

Community Research in Practice

Practical Wisdom: Our Five Principles

Institute
for
**Social
Justice**

York St John University

There is widespread recognition that by narrowing the gap between academia and communities we can find innovative ways of addressing social, economic and environmental challenges that can produce meaningful change. Community Research Grants (CRG) are research partnerships between York St John University academics and VCSE organisations and groups working in Yorkshire and the Humber.

In contrast to the traditional belief of universities being unique knowledge holders, the CRG scheme promotes open and inclusive research, welcoming alternative perspectives to knowledge creation. This scheme pursues social justice in action by working with community-led and community-focused organisations and groups.

On 5 November 2025, the Institute for Social Justice (ISJ) organised an event entitled **“Community Research in Practice: Bridging Curious and Creative Communities”**. Grantees of different ISJ Community Research Grants, awarded between 2022 and 2025, gathered to share their learnings and experiences of doing collaborative research on social justice.

The event explored how CRGs have been beneficial to VCSE partners in generating research findings that contribute to strengthening communities' voices, enable service improvement and strategic thinking. However, discussion also explored the organisational and cultural differences within these research partnerships. Together we have formulated this discussion into what we term 'practical wisdom'; that is experience-led principles that seek to rebalancing power differences, minimise research extraction, and enable empowering research collaborations.

The principles set in this living document will continue to evolve as new learnings and experiences develop throughout the on-going CRG scheme. The ISJ hopes that academics at YSJU and VCSE organisations and groups support these principles and carry on sharing new learnings to achieve more balanced research partnerships as well as innovative and impactful research.

Principle 1. Create and maintain effective communications

Communications in partnerships are better when they are frequent, inclusive, accessible and to the point.

Fostering a working relationship where frank and open conversations happen is indispensable. It helps to: understand organisational differences; ensure that what each partner wants or needs is embedded in the research project; and understand each partner's boundaries, limitations and strengths.

Developing personal connections with each other to build trust is important to navigate challenges and potential disruptions throughout the project.

Principle 3. Apply flexible and compassionate project management

Do not assume that partners have worked collaboratively before or that they have these skills. As with any other partnership, clear roles and responsibilities are needed, supported through regular meetings.

Sometimes partners put significant amounts of unfunded capacity into the project, it is important to acknowledge this. Partners can get anxious or defensive about capacity constraints. Learn to approach these constraints in compassionate ways.

Perceived lack of time can be a major factor in collaborations. Time pressures and availability can vary between partners. Take a strength-based approach to share workloads and learn from each other.

Principle 2. Understand each other without assumptions

Give yourself time to listen to your partner's views. Collaborative partners do not automatically understand each other's structures or ways of working. This lack of understanding can negatively impact things such as research design, quality of data collected and ethics processes.

The ways of developing knowledge may be different between partners. Strive to value different approaches and legitimise each other's work. This will help all partners to build confidence in research to explore challenges together.

Do not be shy at asking your partner what they are getting out from the project collaboration. It is likely that by being open and honest the relationship will be strengthened.

Principle 4. Invite curiosity into the research

Collaborative research projects are likely to require flexibility and adaptability, while keeping to time schedules. However, new ways of working and of co-producing knowledge also invite curiosity to try something different.

Time allowing, do not feel afraid to reshape ideas as you are likely to uncover questions you didn't realise you wanted to explore in the first place. CRGs provide an opportunity to create new perceptions about, and applications of, research.

Principle 5. Plan outputs that matter

In planning research outputs (e.g. report, video, webpage) be intentional. Think carefully and specifically about who the audience is. Consider what you hope that audience will do with or in response to the output.

Intentionality requires thinking about who may care about your findings and how you might reach them most effectively. Sometimes, letting project outputs reflect the people who did the work is both rewarding and engaging.

CRGs are relationship-based research projects. Aim to celebrate and strategically disseminate research findings together. Use each other's different networks. This will contribute to building enduring collaborations.

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