Nerdfighting as Community Engagement: Curricular Change in Context

Jennifer Burek Pierce
University of Iowa
Nerdfighting as Community Engagement

Curricular Change in Context
Topics

- Connecting community engagement and nerdfighting
- Community engagement at UI: Working with the IISC & SCPL
- Confronting the challenges by consulting the literature
- The student experience and directions for the future
Connecting community engagement & nerdfighting

- Previously, community engagement/service learning integrated across the curriculum
- Fall 2015: Community Engagement course
- Explaining the new course: the metaphor of nerdfighting ....
What is nerdfighting?

- Per The New Yorker, fans of Green (see http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/a-note-on-nerdfighters)

- Per the Urban Dictionary, nerdfighters are “made of awesome” (see http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Nerdfighter)

- Per YA novelist John Green and his equally, though differently, famous brother Hank, it’s “decreasing world suck.” (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyQi79aYfxU)

- They even have a book club, reading Behind the Beautiful Forevers: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQ_JnlpzM6M
When nerdfighting is the trope ....
Community engagement @UI: Working with the IISC & SCPL
IISC & Community Engagement

- Organizes, centralizes, and sponsors activities

- Two aims:
  - Increase visibility of UI outreach efforts
  - Ensure students’ work doesn’t increase their costs for their education

- UI community partners selected by IISC advisory board

- SLIS students & IISC partners: WPL, SCPL
The SCPL Project

http://iisc.uiowa.edu/project/coordinate-early-literacy-resources-in-support-of-grade-level-reading-success and
http://www.americanlibrariesmagazine.org/article/mind-gap

Coordinate Early Literacy Resources in Support of Grade-level Reading Success (Fall)

Department/program: Library and Information Science

This project will work to meet information needs expressed by the Sioux City Public Library, which is developing community partnerships to support early childhood literacy. Sioux City Public Library Director, Betsy Thompson, along with students in the School of Library and Information Science will identify and locate potential community partners who have a stake in early childhood literacy. This group will be diverse, as extant partnerships include HUD, Blue Zones communities, and others. By helping community groups interested in childhood literacy to find and communicate with each other, the library will facilitate conversations among those interested in the positive long-term outcomes associated with gains in this measure of educational achievement. Project deliverables will include a literature review that includes material on peer library projects around the nation that might offer best practices and models for the work of interest to SCPL; a spreadsheet containing as comprehensive a list as possible of local and regional entities interested in the subject of early childhood literacy with their specific programs/initiatives, and a formal presentation of the information.
The SCPL Project in Course Context

- A community nearly five hours away from SLIS

- A tri-state region: Siouxland

- A community with a different SES/educational profile than Iowa City (see http://siouxlandchamber.com/economic-development/demographics-economic-stats/)

- Mehra, Mehra & Sandusky, others, suggest paradigms for community engagement in LIS; IISCIISC-SCPL is a new mode
Confronting Challenges

• Peterson suggests the educational literature as a resource (Service Learning: Linking Library Education & Practice, 2009)

• Medicine is another field with a developing history of community engaged research
  - http://www.cdc.gov/phppo/pce/
  - http://www.health.state.mn.us/communityeng/
  - http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2901283/
What the literature tells us:

- “The first step in considering the meaning of community is to understand that, fundamentally, it is a fluid concept. What one person calls a community may not match another person’s definition. However, those interested in working with a community must first have a clear picture of the entity they are trying to address.” – CDC on CE
Two Issues, Two Strategies

- Getting to know how communities are defined, created, and maintained
- Getting to know Sioux City … from afar
Another, More Subtle Issue

- The nerdfighting ethos: free-spirited, fun, self-directed; see, for example, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dxYNUu2egM (while simultaneously invested in well-being, as in http://time.com/3418834/john-green-bill-gates-clean-water-ethiopia/)

- The project: literature- and database- based

- Fulfilling project objectives versus fulfilling motivations for involvement
Impact and Relationships

Washington Free Public Library
Washington, Iowa

lucky to relationship with to many more projects in
Many thanks,
Debbie
The student experience and directions for the future

- The big request: “hands-on”
- Summer reading before theory
- Site visits
- Themes for definition and emphasis
  - Relationship between theories of community and understanding the community served
  - Structure for project, prominence of outcomes
Some conclusions

• Community engagement literatures tend to orient to outcomes and impact; outcomes can be long-range and beyond the horizon of the project/course

• LIS literature’s interdisciplinarity, derived from cognate fields that have emphasized theory responding to the “linguistic turn,” may orient to fields focused on communities and their needs for a strong context to support this kind of curricular learning
Questions?