. When students examine the author's purpose for writing a sentence a particular way, or ask themselves why the author chose to use specific types of details, they should be able to use those creative writing skills when they write an expository essay.

This is not what I expected! Who is this guy? Why is he not a professor? How long will he stay here at this school? Is teaching here a passion project for him?

After a few more meetings, I notice that he never alters his vocabulary or higher-level musings to match the more generalized thoughts of his peers. He always sits in the chair closest to the literacy coach. He usually arrives looking harried and semi-sweaty as if just coming from a very important endeavor. *Why is he always by Anna? Does he think of himself as a superior teacher? Is he always rushing in because he thinks he has something better to do? Does he only attend because it is required, while he believes that for everyone else it is needed?*

As our university partnership with the school continues, my role as a research assistant is expanded, and I began to observe in more classrooms and participate more actively in teacher interviews. I am in his classroom often. He helps me collect data. He welcomes me at his door and gives me insights into his thoughts and methods through our in situ interviews. He tells me he is alternatively certified. He says that one of his greatest influences was an English professor and that his wife is applying to doctoral programs. Most interestingly, he confesses that he has not always been a confident writing teacher. Although he loves to read and write, he views himself as being a more instinctual reading teacher, whereas he sees himself as having grown into a writing teacher.

He credits Anna and the professional development for the skills and abilities as a writing teacher he has acquired. He sits by her in our sessions so he does not miss any part of her instruction. He appears flustered and sweaty because he literally teaches bell-to-bell and rushes to our meetings. Not only is he not filled with hubris, this teacher—the one I had thought to judge—is humble and gracious and has been using his newfound skills (in his own unique way) to help enrich the soil to help grow his community of fellow writing teachers!

After sitting for a while with this newfound knowledge of my own, I cannot help but wonder about myself. *Why was I so surprised by his background? Why had I thought that a different viewpoint meant more knowledge? Why did I not immediately understand that everyone was on this journey together? Why had I imagined a collaboration wherein any party had to think themselves superior?* I am a little afraid of answering my own queries. What will the answers say about me? I hope that after I answer these questions I am not just a better researcher but a better person. I have never had research affect me like this before. I am discovering that it has me examining much more than a problem of practice. It has me inquiring into the facets of who I really am.

"Solidarity" (Mellinee)

It's November 9, 2020. We are in the midst of a global pandemic, yet we are still meeting twice a month to examine writing instruction occurring in 9th and 10th grade English classes. Masked teachers spread out around a conference room table; the university research team joins virtually through a computer screen, a collection of digital heads on the wall. This split arrangement is not perfect, but it's a way to Scotch tape us together and create a shared space amid COVID-19 restrictions. It will be a few more months before we are permitted to enter the school again. Tonight, Anna, the literacy coach, features our research in the professional development session. Professional development is where we overlap—teachers, school and district leadership, university researchers—and our roles become obvious by the way we are invited to contribute to the construction of knowledge in these periodic meetings.

Anna leads the sessions. Her delivery is time-stamped, encouraging, and decisive. The pace is fast. There is much to cover in 1 hour. She has told the university research team on several occasions that it is important for teachers to see her as the "authority." Understanding the logic of a literacy coach charged with guiding instruction to raise student test scores, we positioned ourselves and our knowledge slightly to the side.

Anna begins tonight's session with a video of a presentation we have collaborated on for a national conference. She shows the video to help three new teachers who have joined the faculty this year understand what has transpired with engaged scholarship and the school-university partnership

the previous few years. At the end of the video, she rushes to justify our work:

> My whole point in showing you that is twofold. Number one, to catch the three of you up. But, I also wanted you to see the breadth of what we're doing. It also has far-reaching ramifications outside of this school. I also wanted you to see that someone here thinks that what we're doing is important enough to research. I could never get the data that they're getting. Sometimes our CFA [common formative assessment] data is accurate and sometimes it's not. When they take the amount of research points that they get over time, that helps us out a lot. A lot of teaching is gut feeling work, and that works. At the same time, it's really nice to know what we're doing is working and what we can do to support it. It's time for us to brag a bit. You guys attend these professional development sessions twice a month and you put in a lot of extra work. I just wanted to honor what you're doing.

As I listen to Anna discuss the visibility of the national conference, the role of the university team, and the importance of the data being gathered, I feel secure in my contribution to this work. Despite the turnover of teachers and a pandemic, we are still here learning together. The university team was not deemed expendable and asked to leave. The professional development sessions and collaboration were not paused. Our partnership did not end with overwhelmed new teachers and COVID-19 social distancing mandates. Instead, we dug in and found a way to continue together, our work solidified.

Findings

As we read and revised our narratives together, we discovered the following thematic commonalities within our writing: (a) the juxtaposition of researcher and practitioner identities, (b) the recalibration of perceived power imbalances, (c) the movement away from a positionality of outsider to one of collaborator, (d) the shared space of data collection with school partners, (e) the need to build trust through relational capital, and (f) the surprise of shared discovery. As we grappled with enacting the ideals of engaged scholarship, we came to the following assertions:

1. Practicing reflexivity over all facets of conducting engaged scholarship leads to critical understanding of both the researcher's and the community partner's perspectives.

   Reflexivity is a key tenet of our responsibilities as community-engaged scholars. Engaged scholarship requires constant analysis of the self as researcher and research methods employed in the process of conducting research. Participating in engaged scholarship illuminated how all facets of our identities as researchers were involved in carrying out research.

2. Positive relationships with community partners require a commitment to maintaining clear communication, bringing together multiple perspectives, avoiding premature judgments, and fostering respect between all members of the partnership.

   Engaged scholarship is relationship dependent: between the researcher and the self, the researcher and the community partner, the research team as a whole, the university and the research team, and the research team and the rest of the stakeholders outside the immediate partnership. Communication in relationships among ourselves and with our community partners is paramount to the functioning of an engaged scholarship project. Engaged scholarship is a paradigm based on grace. Relationship building occurs throughout a project and is taken into consideration in every phase and aspect of conducting research. Extending grace is necessary to support and understand the goals of all partners in engaged scholarship.

3. Developing a clear understanding of researcher positionality and roles is critical for addressing vulnerability in a partnership and bringing equanimity to perceptions of power imbalances in engaged scholarship.

   Knowing researcher positionality is key to the proper balancing of roles within an engaged scholarship project.

> Participating in engaged scholarship revealed our vulnerability. This was due to navigating competing roles and goals, such as trying to figure out our appropriate level of engagement with the school as researchers and negotiating between our teacher and our researcher identities. Serving as a university researcher in a school-university engaged scholarship study is a vulnerable space imbued with feelings of powerlessness, confusion about what to expect, concern over relationship dynamics, uncertainty about what should/could have been, and competing roles and goals as teacher/researchers and university partners.

Taken together, these tenets underscore the need for an intellectual space for university researchers to interrogate the nuances of participative research. Through our reflexive narratives, we came to understand the competing and almost contradictory nature of our positionality and identity as scholars. We were also able to come to terms with the fragility of reconciling multiple perspectives and variables in the context. As engaged scholars, we realized we must constantly ask ourselves whether we add value to the partnership and ponder how we define value compared to our partners. This reflexive interrogation, as challenging as it was at times, positively shaped our identities as researchers.

Discussion and Implications

Interweaving the perspectives of self and other calls forth nuanced ways of knowing. There is much we can learn about conducting engaged scholarship through telling and reflecting on our own narratives that invites accountability. Through analysis of our reflexive narrative writing, we discovered that reflexivity is a critical tool for processing new experiences in working with community partners and for analyzing social and cultural influences on our work as literacy researchers (Perry, 2012). It is also a place to sort out uncertainty and misgivings about roles both with stakeholders in the partnership and among the university research team. Through examining our writing, we came to see reflexivity as the glue to successful data analysis that was sensitive to the issues of power inherent in conducting engaged scholarship. We used reflexive writing to (a) understand the larger purpose of engaged scholarship, (b) define personal boundaries for collecting data, and (c) identify the ways power relations influence research. Within these constructs, we also used reflexive writing to rehearse imagined future roles as researchers, analyze our unique positions as researchers and our authority to make decisions with stakeholders, process how we were earning stakeholders' trust, wonder about partners' decision-making, and question our contribution to the larger project. As engaged scholarship seeks to attain the goal of democratically derived research, competing agendas and misunderstandings are inevitable. Creating an intellectual space to sort out our perspectives fostered greater insights about the collaboration.

Lessons Learned

We discovered that writing reflexive narratives and sharing them as a research team helped us manage the process of building trust and mitigate potential issues. Another by-product of reflexive narrative writing is the opportunity it provides researchers to develop their identity and unique voice as a scholarly writer (Lesley, 2021). Through the sharing of our reflexive writing with one another, we also became keenly aware of the role of the team in fostering cohesiveness.

In the future, we hope to deepen the role of reflexive writing within the partnership by engaging in more reflexive narrative writing in the midst of data collection. We would also like to engage in reflexive writing with the participants. Although it might appear to be a limitation of the study, the study only presents our perspectives because the goal was to provide a space for our team to process our experiences.

Importance to the Field

The importance of this study to the scholarship of engagement is the model it provides for others to emulate as they interrogate university researchers' roles and responsibilities. The emphasis of engaged scholarship must continually be upon the participants (Boyer, 1990). However, without researcher reflexivity, researchers are potentially not as attuned to community partners' needs as they could be. Such sensitivities are critical in cultivating transformative knowledge to bring about changes for the betterment of the partnership and community.

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About the Authors

Mellinee Lesley is a professor in the Language, Diversity, and Literacy Studies program in the College of Education at Texas Tech University. Whitney Beach and Elizabeth Stewart are doctoral candidates at Texas Tech University, and Johanna Keene is a doctoral student at Texas Tech University.

Appendix. Codes Arising From Narratives

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Refined Axial Codes	Selective Codes	Findings
Feeling like not the ultimate authority in the classroom Never knew what we were walking into (a plus and minus in terms of assumptions and surprises) Imagining what could have been Sense of powerlessness Imposition (are we imposing on school partners' time, space, etc. ?) Unexpected events New research assistant and new teacher together in the same space Vulnerability on multiple levels	Coping with uncertainty about events when entering the community site Navigating the tension between judging partner behaviors and imagining different outcomes Collaboration as navigating competing needs, goals, motivations, and perspectives	The juxtaposition of researcher and practitioner identities	Serving as a university researcher in a school-university engaged scholarship study is a vulnerable space.	Practicing reflexivity over all facets of conducting engaged scholarship leads to critical understanding of both the researcher's and the community partner's perspectives.

Appendix (continued). Codes Arising From Narratives

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Refined Axial Codes	Selective Codes	Findings
All facets of ourselves involved as researchers (e.g., emotional, spiritual, intellectual, psychological) Making multiple judgments Responsibility and self-interrogation Examining researcher positionality Dispositions toward conducting research Keeping bias in check Examining what it means to be a research assistant in the context of engaged scholarship	Perpetual sense of uncertainty with research role and self-interrogation of potential bias Analysis of positionality as researchers vis-à-vis community partners	The recalibration of perceived power imbalances	Engaged scholarship requires constant analysis of the self-as-researcher and research methods employed in the process of conducting research.	Positive relationships with community partners require a commitment to maintaining clear communication, bringing together multiple perspectives, avoiding premature judgments, and fostering respect between all members of the partnership.

Appendix (continued). Codes Arising From Narratives

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Refined Axial Codes	Selective Codes	Findings
Stability and camaraderie of the research team—support each other, hold each other accountable, functionality Teaching as part of research from an engaged stance of teaching Partnership and personal relationships Placing emphasis on the positive Recognizing growth Validation of work Building trust Co-training and negotiation of learning Valuing our partners' knowledge and authority Coming to understand the community Collaborative learning	Positive outcomes and growth in the partnership take time to see Stretching the researcher to think about and handle multiple facets of conducting research Remaining optimistic/ positive about the community setting Balancing researcher role with developing relationships with community partners and stakeholders Establishing roles and responsibilities in the university research team is ongoing Valuing community partners' knowledge and authority Exercising patience and trusting the process of collaboration	The need to build trust through relational capital The surprise of shared discovery	Long-term engaged scholarship yields positive outcomes for researchers (and community partners) that may be perceived as failures in the beginning of the collaboration. Relationship building occurs throughout a project and is taken into consideration in every phase and aspect of conducting research.	Developing a clear understanding of researcher positionality and roles is critical for addressing vulnerability in a partnership and bringing equanimity to perceptions of power imbalances in engaged scholarship.