

NOAH LENSTRA RESEARCH STATEMENT (last updated August 1, 2016)

In my research I take a community informatics approach to studying literacy, heritage, and marginalized communities. This research began with eBlackCU, a multi-year project focused on understanding how digital heritage information is used in communities. Working with an African-American community, I found that older adults of all backgrounds, including those who struggle with basic digital literacy, have a keen interest in creating, accessing, and sharing digital heritage. This discovery emerged over a three-year period in which I worked intensively with this community to build a digital library containing over 50,000 documents about the local African-American experience. During this research I led workshops on digital heritage at local churches, organized a campus-community symposium attended by 450 people, and secured funding to hire and train 10 high school interns. This work led to an award-winning research paper (Lenstra & Alkalimat, 2012), as well as to my dissertation research, which asks to what extent and how community-based information infrastructure, including public libraries, supports older adult digital literacy.

Conducting community-based research

One challenge in community-based research is combining methodological rigor with community engagement. My dissertation fieldwork combined engagement and data collection by helping older adults with technology, and then talking with them about their experiences learning new technologies. This technique gives me close ethnographic data as well as answers to open and closed end questions. To manage and make productive longitudinal community-based research, I have used a variety of methods, including participant observation, interviews, surveys, and focus groups. This triangulation enables me to understand in rich detail how communities support digital literacy.

Doing research in communities also requires forming relationships between universities and communities that endure across time. One challenge in the eBlackCU project was overcoming the distrust of the local African-American community towards the University of Illinois. This distrust was understandable, as I learned when I compiled a monograph summarizing university research done in the local Black community over many decades. Not only did communities not hear the results of this work, most of the scholars were unaware of what else had been done in the local area. I earned people's confidence by staying engaged over a period of years, and by creating tangible goods, such as the eBlackCU digital library. Community members continue to draw on eBlackCU as they share their community's heritage online.

Sharing research findings with communities also opens new opportunities for research. In Spring 2012, I led four workshops in Illinois on digital local & family history, based on the findings from the eBlackCU project. The workshops were at the same time research. The 70 participants, including 18 public librarians, filled out surveys before and after the workshops, which were video recorded for subsequent analysis and publication. Participants engaged actively in the workshops. Even after a six-hour workshop that included filling out multiple surveys, participants who had just met that day kept talking about the topic as they walked out the door. This example illustrates how my service has also been research.

Local research in global contexts

Being adaptable in terms of method has enabled me to ask and answer big, globally significant questions while also being responsive to local community needs and concerns. Since 2012, I have worked with my advisor on the Community Informatics Global Literature Review, the first comprehensive survey of the first 20+ years of the multi-disciplinary research literature in this area. In the process, I discovered that a literature on older adults learning technologies is emerging around the world, including in Jamaica, India, China, Brazil, and South Africa, as well as in studies on diverse aging experiences across North America and Europe.

This global focus shapes my dissertation research. The 209 older adults who participated in my dissertation research were 59% white, 38% African-American, and 3% Asian-American. One of my six sites was rooted in the local African American community, and it proved to be the most robust and steady as to participation. This finding suggests that a counter-public sphere rooted in ethnic identity actually facilitates digital literacy acquisition. Information professionals need to understand the needs of this growing, and increasingly diverse, population of older adults. My research contributes to this goal by illustrating how diverse communities themselves contribute to the digital literacy of their older members.

Findings and future research

An overarching finding from my research is that lifelong learning of technology depends on public spaces, both physical and virtual. I have presented my research at academic conferences and in academic journals, including *First Monday*, *Public Library Quarterly*, the iConference, the Personal Digital Archiving conference, Archival Education Research Institutes, and the Association for

Library and Information Science Education conferences. My research on digital heritage found that Facebook is a lively inter-generational space for local communities to share memories and photographs. Public libraries support this process by sharing heritage information in these virtual spaces. My dissertation demonstrates that public libraries and senior centers are trusted learning spaces. To the extent that these public spaces support lifelong learning of digital technologies, older adults will stay engaged with technology and experience inclusion in the information society. Understanding these processes enables library & information science educators and professionals to build strong, democratic communities for all.

In the future I will continue this research trajectory by studying how community institutions support older adults learning to use digital technologies specifically for heritage purposes, such as to share family histories and personal archives. Older adults have a great deal of heritage information they want to share, and they are also keenly interested in learning more about the past. Yet many struggle learning the technologies necessary to reach these goals. As a result, the inter-generational transmission of heritage in communities is threatened. By extension, communities are at risk. The Institute of Museum and Library Services and/or the National Endowment for the Humanities are prospective funders of future research.