



A guide to disseminating research findings with youth



Spaces & Places Dissemination Manual

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INTRODUCTION

This manual is a practical guide for people who want to involve participants, youth in particular, in translating the findings of a research study into dissemination products that can be shared with a wide audience. It draws on our experience doing research with Aboriginal youth in Atlantic Canada for the Spaces & Places research project (www.resilienceresearch.org). In this manual we will share with you some of what we learnt about choosing, creating and distributing a dissemination product with research participants in ways that inform policy and practice. We include a number of examples from our project and others we find inspiring. This manual is not intended to be a definitive guide to doing participatory dissemination,

For an up-close view of what participatory data analysis looks like, watch the companion video to this manual at <http://www.resilienceresearch.org>

but rather a sharing of ideas with the hope that this exchange will support other research teams in their dissemination work. In describing the process that we undertook, we hope that you will be able to use or adapt some of the activities to your own work. We hope that reading this manual will inspire you to custom-design a process that is tailored to the setting of your own research and the participants who you are working with.

◇ *Why do participatory dissemination?*

For researchers who are committed to producing work, with research participants rather than about research participants, and producing work that can directly impact policy, service interventions or community practice, participatory dissemination can be a powerful way to make our findings real. In an era where an oversupply of research reports often serve no other purpose than to generate a backlog of reading material for policy makers, service providers and frontline staff, researchers are increasingly trying to find better ways of sharing research findings, and of using ways that will bring volume to the voices of the participants we work with; to attract the attention of the people who have the ability to directly impact their wellbeing and bring change to practice and resources.

There are a number of other compelling reasons to do participatory dissemination, particularly if we are working with a participant group that is usually marginalized in decision making, such as youth. First, youth participation in these activities provides an opportunity for youth to engage positively with their communities, as well as an opportunity for youth to express their needs more constructively, advocating for supports and resources they need. In this way, participation becomes a means of seeding long term engagement in a knowledge sharing process that effectively supports a long term change process.

Second, participatory dissemination products open a direct link between the voices of participants and our research audience. Creating this link has its own implications. Our research audience receives messages that more accurately represent young people's lived realities, which means that whatever action/ applications come out of the findings will possibly be more appropriate for young people and their communities. Furthermore, when we open up an opportunity for young people to communicate directly with people who have the power to affect their wellbeing, we legitimize young people's knowledge, we demonstrate that this knowledge is valuable and can be useful for improving their lives and those of their families and communities. This helps build their communication skills as well as their sense of agency, ownership and responsibility in the world. This is particularly relevant for researchers working within a transformative, action research or anti-oppressive paradigm.

Third, dissemination products created by participants, who are untrained as researchers, starts to address the problem of inaccessible and jargon-heavy academic and policy writing. These writing styles often limit the number

Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Institute of Aboriginal Peoples' Health. (2009). *Aboriginal Knowledge Translation: Understanding and respecting the distinct needs of Aboriginal communities in research*. Ottawa, ON: Author.

Hanson, P.G., & Smylie, J. (2006). *Knowledge Translation for Indigenous Communities; Policy Making Toolkit*.

and variety of audiences or people who can access and engage in the knowledge production process. Participants can support academics in producing research products that are accessible non-academic audiences—this is particularly important if you are working in a transformative, post-colonial and/or indigenous research framework.

◇ *What is? the Spaces & Places project?*

Spaces & Places is a multi-site, visual methods study that explores what spaces are available to youth that establish a sense of community and cultural connection when facing higher than normal risks. The goal is to understand how these spaces facilitate a sense of cultural and civic engagement in youth, in turn fostering good social and health outcomes for youth. Our hope is to provide communities, and community-based services, with practical information on how they can support positive life outcomes for youth. The project was designed in close collaboration with community partners to ensure the study meets both community and academic goals.

The experiences that we include in this manual, come from the research that has taken place in the three Aboriginal communities that participated. Youth invited to the study were seen by community advisors as having something important to say about growing up well in their respective communities. The young people who worked on the project were between the ages of 12-18.

Specifically, each youth in the study was filmed for as much of a day in their life as possible. They also each took photographs of the spaces and places in their community that make them feel like they belong; and the spaces and places in their community that make them feel they don't belong. Individual elicitation interviews were then conducted with each youth. Interviews ordinarily occurred over two sessions: one focusing on the youth's photographs and one focusing on a 30 minute compilation of their video data. Following this a focus group interview was conducted with all participants within that particular community. This process was repeated twice in each community allowing for a

What dissemination products were produced from Spaces & Places?

- Murals
- Posters
- Postcards
- Videos
- A photobook

longitudinal understanding of the ways in which young people interact with their environment.

Data was analysed in collaboration with youth, using thematic analysis. See the companion manual “Analysing data with youth: A guide to conducting thematic analysis” for more information on this process.



HOW TO CREATE PARTICIPATORY DISSEMINATION PRODUCTS

1. Choose which findings to focus on

After you've completed your data collection and data analysis, the next step is deciding which findings should be communicated to which audiences. Because research studies often produce several findings, or complex findings with several components that explain that complexity, it may be better not to crowd all your findings into one dissemination product. Perhaps there are some particular findings that are more relevant for community-based service providers, and others that are more appropriate for policy makers.

Participants are best suited to make decisions about which findings, or aspects of the findings are most critical to them, and should therefore be disseminated. In Spaces & Places, once the data analysis was complete and we had a series of themes related to the overall findings, we asked participants to rank the importance of these themes to them as a group. For example, in one site we listed all the themes generated through the data analysis on large sheets of paper. Youth then placed post-it notes next to each theme, rating (from 1-6) the theme that was the most important to them, what they spent the most time doing, and then in an ideal world, how they would like to be spending their time. In this way, a conversation could be facilitated that helped youth reach consensus on what themes they wanted to share.

There are some great resources on advocacy and media that can support you to do this.

*<http://plan-international.org/about-plan/resources/publications/participation/youth-advocacy-toolkit/>
http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/mediasmarts/files/pdfs/Media_Toolkit_Youth_2014.pdf
<http://www.optionsforsexualhealth.org/sites/optionsforsexualhealth.org/files/Youth%20Advocacy%20Toolkit.pdf>
http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/storage/advfy/documents/mvc_toolkit.pdf*

2. Choose a dissemination product

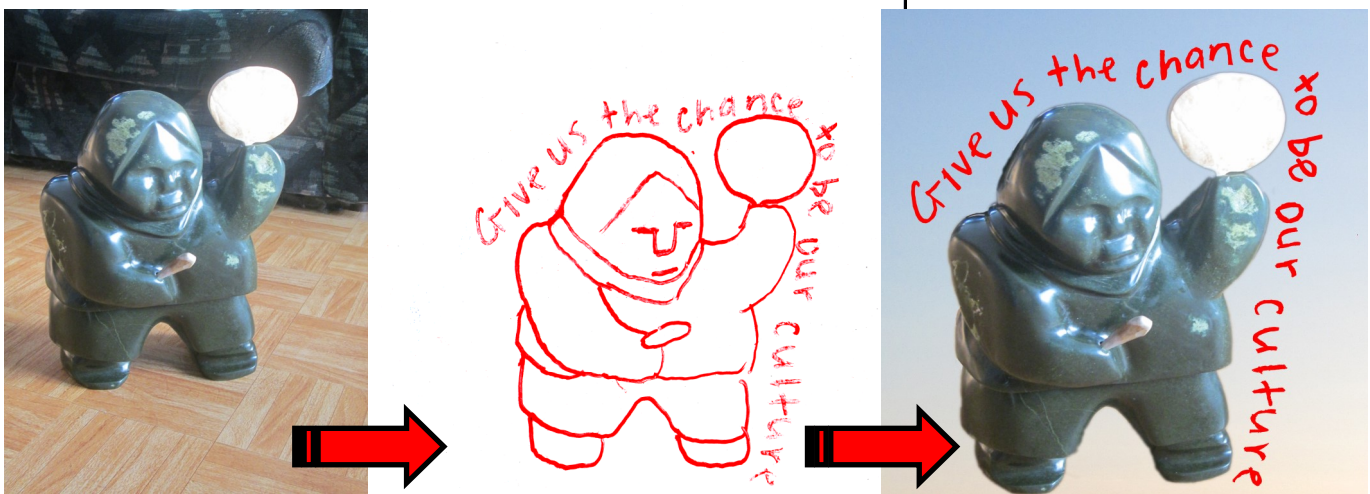
One of the most important decisions to make in this process is what dissemination product(s) should be created. Below, we offer a set of questions to ask yourself in order to determine what format might be the right fit for your findings. Many of these questions intersect, and should be considered simultaneously

◇ Who are the research participants? And what skills would they gain from creating a dissemination product?

What level of engagement do participants want in a dissemination process, and what are they able to do? The answers to these questions depend on their interests, ages, and if and how easily they can come together as a group. How much time do they have to lend to the process and how often? How long would it take them to create a mural vs. a postcard? How many participants are interested? Two people can put together a presentation, four a video. Importantly, what skills do participants have, and what do they want to learn? In this way, the question of “who are the research participants?” is very closely linked to the question “What skills will they gain from creating a

dissemination product?" Ultimately, participatory dissemination processes shouldn't only benefit the research study, but should have a positive impact for everyone participating in the process.

Example: In one Spaces & Places site, youth had limited time to devote to a dissemination product. Because of this they, together with the site researchers, decided to produce a set of posters and post cards that integrated photographs they had already made for the study, and expressions that reflected the themes and findings from that site. In only a few hours on a Saturday afternoon, the team was able to produce a series of 12 posters.



Working collaboratively on the data gathering and analysis process should provide the research team with a good sense of what skills participants already have and what skills they might want to build. Youth participants who want to spend more time outside may love painting an exterior mural. Others who are interested in learning how to use a video camera could make a movie. Other participants who only have a few hours to spare might be interested in taking photos of their community that the research team can then turn into postcards. It is of crucial importance however not to allow a situation in which participant expectations and resulting plans exceed the supports and resources that the research team can provide. With this in mind ...

◇ *Should researchers or participants decide on dissemination products?*

Some of the dissemination products created in Spaces & Places were chosen by the participants, and some were chosen by community partners. If you

know you're constrained by time or money, or if there are very good reasons to choose one particular dissemination method over others, be up front about this with participants from the beginning, and suggest options that fit within your constraints. Or you may want to leave the choice entirely up to participants, particularly if they are already somewhat familiar with modes of expression like writing, art-making or public speaking. Your role as the facilitator of this process is to enable youth and/or researchers to choose a product that hits the sweet spot between what youth want, what is appropriate for the context, and what will have the maximum impact in communicating your findings to the desired audiences. Of course, as the facilitator you also need to account for the available resources ...

Example: the offices of one of our community partners were located in a 60-foot trailer that faced a community healing garden. The community partner was extremely excited about the potential of a mural reflecting youth voices being painted onto the outside wall of the trailer. While the decision of what the dissemination product would be, youth directed the content of the mural. We found that telling the youth from the start that we were going to paint a mural gave them enough structure for their involvement—they knew what to expect and they felt reasonably confident that they could do it—within which they creatively informed the themes and content of the mural.



◇ *What resources do you have?*

In the process of deciding what dissemination products to generate with participants, consideration also has to be given to the amount of money and time available to develop a solid product. Given the that the intent is to produce something that will add authority to participant voices, it is valuable to think about the people who are available to help, such as community partners, service providers, and trainers you could bring in to coach participants in, say, public speaking. Beyond research participants and the larger research

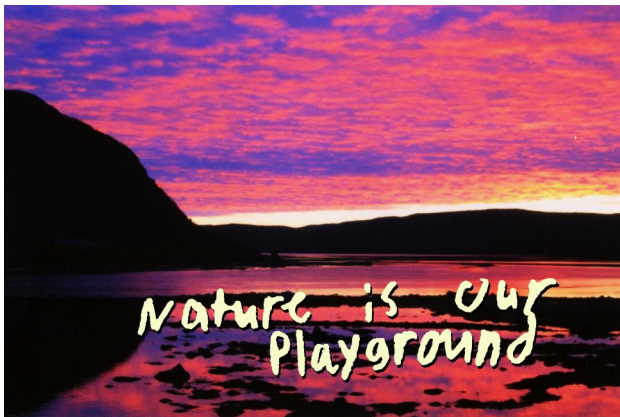
team, how much broader community involvement could there or should there be? Especially for a longer term project that doesn't require specialized skills, participants' families, friends and community members might be interested in helping as well. Involving local experts like a high school art teacher can help to create a high quality product as well as build local relationships—but make sure you compensate them or reciprocate to recognize their expertise, if appropriate.

Example: When the mural was painted in the community healing garden, the local Band Council provided scaffolding for the team to use in the painting.

While considering what resources are available for the dissemination process, it's a good idea not to let this process of stock-taking result in a list of limitations. Wonderful products can be produced with limited budgets and few resources. Working with youth and community partners can be a great way of coming up with creative ideas and alternatives.

Example: In one community, at the second phase of research, youth decided to replicate the poster and post card process of the youth from the first

round of research (See example above). The images many of the youth produced for the posters however, were made on their cell phones and didn't have very good resolution/high pixel count. Using some of the image effects (included in the photo software that came with our PCs) the team was able to produce posters using the images at hand.



◇ *Who is your dissemination audience and how can they be reached?*

Identify the key groups that you want to reach with your findings, and figure out what will capture their attention, what will be manageable and accessible for them to consume, and what kind of product will actually make an impact on them. Arts-based dissemination products can be particularly useful here.

For example, one of the research reports we produced for a previous study was summarized into a one-page comic that we sent to all the youth who participated. We also attached the comic to copies of the full research report, and both were sent to policy makers who, even if they didn't read the whole document, could skim the comic for the relevant findings.

A further consideration is how best to maximize the various audiences that will see a product. The posters and postcards created in various sites could be sent to service providers and policy makers together with a summary of the findings. Similarly, short videos (i.e. 3 - 4 minutes) explaining the murals painted in some of the communities, and hosted on youtube, can be shared very widely. Again, these videos were produced "in-house" by pulling together various resources and skills that existed within our larger team. In this way, a product (e.g. a mural) can speak to various audiences: the community, local service providers, policy makers, and academic audiences.

◇ *What cultural context are you working in?*

Do you know the history of the participants and their neighborhood/city/community? Are there culturally evocative (or on the other hand, inappropriate) symbols, messages, images or references that you should consider? If you are an outsider to the community, how will you incorporate these elements in a way that is respectful and consensual?

Having a local advisory committee will help immeasurably to determine these parameters. The mural we painted at one of our Spaces and Places sites incorporated a lot of indigenous imagery and symbolism, much of which was suggested by the participants. However, having a team of staff from our partner organization helped us understand these references, as did taking some time to research the artistic traditions of that particular community.

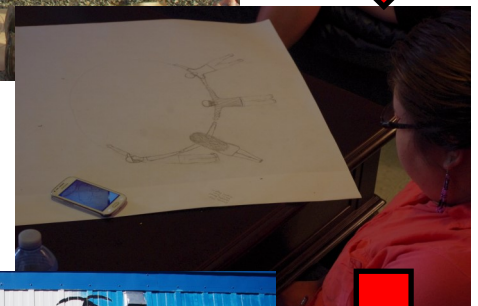


3. Create the product

Once you've determined what findings you're going to share and in what format, now your task is to synthesize the research findings into a cohesive product that can then make its way out to the intended audience. How this process unfolds will be very much informed by the way the questions above were responded to. Again, the research team can drive this process, as long as you are checking in with youth to make sure you're accurately representing the findings. For example, in one of the mural projects we did, we first had participants brainstorm images they wanted on the mural, and sketch them out quickly. Based on those, as well as our findings and the research we had done on the community's cultural symbols, we designed a mockup for the mural. We presented the design to the youth and staff from our partner organization for feedback, redrew it based on their comments, and got the participants' final approval. Throughout the process, we were dedicated to a process of inclusion and listening, but we also moved quickly in order to complete the mural within the designated time.

Facilitating the process

In order to successfully lead a group of youth through a participatory dissemination process, it can be helpful to brush up on your skills for facilitating groups. If you have little experience with facilitation, consider having someone on the research team who has skills in this area, or take advantage of one of the many training opportunities available. You already have some facilitation skills if you've conducted interviews or focus groups, and the addition of some basic principles of workshop sequencing, pacing, and reading the group can be enough to equip you to lead an effective participatory dissemination process with young people.



4. Distribute the product

If youth and community members have been meaningfully involved, either just during dissemination or from the start of the research process, they will ideally have developed a sense of ownership and responsibility for making sure that their family and friends know about the study's findings. Videos and websites allow them to share their work on social media.

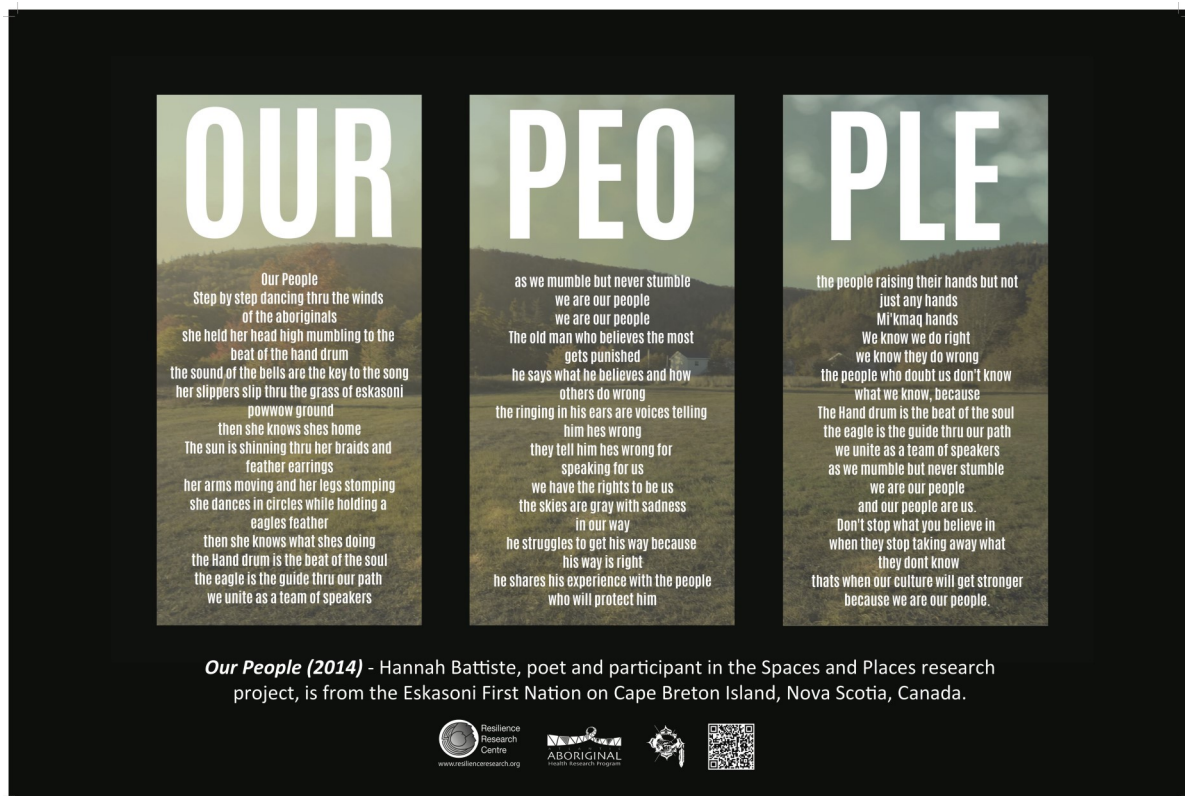
Effective dissemination to service providers and policy makers can be boosted if you have developed strong relationships during the project with your community partner and other relevant organizations. Local advisory committee members will have their own networks, and community partners can tap existing relationships with government ministries. Use all opportunities to publicize your findings. Short, easily digestible dissemination products can be cleverly slipped into reports, newsletters or conference programs.

A NOTE ON LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT

There is ongoing discussion among researchers about how much responsibility and choice to give youth during the participatory research process. What emerges for us is the conclusion that the balance between youth-driven and researcher-driven is different for every project, but that it is essential not to burden young people with more work or decision making than they want or can handle. Especially for youth who are already facing challenges like poverty, home stress, low academic performance or disability, a highly involved participatory process might have the opposite effect of what you're trying to achieve with your research. The key should be respecting participant's wishes regarding levels of engagement and involvement.

Through our experience doing participatory dissemination in three different research sites, we discovered that each group wanted a particular type of engagement. A lot of this depended on how much time the youth had to spend with us, how interested and able they were to synthesize findings into products, and what hard skills we all had—participants and researchers combined—for creating arts-based products. Based on the level of engagement that worked for the youth, we as the research team took on more or less responsibility for making certain decisions and moving the process forward.

We also left room for multiple levels of engagement within the same project. One of our participants spent the weekend painting a mural along with the rest of the group, but came to talk to us separately about a poem she had written. As an aspiring writer and community leader, she wanted her poem used as a dissemination product, so we decided to create a poster that featured her poem. Our graphic designer mocked up some possible layouts for the poster and she had the final creative say.



We hope this manual has provided some assistance in generating ideas and plans for your own participatory dissemination projects with participants; and that you find the experience as rewarding (and as much fun!) as we did!