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At the heart of my research are two central ideas about how we can best respond to complex problems: first, that public rhetoric and technical communication research can make substantive contributions that respond to complex problems facing our local communities and institutions. And second, that attention to infrastructure (Star, 1999) which makes tacit practices visible can help us design more sustainable approaches to research, and address historical and systemic inequalities related to technical communication (Jones, Moore, & Walton, 2016, Longo, 2000). Combining these trajectories helps technical communicators become more resilient, flexible writers and problem solvers in increasingly collaborative, distributed, and digital spaces. My research speaks to this focus on responding to the material needs of communities and creating spaces for inclusive, sustainable and constructive collaborative work.

Developing New Materialist Research Frameworks for Collaborative Response

My dissertation is a mixed-methods exploratory study focused on identifying research methods and methodology that support sustained, collaborative response to complex problems. The emergence of harm reduction strategies to address the opioid epidemic in Indiana is an effective case for considering how practitioners, scholars in multiple fields, and community members cooperate in order to address problems. My study uses textual analysis of press releases and news stories related to the 2015 HIV outbreak in southeastern Indiana to map the operational response to the crisis. Participant interviews with public health practitioners, community advocates administering syringe services programs, and academics currently engaged in research initiatives help me to further develop a method for identifying and mapping the sensitizing metaphors (Johnson, 2017) and the infrastructure and boundary objects (Star, 1999) that help a complex network of stakeholders cooperate to improve lives in local communities. My project builds on participatory research design methods in technical communication (e.g. Opel & Hart-Davidson, 2017, Moore & Eliot, 2016) and contributes to current conversations about methods in technical communication research (Graham & Teston, 2015, McNeley, Spinuzzi, & Teston, 2015, Meloncon & Scott, 2017) by considering how researchers think about what counts as evidence, and how we can collaborate with diverse groups to not only make knowledge, but to also to improve our communities.

My dissertation will serve as a basis for further research and publication along two trajectories. I contribute to current conversations about new materialist methods for technical communication research by examining how a diffractive methodology (Barad, 2007) that includes textual analysis, assemblage mapping (Angeli, 2017) and participatory research design methods can help to support sustained response to problems. My first article, currently in preparation demonstrates my preliminary findings in tracing the operational response in Scott County. Mapping the language of operational response illuminates community networks and the negotiations that inform emergent policy and practice. For example, it shows how the metaphor of “building a model for response” allowed for cooperation and policy making that seemed impossible prior to the outbreak. The second trajectory is focused on the phenomena of emergence and the shifts in public rhetoric surrounding complex problems. For example, in my initial research, following the news reports and press releases, the HIV outbreak in Scott County was on the surface, the crisis event that allows for syringe exchange to emerge as a response disease prevention and harm reduction in Indiana. Further research with community advocates in Monroe County shows that community activists in Bloomington, IN, were running an unsanctioned syringe exchange program, months before the outbreak was identified in Scott County. Bloomington is the home of Indiana University, it’s more urban than the rural epicenter of the outbreak. Despite the difference, the local expertise and the network that developed in Monroe County prior to the 2015 law allowing sanctioned needle exchange was integral to both capacity building and community building for response to the outbreak in Scott County. The relationship between the community, the county public health department, and the university in Bloomington has shifted the conversation about harm

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reduction in Indiana. What is evident from initial research is that my methods for studying the response to crisis in Scott County have applications and implications for how we collaborate to address complex problems like disease outbreak, climate change, and community infrastructure where the reality of material conditions and lived experience outpace our political will and institutional capacities for response.

For more information about my dissertation you can view a dissertation summary and abstract at chellemcmullin.com

Crow, the Corpus & Repository of Writing

Crow is an interdisciplinary, inter-institutional research team working to develop a web-based platform that combines a large-scale corpus of student writing and corpus research tools with a repository of pedagogical materials. Crow is another site for examining how teams develop collaborative methods for response to complex problems. In the case of Crow, we respond to a need for sustainable platforms for large scale, data-driven writing research. I bring a similar set of questions to this research team that I bring to my dissertation research: How do we support sustainable collaborative work in in large, often distributed interdisciplinary teams? In both an upcoming publication and a planned empirical study, I work with Crow researchers to study how we keep tacit habits of writing, workflow and collaboration visible so that research teams can be more responsive to the tensions and potential bottlenecks of collaborative distributed work.

Our digital collaborative methods, in Google Drive, Basecamp (a team communication platform), and GitHub have yielded a rich collection of data that we can analyze empirically to understand Crow infrastructure. In 2016 I conducted a pilot study with Crow team member Tony James, harnessing Basecamp data and statistical genre analysis (Graham, XXXX) to analyze Crow collaborative practices. This pilot study generated technical workshops at universities and at conferences, on best practices for distributed team work, and a research design for a robust investigation of how interdisciplinary, interinstitutional researcher teams collaborate for writing, research, and software development. We are currently developing protocols and methods for a large scale, data-driven study of Crow infrastructures, focused on making visible tacit practices, and demonstrating how attention to these practices is important for sustainable, inclusive, distributed work.

For more about our current work with Crow please visit writecrow.org