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Research in Cooperatives: Developing a Politically Conscious Research Methodology (Pre-print)

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Abstract

Cooperatives are distinct from conventional businesses and the technical documents they produce challenges assumptions about documentation practices. To better understand these differences, technical communicators may need a set of tools well-suited to mission-driven, for-profit businesses. In this process-focused article, I draw on action research methodology to take first steps toward articulating the similarities and differences in research between a conventional organization and a cooperative. I demonstrate this framework by using two recent case studies.

Research in Cooperatives: Developing a Politically Conscious Research Methodology

Cooperatives—organizations owned and controlled by the people who use them (Gordon Nembhard, 2014, p. 2)—are largely unexplored contexts for technical and professional communication (TPC) research. Common cooperative values such as shared ownership, member education, member autonomy, community engagement, democratic decision-making, and environmental sustainability (Gordon Nembhard, 2014; Pittman, n.d.; Scholz & Schneider, 2017; Zeuli, & Cropp, 2004) present a unique milieu for a field that has predominantly focused on conventional and nonprofit organizations, the focus of workplace writing studies for decades (see Russell, 1997; Spilka, 1998; Sullivan & Dautermann, 1996). Cooperatives are distinct from conventional and nonprofit organizations in a variety of ways. They are *similar* to conventional businesses in that they are for-profit, but *distinct* because they are mission-driven businesses that arise from—and are beholden to—the communities from which they emerge (Cheney, 1995). Cooperatives are *similar* to nonprofits in that they are mission-driven and organized around a community need (broadly defined), but they are *distinct* because profit does not need to relate to their mission ("What is a 'Nonprofit'?", 2018). Despite these distinctions and the attention from a range of fields on alternative arrangements including ad hoc, distributed, holacratic, or other

post-industrial workplaces (Carradini, 2018; Johnson-Eilola, 1996; Murphy, 1992; Petersen, 2014; Robertson, 2015; Spinuzzi, 2007, 2014, 2015a; Waterman, 1990; Wilson, 2001), few TPC investigations have been conducted on writing in a cooperative. Further, because of their differences, conducting research at these sites may require rethinking methodologies and applying a different set of tools (or using old tools in novel ways) in order to both contribute to TPC research *and* support the cooperative's mission,

This article takes first steps toward articulating one possible framework for such studies, one grounded in an action research orientation to toward social change (Blyler, 1998; Clark, 2004). Specifically, this article posits a politically conscious framework of action research in cooperatives—a framework well suited to collaborative organizational research (Grabill, 2000). To demonstrate, I share just two concerns in recent case studies that arose in collaboration with cooperatives: reciprocity and methods of publication. I conclude with implications of how this research could be taken up by other TPC researchers and instructors.

Cooperatives at the Intersection of Social Justice and TPC

There are many types of cooperatives: producer, value-added, distribution, service, consumer, employee, housing, or financial cooperatives (Williams, 2007, p. 15; see also Gordon Nembhard, 2014). Recently, a new type of cooperative has arisen as part of a movement to democratize the internet: platform cooperatives, with the aim of increasing shared governance of internet platforms (Schneider, 2016; Spitzberg, 2017). Havens, one of the case studies featured below, is one such cooperative.

Regardless of the type of cooperative, globally they are recognized by their democratic commitments and loyalty to the Principles of Cooperation (also called the Rochdale Principles of

Cooperation). According to Williams (2007), these principles were first set out by Rochdale weavers.

> Spurred on by having been relieved of their jobs by their local manufacturing company and after an unsuccessful strike, the 28 weavers pooled 140 British pounds and began purchasing oatmeal, sugar, butter, and flour. They codified their experience in the "Rochdale Principles of Cooperation" that have been amended over time and are now the "Principles of the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA). (p. 10)

The principles are:

1. voluntary membership
2. democratic member control
3. member economic participation
4. autonomy and independence
5. education, training, and information
6. co-operation among co-operatives
7. concern for community ("Co-operative identity, values & principles," 2018).

Widely adopted by cooperatives around the world, they serve as the mandate of a cooperative enterprise, and therefore must be considered in any research project, particularly those that are grounded in a commitment to social justice.

Walton and Jones (2013) draw from Frey, Pearce, Pollock, Artz, and Murphy (1996) to define social justice as "advocating for people who are underresourced" (p. 31). In the last decade, TPC has increasingly become interested in and committed to research grounded in social justice (Agboka, 2013, 2014; Jones, 2016; Jones, Moore, & Walton, 2016; Walton, Colton, Wheatly-Boxx & Gurko, 2016; Walton & Jones, 2013; Williams, 2010, 2012). Top awards have

gone to articles advocating a social justice focus in TPC practice and research (Colton, Holmes, & Walwema, 2017; Jones et al., 2016; Walton, Zraly, & Mugengana, 2015). Additionally, many scholars are becoming attuned to the role of TPC in enacting social change in underresourced communities or in perpetuating oppression (Agboka, 2013, 2014; Colton & Holmes, 2018; Colton & Walton, 2015; Evia & Patriarca, 2012; Haas, 2012; Jones, 2016 Jones et al., 2016; Walton & Jones, 2013; Walton et al., 2016; Williams, 2010, 2012).

In the sections below, I argue cooperatives are legitimate sites of TPC research because, while studies show several key differences between these writing contexts, technical documents are nevertheless crucial to a cooperative's durability (AUTHOR, 2017). Further, cooperatives are sites of *specifically* social justice TPC research because cooperatives have a history of grassroots economic success for socio-economically marginalized communities.

Technical Documentation in Cooperatives

Though cooperatives present new opportunities for TPC research, other than this author's previous work, there have been few studies on them. That said, research that has been conducted identified crucial overlap and divergence of communication practices between conventional and cooperative businesses (AUTHOR, 2017, 2018; Colton, AUTHOR, & Holmes, 2019). For example, one recent study conducted by this author, (AUTHOR, 2018), found that, while the concept of "strategic ambiguity" has been widely studied in nonprofits and conventional organizations (Contractor & Ehrlich, 1993; Davenport & Leitch, 2005; Eisenberg, 1984, 1994, 2007; Eisenberg & Goodall, 1997; Eisenberg & Witten, 1987; Paul & Strbiak, 1987), strategic ambiguity may function quite distinctly in a cooperative. In fact, this study found that ambiguity was functionally indispensable because "...unlike a conventional organization where precision and clarity are key, ambiguity forced ongoing negotiations of meaning, in line with their

democratic commitments...” (AUTHOR, 2018, p. 38). In other words, when ambiguity and clarity—concepts well understood in a conventional setting—are tested in a cooperative, the differences are stark. To display another significant difference, this same study found that in a conventional business, ambiguity is common in organizational “vision statements” as a means to generate buy-in from multiple stakeholders (Eisenberg, 1984), but in a cooperative, this ambiguity might even include documents intended to manage behavior like job descriptions or codes of conduct. In fact, ambiguity may be purposefully written into these documents as a means of achieving consensus among group members. This finding challenged the assumption that clarity was an absolute necessity in such documents (AUTHOR, 2018).

An earlier study also conducted by this author (AUTHOR, 2017) found that collaboratively written documents may have the disciplining effect of normalizing a culture of shared ownership, communal responsibility, trust, and transparency—effects not necessarily prioritized in conventional organizations yet that were critical to the success of a cooperative (AUTHOR, 2017). In another paper, Colton et al. (2019) argue that cooperatives and other democratic organizations may offer a substantial challenge to distributive, liberal frameworks of equality, especially as they are represented in the texts they produce, and, further, these sites may offer an opportunity for efforts of “active equality” (Colton & Holmes, 2018) to be put into organizational practice.

There are more studies to consider, especially if we include communication and organization studies. Harrison (1994) challenged the primacy of hierarchy in organizational research by examining interdependence and communication within specifically democratic organizations. Cheney (1995) examined unique communicative practice in multiple worker cooperatives. Trechter, King, and Walsh (2002) focused on communication strategies to develop

member involvement and commitment. Hoffman's (2005) study of dispute resolution in a worker cooperative substantially focused on workplace communication. Edenfield and Andersson (2018) examined the role of technical documents in boundary formation in a cooperative. Each of these previous studies demonstrates the crucial role of communication within cooperatives.

Social Justice and Cooperatives

Using the definition of social justice by Frey et al. (1996), cooperatives have historically been a site of social justice work for "underresourced" communities. As the above Principles of Cooperation demonstrate, cooperatives are mission-driven, and, through democratic member control, they offer a way for these members to shape this mission in order to advocate for themselves and their communities, broadly defined. In the U.S., this collective effort for oppressed or underresourced communities extends at least to the antebellum era.

> The history of African American cooperative economic activity begins with solidarity and collective action (economic and social) in the face of oppression, racial violence, discrimination, and sometimes betrayal. Even though separated from their clans and nations in Africa, enslaved as well as free African Americans continued African practices during the antebellum period—cooperating economically to till small garden plots to provide more variety and a healthier diet for their families. For two centuries they did not earn a regular wage or even their own bodies, but they often saved what money they could and pooled their savings to help buy their own and one another's' freedom (Gordon Nembhard, 2014, p. 31; see also Du Bois, 1907; Jones, 1985).

These collective efforts among marginalized communities continue today as people pull together to provide for themselves in the face of oppression. For example, in New York City, a worker-owned beauty shop, owned and operated by Latina transgender women, provides job

opportunities to a population that often suffers economic discrimination (Dekimpe, 2015). In Puerto Rico, the world's first incarcerated persons' cooperative, Cooperativa de Servicios ARIGO, affords people serving prison sentences the opportunity to earn money and to practice interpersonal skills, problem-solving, and business management (Nzinga Ifateyo, n.d.). These are just a few instances out of a long history of disadvantaged communities using the cooperative model to enact justice and to care for themselves.

It is important to note that not every cooperative venture is organized at the grassroots level. Some have grown out of institutional initiatives to address social problems. One example is the Evergreen Cooperatives system in Cleveland, Ohio. According to the "About Us" page, the cooperative system grew out of institutions addressing what they perceived as a need.

> Launched in 2008 by a working group of Cleveland-based institutions (including the Cleveland Foundation, the Cleveland Clinic, University Hospitals, Case Western Reserve University, and the municipal government), the Evergreen Cooperative Initiative is working to create living-wage jobs in six low-income neighborhoods, with a median household income below $18,500, in an area known as Greater University Circle. ("About Us")

Nevertheless, like the Rochdale weavers, many cooperatives do arise from within the community itself, such as the Lusty Lady, "the world's only unionized worker owned peep show," which grew out of a quest for a better work environment, and then an effort to save their own jobs ("History," 2018). In the case of New Era Windows and Glass in Chicago, employees successfully—and with great personal sacrifice—fought against wage theft, occupied the factory, then purchased that factory when it the owner threatened to close it. And now these same employees co-manage it ("Our Story," 2018). Other examples include a neighborhood food

desert opening their own grocery story (Peters, 2018), a child-care cooperative owned by the parents (Clynes, 2018), or platform cooperatives like Stocksy, where photographers co-own and manage a website for their stock photography in an effort to ensure equitable pricing and use of their work (Cortese, 2016).

Understanding that cooperative initiatives may be just as likely to come from within these communities as from without, it is evident that these initiatives are designed to challenge what is viewed as a lack, injustice, and/or imbalance. In other words, cooperatives are a critical site of social justice work.

Action Research and Cooperatives

In the last decade, research itself has come under scrutiny for its social justice implications (Agboka 2013, 2014; Evia & Patriarca, 2012; Jones, 2016; Jones et al., 2016). Identifying research methodologies appropriate for research in cooperatives and their community mission may need to begin with a similar examination of research ideologies and responsibilities. In the next section, using existing literature, I establish action research and participatory approaches as possibilities for cooperative research.

Rhetoric, composition, and TPC scholars (among others) have long contended that academic research is "always/already ideological" (Berlin, 1988, p. 679; see also Agboka, 2014; Alvesson, 1991; Blyler, 1995; Harrison, 1994; Herndl, 1991, 1993; Herndl & Nahwold, 2000). Scholars widely recognize ideological influence on research design, interpretation, and distribution. Agobka (2014) writes:

In my opinion, the most significant contribution of the "ideological" perspective

> was that academic research is always cultural, in many respects, and is always laden with political, power, and social justice concerns that cannot be addressed by employing positivistic approaches. (p. 299)

Recognition that research is, as Agboka (2014) says, "always cultural" and "laden with political power and social justice concerns" (p. 299) has resulted in embracing methodologies that reject the "neutrality and objectivity of researcher" (Grabill, 2000, p. 33; see also Agobka, 2013; Blyler, 1998; Clark, 2004; Doheny-Farina, 1993; Herndl, 1991, 1993). Blyler (1998) describes this move as a shift away from a "descriptive, explanatory research focus" to one that explicitly "aims at empowerment and emancipation" (p. 33), that "interprets the relationship between research and participants as one of collaboration" (p. 33). That is, researchers and participants become collaborators engaged in "their common research process" (Blyler, 1998, p. 37). As Cushman (1998) and others point out, one significant purpose for such critical research is for it to "effect social action" (Deetz & Kersten, 1983, p.148). This point resonates with current TPC research invested in social justice methodologies that expressly advocate for collective action and social change (Agboka, 2014; Cox, 2018; Evia & Patriarca, 2012; Haas, 2012; Jones, 2016; Sun, 2006; Walton & Jones, 2013; Walton & Zray, 2015), including action research (Clark, 2004; Faber, 2002; Grabill, 2000) and related participatory and decolonialist methods (Agboka, 2013, 2014; Evia & Patriarca, 2012). Actualizing the goals of social change at the foundation of these methodologies requires linking "education and sociopolitical action with research" (Blyler, 1998, p. 44). Further, action research (or participatory action research to some) is explicitly *activist* research, unambiguously working toward social change (Clark, 2004; Grabill, 2000; Sullivan & Porter, 1997). Clark (2004) articulates this overtly-political stance as bringing "action" to research.

> Recent work of some professional writing scholars has sought to bring "action" to our research, to embrace community engagement as a means to give students nonacademic contexts for their work, to promote an active vision of citizenship, to serve the community, and to create a new variety of relevance for our research. (p. 309).

Further, according to Grabill (2000), research demands "the codefinitions of problems, the cogeneration of knowledge, and collaborative action" (p. 34).

One approach influenced by the above principles of action research is participatory design, (or PD) (Spinuzzi, 2005, p. 163; see also Glesne, 1998). PD originated with "Norwegian unions looking for a more democratic approach to the design of workplace tools" (Evia & Patriarca, 2012, p. 342; see also Spinuzzi, 2005). PD research is "user-empowering" (Evia & Patriarca, 2012, p. 352). Evia and Patriarca (2012) also describe PD as user-centered.

> PD is based on the claim that users should be regarded as experts when they enter the design process of workplace tools, and it is driven by the concern for a more humane, creative, and effective relationship between those involved in technology's design and those involved in its use (Suchman & Trigg, 1991). The users' experience is described as tacit knowledge: vital to the process but seldom documented or standardized. (p. 351)

In other words, participants' knowledge and experience are essential to the research design. Similarly, researchers who have advocated for and deployed decolonialist methods argue that these approaches arise from the understanding that research is always ideological and cultural and that unreflective research can be colonizing. Agboka (2014) argues that researchers need to:

> [….] question our own assumptions; make participants active collaborators in research projects by positioning them—not as subjects/objects, but as equal participants; employ reflexive research methods; be critical of our own approaches; question our insider

> posture, even when we claim to be native to the research site; and be humble in our contacts with participants. (p. 299).

Agboka and others clearly call for ethical, reciprocal, participant-centered research that enacts emancipatory social change, and they point the way to research methodologies suited to cooperatives.

Looking at action research, PD, and decolonialist methodologies, at least two tools emerge as essential to meaningful user-centered research: 1) reciprocity between researcher and participants and 2) publication of results in ways that are relevant to the community that participated in its creation. While these themes may be applied to all action research (and possibly to ethical research in general), I want to draw attention to these themes in relation to cooperative research specifically, especially projects with partners from underresourced communities. And while there may be more, in this manuscript I focus on these two, which research and the following case studies illustrate may be the foremost important considerations when working with cooperatives. In many regards, the implementation may not look that different from working with other community-based or mission-driven organization. And, while it is important to account for unique features and challenges at every research site, there are at least three points of distinction that makes these tools specifically appropriate for a politically-conscious investigation into the writing practices of a cooperative enterprise. The researcher must consider 1) the cooperative's commitment to the Principles of Cooperation; 2) the cooperative's community commitment to the underresourced population that they serve, and 3) a range of co-equal stakeholders.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity is a foundational concept for research intended for social change and essential to action research. Reciprocity occurs when participants benefit "just as the researcher benefits" (Grabill p. 34, 2000). Cushman (1998) writes,

> If reciprocity requires that both the researcher and participants know and agree on what to give and what to take in a relationship, dialogue, in the Frierian sense of the word, insured the research relationship is mutually beneficial to everyone involved. (p. 31)

That is, rather than research as extractive, i.e., taking from participants, reciprocal research depends on dialogue to identify goals and benefits for the participants as well as the researcher. Grabill (2000) clearly links reciprocity with action research methods, writing that "mutual knowledge construction" is at the heart of action research and gives participants "a fundamental opportunity to participate in analysis, reflection, and meaning making" (p. 34).

For TPC research in cooperatives, reciprocity is a powerful force for social change, especially in light of field's movement toward socially just research. As in other action research projects, for cooperatives, this could mean working meeting with diverse stakeholders including members, employees, members of the board, or various intuitions (as in the case of the Evergreen Cooperative system mentioned above). Additionally, the Principles of Cooperation provide unique ethical guidelines for their work. Designing reciprocity into a project may have to account for these principles, along with other stated missions. Further, because cooperatives are co-managed and co-owned, doing so may mean negotiation with a diverse group of people with multiple (even competing) visions of how they or their communities may benefit.

Publication

Politically-conscious research seeking to enact social change and relying on the participation of cooperatives must also endeavor to provide transparent access to research data,

methodologies, and best practices for community research with the goal of achieving policy change (Jolivétte, 2015, p. 1). Cushman (1998) and others have paved the way, putting the research results into the hands of those who can act upon it. In the case of cooperatives, members, board members, or employees can act upon the research in ways that fit their own needs, through avenues that they can easily access and use (for instance, not behind a pay-wall and respective of their language and literacy). Presenting results could occur at the cooperative itself (if it is a brick and mortar site), at a community center, through newsletters, or, in a broader sense, through forums, trade publications, or in sit-downs with community leaders, to name just a few means of articulation. Each of these (and more) can effectively put actionable research into the hands of those who can use it to bring about change in/through the cooperative or to otherwise benefit the community it serves.

Study Design

In order to better understand the concerns of reciprocity and publication, I designed a small study informed by socially responsible research methodologies outlined above. Like any study, there are implications that fall outside the scope of this paper. Here, I will focus on the research design and methods used with cooperative partners within the context of a study on writing practice. Those findings will hopefully appear at a later date. In this paper, I focus the previously identified tools and their implications.

Sites

Choosing an appropriate site is a significant facet of politically-conscious research. Blyer (1998) argued that "[c]ritical research must be undertaken in settings where participants have the freedom and motivation to influence the research and where the critical research's emancipatory goal can be reached" (p. 46). In other words, participants must be able to influence the research

design, and there must be a social change outcome to the research. Further, Blyler (1998) argues that research might choose to collaborate particularly with marginalized groups, writing:

> …. scholars in professional communication might follow the lead of radical educational, and participatory action researchers in selecting questions and sites more amenable to the critical perspective—those that involve marginalized groups (for example, women, students, or grassroots community workers) or questions and sites that concern factions—for example, labor and management—that have chosen to collaborate in order to solve common problems. (p. 46)

With Blyer's directive in mind, I reached out to several U.S. cooperatives who worked with or who were formed by marginalized groups. In order to design a project that fell in line with the methodologies above, I approached them with the client-partnership study. Client-based research projects have a long history in TPC (for recent examples, see Kramer-Simpson & Simpson, 2018 or Walton et al., 2015), though few (if any) have been conducted with a cooperative.

To each cooperative, I offered my technical writing expertise. In this sense, working with clients was similar to any client relationship; however, consonant with action research precepts, this project started out "from a different premise than conventional research, as it is dedicated to helping rather than describing for publication" (Clark, 2004, p. 310; see also Faber, 2002). In each case study for this research, the participating cooperative had some sort of writing problem they needed to be resolved in order to better serve their communities. Please note that the names of the people I worked with and the research sites have been changed.

Site One: The International Council for Student Cooperatives. The International Council for Student Cooperatives (ICSC) is an organization that resources student and grassroots cooperatives, primarily housing cooperatives, and that has worked in cooperative development

for many decades. Housing cooperatives offer students affordable lodging and the opportunity to own and manage their own home. In addition to helping student cooperatives, ICSC provides free resources through their website to a variety of inter/national cooperatives from a range of sectors.

Site Two: Havens. Havens is one of the new forms of cooperatives, a web-based, platform cooperative. As such, Havens is a conglomerate of smaller online sites including a publication venue, user forum, and podcast, each focused on providing a creative outlet and peer support for artists. At the time of this research, Havens was still in its start-up phase and most of the project was in beta.

Data Collection

The study (IRB #8623) collected data via interviews from participants in cooperative development, support, or education. I also reviewed the observational notes taken during our meetings. I interviewed individuals from each cooperative who had hands-on experience with and knowledge of organizational writing practice for their cooperative. I conducted three semi-structured interviews. I interviewed Cecil, Richard, and a founder of a third cooperative that ultimately did not participate in the client study. Cecil is one of the two co-founders for Havens (the other individual was not able to participate). Richard was interviewed because, as the contact person for communication, his work at ICSC had the most overlap with TPC. Additionally, my project aligned with his job description and responsibilities, which enabled us to meet several times throughout the summer while he was "on the clock." The third individual was a founder who had intimate knowledge about the writing practices of the cooperative.

Conducted over several weeks in winter 2017, interviews were semi-structured and averaged 45 minutes long. They were transcribed and redacted of personal identifying

information. These interview questions were designed to gain a deeper understanding of TPC practice in a cooperative setting. I asked each participant questions pertaining to their perceptions of the role of research collaboration in cooperatives. While the interviews primarily contributed to research outside the scope of this article, working alongside them provided valuable data for thinking through research methods suited for action research in cooperatives. I took extensive notes during our meetings regarding research design including our research goals, needs, and constraints, and how each cooperative could best benefit from a TPC-focused research project.

Challenges

This study presented me with several challenges. First, because few models exist for research in cooperatives, I found myself drawing from other studies for inspiration, for example, research in nonprofits (Clark, 2004; Walton, Mays, & Haselkorn, 2016). While these examples provide some direction, the notable differences between cooperatives and nonprofits necessitate distribution of decision-making authority among a group of people, rather than a single arbiter of power. As both the cooperatives I worked with operated with collective management, decisions were distributed across a range of stakeholders, yet at times individuals were completely autonomous (understanding which situation required what is another project). Moreover, as they shaped not only the research goals but also the study design, the Principles of Cooperation could never be far from my mind.

Second, my participation in this study required background knowledge of U.S. cooperatives. My previous experience in cooperative development equipped me with the appropriate discourse and enabled me to articulate my concern and investment in the success of their work in a manner that resonated with them. While I can imagine another researcher with the same investment but without similar experience facing some initial barriers, by conducting a

background investigation into cooperatives, a researcher (whether practitioner, scholar, or student) could similarly apply action research methods with a partner cooperative.

Finally, while it is important to begin identifying appropriate methodologies for these distinctive sites, I want to be careful to not overly generalize based off a limited case study. The findings and methodologies I articulate below are only first, early steps and more research is needed.

Operationalizing Research for Community Change

I previously identified reciprocity and publication as central concerns for an action research methodology for cooperatives. In the sections that follow, I analyze each relative to my work with ICSC and Havens.

Reciprocity with ICSC

Working with ICSC afforded me the opportunity to contribute to their mission of inter/national cooperative development. During one of our initial conversations to plan the research project, the coordinator for communications, Karen discussed their concern for their website user experience and that they had prioritized a redesign in the coming months. She also mentioned working on a redesign of their handbook for developers, but that the rewrite was already underway. Through our conversations about the relationship between the website and the handbook, together we decided my experience and expertise would best be used to tackle one aspect of the website, a database of resources which had grown unwieldy through the years. Moreover, re-designing the database could help get these resources into the hands of the people who need them the most—marking this research as politically-conscious in that I aimed to enact a particular social change in concert with the ICSC. This database was a vital free resource they provided to cooperatives that could not afford a consultant. The ICSC voluminous resource

database contained topics ranging from templates for required documents like articles of incorporation and business plans, training manuals for a board of directors, and guidelines for creating a feasible budget, to name just a few. Cooperatives from all over the world and in a variety of languages uploaded resources to help others learn from their experience. Making the resource library more usable would be a significant contribution to their mission, and, by extension, help serve cooperatives around the world. Aiding ICSC in their endeavors of cooperative development is a clear political statement, siding with an organization in helping to build more and stronger cooperatives—a move that also aligned with Cooperative Principle Six: cooperation among cooperatives. As a researcher, I would enact the Principles of Cooperation alongside ICSC.

After we agreed my help would be most useful on the resource library, Karen then introduced me to Richard, who would be my contact for the rest of the project. When asked about usability testing or other kinds of research they had conducted towards their redesign, Richard confirmed ICSC did not have the capacity for that kind of research. So, in the summer of 2017, in concert with a partner with expertise in user experience (UX) who worked *pro bono* on the project, we worked with the ICSC to design, execute, and report out usability testing on their site. Testing was conducted over the summer with a fall deadline for a report in line with ICSC's timeline for the redesign and around their annual conference. The report on our findings and recommendations necessarily included consideration of strapped resources, a credible timeline for changes, and, most importantly, their position as a key resource for cooperatives around the world. After the initial delivery of the report, we arranged a later meeting to discuss the findings and recommendations, with the intention of supporting the organization in their changes. Our discussions with Richard also necessarily needed to consider that any redesign would also

involve many co-equal decision-makers. Ultimately, the goal was specifically to help them make their resource library better and to help others find information that could help them build new cooperatives. That is, the goal was social change by providing underresourced people tools to start or to grow their cooperatives, regardless of their financial capacity or connections. For example, one aim of the usability study was to identify common topics, keywords, and methods of searching for resources, common languages among users, types of content (such as videos, templates, or slide decks), and navigation struggles with the site. Redesigning the resource library with this information in mind could allow them to better circulate their resources.

Importantly, our expertise in TPC and UX was intended to inform our conversation about improving ICSC's site but not to supplant their knowledge. Rather, our goal was to operationalize it. For instance, one feature of our initial review was working together to find easy-to-acquire tools they could use to make the changes themselves. After six weeks, I contacted them again to see if they had any questions and to help identify and implement changes they had targeted.

In sum, I worked with Richard to identify their organizational needs and a deliverable that could help them, and consequently help those who used the resource library to develop their cooperative. Importantly, the deliverable helped further their mission of resourcing cooperative development—with the broader goal of growing more cooperatives around the world. They were given the full reporting of the usability findings and the help of a UX professional they would otherwise not have been able to afford. In this sense, my project was overtly working toward social change by actively engaging in community service to cooperatives. Making the resource library easier to navigate and more accessible could enable more users to find the information they needed to serve the communities through their cooperatives.

Reciprocity with Havens

I first met the co-founder of Havens, Cecil, at a conference for cooperative educators. During our initial conversations, Cecil disclosed that one problem they faced was figuring out how to generate and manage documentation for such a unique organization, one built around broad user engagement in both the creation and function of the site. To go a step further, as a cooperative, Cecil stated that Haven's financial model heavily relied on fostering and maintaining a sense of *ownership* for all users of the platform. In such a space, how could documentation be created and then maintain its relevance? What role should the Principles of Cooperation play in shaping documentation practice? Using their struggles and concerns as the basis for my participation in the project, I was also curious and stumped at the notion of "participatory documentation," the kind of documentation a platform cooperative might necessitate creating.

Over the next few months, Cecil and I met via video conference to brainstorm methods for document creation and management that could be participatory. Working together required learning about their constraints and affordances, the obstacles they were currently facing, and those they anticipated facing in the future. They also needed to learn more about what I could do for them. Once we identified the problem and how I could help, I conducted research on various documentation strategies and met with Cecil regularly to combine my research on genres and cooperative enterprise with his expertise and organizational needs with the aim of identifying actionable steps. Together, Cecil and I began to sketch a framework for documentation practices that met the requirements for a cooperative, broadly centered around the question: when is a user an owner? Over the course of fall 2017, I met with Cecil several more times to discuss novel ways to approach documentation creation and management, adapting existing technical

communication scholarship to their unique needs. In this sense, while the goal was explicitly to help Havens think through and develop documentation, our ideas could be helpful for platform cooperatives more broadly. Indeed, as my previous research projects indicated collaborative writing is key to shared governance in some cooperatives (AUTHOR, 2017), this research could potentially benefit any cooperative struggling with collaborative writing.

Publication

Keeping the aim of emancipatory research in mind, action research within a cooperative must also include a plan for sharing research results in ways that are actionable for the organization. For both the ICSC and Havens, dispersing research had two parts. First, I shared the deliverables with both organizations in a way that respects the context and constraints of that specific organization, which required negation with the clients, each resource-strapped and experts of their work, just not necessarily in TPC.

For the ICSC, I delivered the report to them as both a .pdf and via an oral report in an online meeting on their strict timeline. After giving them time to read the report and digest it, I then followed up to answer any remaining questions are all aspects of being mindful of the positionality of the organization. At this second meeting, the *pro bono* UX expert also offered her expertise and also identified open source and free use applications for instituting the changes Richard identified were priorities after having read the report.

For Havens, sharing my research meant meeting with Cecil and sharing information I had learned that added to their unique mission and constraints of an online democratic organization. Cecil also felt it was important to mention my work in relation to Havens in their marketing materials and beta documentation. Another tangible deliverable for Haves was our work toward identifying a method of documentation uniquely suited to their goals.

The second aspect of sharing this research with participants is ongoing: distributing this methodology and experience in channels that are relevant, i.e. going beyond sharing the academic article that resulted from their participation, for which they are not the target audience. Appropriate avenues for sharing this research include presenting at a workshop in a location that was convenient and accessible for the clients, writing a post in a newsletter that distributes cooperative news, participating in a cooperative workshop or conference, or posting in a listserv.

While these tools are imperfect, my modest aim was to conduct politically-conscious research in order to bring about social change via cooperatives to underresourced communities. Sharing this research with the communities who not only helped develop it but also may be the ones to benefit the most is an extremely important part of this project. My work with Richard on UX for free resources for cooperative development could help others who are developing resources for similar targets or to inform a yet-to-be-articulated praxis of UX in cooperative work. My work with Cecil is more up-and-coming as platform cooperatives are being developed. As the movement is only just beginning (Spitzberg, 2017), this work with Havens could play a role in articulating best practices for participatory documentation.

Conclusion

This process-focused article takes first steps toward articulating a methodology for conducting action research at a cooperative. In many regards, the manner in which concerns of reciprocity and publication were handled did not look any different from working with other community-based or mission-driven organizations. There are a few notable exceptions. For both ICSC and Havens, the Principles of Cooperation weighed heavily on the research design. For Havens, questions of ownership were foremost in our minds as we worked (Principle Two and Three). For ICSC, member education and access were driving concerns (Principle Five), as well

as the aforementioned cooperation among cooperatives (Principle Six). Both sites showed a commitment to the underresourced communities they served as well as negotiation with a range of co-equal stakeholders (Principle Seven).

These case studies offer several implications for TPC more broadly. For researchers, notwithstanding specificity of context to these case studies, we may be able to extrapolate and begin to generalize successful methodologies because, in nearly every setting, action research demands researchers make space for participants to contribute to the design of the study. In this case, cooperatives demand no less. Yet, regardless of their origin, sector, or organizational arrangement, each cooperative is unique and identifying appropriate methods requires tailoring and thoughtful consideration of each individual's goals. And, as TPC research in cooperatives is only now beginning to take shape, more and different kinds of research must be conducted at these sites in order to identify successful methodologies. Drawing on the above findings could help further develop politically-conscious methodologies grounded in working toward social change, one based on action research with a focus on reciprocity and the open sharing of research to the participating communities.

Another consideration for researchers is what aspects need to be altered for it to work in a social entrepreneurial (SE) venture, a close cousin to the mission-driven, for-profit cooperative (Andersson & McCambridge, 2017). Kerlin (2006) defines SE as "the use of nongovernmental, market-based approaches to address social issues" (p. 247). In one sense, an SE venture resembles aspects of cooperatives, e.g. a mission-driven, for-profit business intended to address a social need. In fact, many European SEs are organized as social cooperatives and necessarily rely on democratic governance (Kerlin, 2006). In contrast, in U.S. contexts, management and ownership structures of the latter may not be all that different from a conventional for-profit

organization (Kerlin, 2006, 2018). According to Kerlin (2018), U.S. SEs are typically part of for-profit ventures, typically with a double- or triple-bottom-line objective. While TPC research in SE is only now beginning (Spinuzzi, 2015b), no doubt action research tools will play a role in those studies.

For teachers, given the requirements for insider knowledge, one way this methodology could be useful for a research methods classroom is to lead students to conduct necessary background research in their country in order to understand what cooperatives have been designed to do, what issues they seek to resolve, and what role the Principles of Cooperation play in shaping the organization. It is also important to understand, as I stated above, the grassroots origin of many cooperatives and the commitment to democratic ownership that drives them. Students may be skeptical or even resist working with an organization that eschews conventional, bureaucratic arrangements of power. Thus, it is important for them to understand not only the "how" but also the "why" of these nonconventional organizations.

And, perhaps most importantly, beyond conferences and newsletters, it is important to identify the best manner for research conducted in marginalized communities to be operationalizable for them. One clear way is to work closely with partners to identify channels for distributing the research in ways that will best serve the communities. One means of distribution could be to collaborate with cooperative development and advocacy groups such as Democracy at Work (https://www.democracyatwork.info) and Cooperation Works! (https://cooperationworks.coop). Assemblies such as Coop Fest, in Milwaukee WI, the North American Students of Cooperation's Annual Institute, the Association of Cooperative Educators Annual Institute, and other gatherings explicitly aimed at cooperative education and development are other opportunities to share this research. It is important to note that while travel may be

expensive, many conferences intended to support cooperative development provide scholarships and other means of travel support for low-income attendees.

Cooperatives provide new domains for politically conscious TPC research focused on supporting marginalized and underresourced communities, but they also provide new challenges. It is vital for academic researchers to develop and follow methodologies that respect their contribution to our research and that put that research back into the hands of those who will benefit from it the most.

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