

Librarians as Full Participants in Participatory Action Research

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Abstract

This case study of a participatory archiving event and its resulting collaborative digital archive is used to illustrate the powerful impact librarians have within participatory action research projects. It outlines the essential roles played by the three research, metadata, and archive librarians who worked alongside university faculty, community members, and a classroom teacher to preserve the languages, literacy practices, and histories of Southern Appalachia. This results in recommendations for viewing libraries as research sites and librarians as research partners across the entire research process to better connect public institutions to the communities they serve.

Keywords: participatory action research; participatory archiving; research librarian; metadata librarian; archive librarian

Article Type: Case study

Introduction

The team gathered in a small conference room beneath a large church sanctuary, where fluorescent lights flickered over wooden chairs and a table surrounded by three people. Caitlin (Author 2) snaked wires between computers, microphones, and scanners, while Presley (Author 1) booted up her laptop and checked the audio recorder while chatting with Summer, a community volunteer. During that conversation, Presley and Summer (a pseudonym) found a connection: both were career librarians. While arranging the space for the first participants to arrive for a community based participatory action research project, Summer began reminiscing about her time working in archives. "I did Special Collections," she explained, "and we had to go

through an archive box that somebody had donated. . . We would have to go through and manually index and abstract all that stuff." As the group reflected on the convenience of the technology now available to collect and organize archives, Summer shared more about her journey to become a librarian and the evolving nature of the profession. "I worked at [an urban higher education institution], and I told them when I went there, I said, my heart is in the mountains and in public libraries. That's where I want to be."

After many years in academia—supporting students with dissertation research, managing special collections, and engaging in cross-disciplinary collaborations—Summer returned to the region she loved. Though the

work at the small public library in town presented unique challenges, she adapted quickly:

When I came to Mountain Regional, I . . . helped with writing the program to translate everybody's small online catalog into full data for the PINES database, along with the algorithms for that. It worked out that the skill set I had wasn't necessarily about being an expert in anything, but being adaptable. A computer professor at LSU once told me, 'Libraries are going to be big in computers. They're on the fringe now, but they're going to be really big.'

Looking around the room at the metadata intake forms, spreadsheets, and scanners humming to life, Summer reflected on how libraries had embraced new tools to remain vital hubs of innovation and accessibility. Even more so, *librarians* serve as gateways to knowledge and resources, empowering individuals to engage with new technologies and, in this small church conference room, preserve cultural histories.

Summer's stories offer a window into the often-overlooked yet transformative contributions librarians make to participatory action research. This case study focuses on the essential roles played by three academic librarians specializing in metadata (Author 1), research (Author 5), and archives (Author 7). These librarians partnered with a literacy professor (Author 4), school-based coordinator and doctoral candidate (Author 3), school-based teacher, community-based educator (Author 2), and historical society president (Author 6) to complete a participatory action research project.

Participatory action research in the humanities typically brings together diverse stakeholders to address pressing community challenges. Librarians are often called upon later in these projects—to organize oral histories, correct metadata errors, or locate overlooked resources. However, this case study demonstrates how including librarians from the onset can transform a project, ensuring greater organization,

innovation, and impact. Through the case study of *Swappin' Stories*, we highlight the essential contributions of academic librarians as collaborators in preserving and amplifying community voices.

Literature Review

Participatory Action Research. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is rooted in methodological pluralism, integrating “research, action, and participation” to address community-driven concerns (Lawson, 2015, p. 6). At its core, PAR emphasizes “shared ownership of research projects, community-based analysis of social problems, and an orientation towards community action” (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 11). Israel et al. (1998) delineates eight guiding principles for community-based participatory research, underscoring the importance of recognizing “the community as a unit of identity,” building on local strengths, and ensuring equity in knowledge access (p. 178). Specifically, the integration of knowledge and action for the “mutual benefit of all partners” and the dissemination of findings to the entire community (Israel et al., 1998, p. 179).

This community-centered approach challenges conventional epistemological boundaries by expanding what constitutes valid knowledge. Gutierrez et al. (2023) describe cultural intuition as an essential source of knowledge that emerges from “personal experiences, existing literature, professional experiences, and the analytic research process” (p. 293). This framework legitimizes the lived experiences of community members as critical sources of insight, thereby reshaping traditional notions of what knowledge “counts” in research.

In line with this, recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of clearly defining “community” within PAR projects, allowing community members, rather than external researchers or non-representative leaders, to articulate these boundaries. This not only prevents the term “community” becoming coded for race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, but also ensures that

community participation reflects a deeper engagement with “cultural processes that form the common practices of particular communities,” rather than an individual’s categorical identity (Rogoff, 2003, p. 80; Ruhland et al., 2023). The critical focus on community practices is particularly salient in Appalachian contexts, where local knowledge is frequently dismissed as “folksy” reflecting classist assumptions that delegitimize non-mainstream knowledge (Rittenour et al., 2020). PAR, however, provides a mechanism for reclaiming this community knowledge as valuable and sophisticated.

When participatory action research became a more established inquiry model during the 1990s, eclecticism was highly valued as “groups of researchers, professional and social activists developed approaches suited to the problems they were facing in their work” (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 15). As the people involved in research expanded, so, too, did the primary sites of research. Libraries and archives serve as critical sites for the reimagining of community knowledge and action within PAR. Public libraries, with their democratic accessibility, often function as hubs for PAR meetings, data collection, and public dissemination of findings (McConnell Parsons et al., 2022). Manley and colleagues (2019) extend this role further, describing archives as “laboratories” where librarians collaborate with community members to teach research practices, facilitate access to historical resources, and co-create knowledge. Moreover, public history institutions can play an instrumental role by “collaborating with schools and other civic education organizations” to ensure that rich primary sources are integrated into educational curricula (Munn & Wickens, 2018, p. 98). Through such collaborations, libraries and archives not only provide the material resources for community-based research but also serve as active agents in the co-production and dissemination of knowledge.

Despite the transformative potential of PAR, scholars caution against its uncritical application. Academics displeased with neoliberal systems

inherent in use of space and time within academia may turn to PAR without full acknowledgement of the privilege and resources they still have access to (Hickey, 2020). Nygreen (2009) argues that PAR projects, while appearing egalitarian, may inadvertently “reproduce and exacerbate power inequalities” (p. 19). Lewis and Moje (2007) noted that “systems and regimes are produced and reproduced” through the micropractices of research, even when efforts are made to subvert oppressive power structures (p. 17-18). Therefore, participants must engage in a conscious reexamination of their social world, aiming to “change it collectively, by thinking about it differently, acting differently, and relating to one another differently” in order to construct new “practice architectures” that are more just, inclusive, and sustainable (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 17).

Participatory Action Research, Archives, and Librarians. Roulston and deMarrais (2021) explain archives serve three primary purposes: (1) generating the “material for histories of countries and communities, and genealogies and family histories, (2) as tools for accountability for tracking injustices and repression, and (3) as touchstones for memory and identity” (p. 4). Community archiving and participatory archiving have the potential to meet the primary purposes of archives while rooted in the onto-epistemological commitments of participatory action research. These are not new concepts (e.g., Bastian, 2003). Particularly during the pandemic, public sourcing of transcription work and metadata increased in popularity (LaPierre, 2021; Roulston & deMarrais, 2021). The shift towards community and participatory archiving models has demonstrated benefits to libraries and librarians, such as aligning daily work with professional standards, fostering ownership of learning, and making community narratives more complex (Ahlfeld, 2021).

More sophisticated and long-term participatory archiving projects are sites to “preserve community-identified cultural heritage”, typically

through a participatory process that includes “collection development, appraisal, arrangement, and description” but also “in planning the digital archives itself, controlling all aspects of design, functionality, and appearance” (Allard & Ferris, 2015, p. 370). The participatory nature moves towards meaningful remixes and bricolages that acknowledge the blurry line between the record’s content and context (Bak et al., 2019).

The community-based and participatory archiving process also includes creating descriptive records and metadata (Bak et al., 2019). Many archivists revisit descriptive practices in cataloging and metadata to ensure ethical descriptions. For example, they question, “How would you describe a White supremacist group if they themselves did not identify as that? How do you decide how people label themselves?” (Roulston & deMarrais, 2021, p. 75). This is crucial for preserving Georgia’s Appalachian identity, which research has highlighted is often erased (Dyer & Walker, 2024). As Kinsey (2019) describes, “The archive is its own contested terrain, full of choices and contingency rather than the whole truth and nothing but the truth” (p. 19). Participatory archiving allows community members to be involved in the descriptive metadata process, helping to preserve local languages, practices, and knowledge. As Howard (2022) describes: “Participatory archives offer a space of reconciliation for communities who may be plagued by misunderstanding, mistrust, and mistreatment” (p. 7).

Furthermore, there are challenges faced by non-historians or interdisciplinary scholars who seek to “historicize” their topics but lack a clear understanding of historical methodology. This perpetuates the tension between needing a rigorous approach to integrate historical context into archives and community narratives while recognizing the interpretive nature of historical scholarship: there is a temptation to oversimplify historical narratives rather than enhance the relevance of historical analysis in contemporary research (Kinsey, 2019). Participatory approaches to archival work, such as decolonial

remixing of existing archives, eases this tension by nuancing and centering marginalized histories (e.g. McCreary & Murnaghan, 2020; Zavala Guillen, 2023).

Thus, the interdisciplinary nature of a participatory action research team enables members to contribute diverse skills and perspectives, fostering strengths in innovative technologies, community-based methods for uncovering new information, and preserving nuanced narratives of cultural heritage in community archives (Oberbichler et al., 2021).

Case Study

The *Swappin’ Stories* project involved significant planning and community engagement to host a week-long participatory action research archiving event in Towns County, Georgia. This project focused on preserving the community’s rich Appalachian history through oral histories, artifacts, and storytelling, while building knowledges, skillsets, and resources for school and community-based education efforts.

Summarizing the project, the team began our preparations by visiting established archives to learn about digitization techniques and metadata structures for long-term preservation from various interdisciplinary perspectives. This step also involved securing new equipment and training the team on the necessary technology such as scanners, external hard drives, and microphones. McConnell Baptist Church, centrally located in Hiawassee, was selected as the venue for its accessibility and generous offer of free space. The team ensured that the space was ADA-compliant, soundproof for audio recording, and provided a welcoming environment for community members. To reach potential participants, the team issued a press release that was published as a newspaper article. Social media platforms, local historical society meetings, and the Chamber of Commerce website were also used for promotion. A toll-free number was provided for community members to set up appointments, and walk-ins were welcome as an

acknowledgement of “mountain time”, a cultural value that prioritizes being in the moment with other people over efficiency models of time management.

The archiving event lasted a week with two public days for archiving. Volunteers from the Towns County Historical Society were trained on-site to use technology and handle artifacts, offering invaluable support for the event. Over the following two days, community members were invited to bring print-based items, which were digitized while oral histories were recorded about each item. Participants were required to complete an intake form which was corroborated against the oral history to determine the metadata. Volunteers assisted with scanning and recording oral histories, while external hard drives were used for data backup. Each item contributed by the community was carefully documented, including the history behind it and its relevance to Towns County’s Appalachian heritage.

The team also contributed to the Towns County Historical Society’s efforts by creating a photo wall with unidentified historical images. Community members were encouraged to provide metadata and context for these images using transparent post-it notes, sparking conversations about local history. A volunteer at the photo wall also invited participants to record stories in the storytelling booth, preserving the oral histories that emerged from these discussions. Similarly, to support the Towns County school system, several stations were set up collecting community information related to the school curriculum. For example, a folklore station captured community stories and unique “Appalachia-isms” related to English language arts while a map room allowed participants to add place names, memories, and stories to a laminated county map related to geography and social studies standards.

After the event, the team continued its work for three additional days. This allowed for the completion of metadata for archived items, the development of school-based educational

resources, and further research into the oral histories and artifacts collected. The team visited historical sites mentioned in the oral histories, conducted home interviews with community members who could not attend the event, and verified stories through archival research.

After completing the data collection from our project, part of dissemination was the establishment of a special collection within Kennesaw State University’s archives, where the artifacts would be stored alongside oral histories. This digital repository ensures that the materials are available for public education and ongoing research.

The *Swappin’ Stories* program successfully created an inclusive, community-driven process for preserving the Appalachian history of Towns County (for more about the event see Panther et al., in press). By engaging community members, educators, and students, the event not only preserved the past but also forged strong educational and social connections that will sustain the community’s cultural legacy for future generations. The archival materials collected, alongside the oral histories, serve as a critical resource for understanding the diverse narratives that shape the region.

Discussion

At the completion of *Swappin’ Stories*, the interdisciplinary participatory action research team has continued to reflect on and analyze the collaboration in order to support similar projects (e.g., Panther et al., in press) and expand our efforts to develop a community archive. In the analysis of our work, two clear lessons were (1) the essential role that librarians play as active research partners and (2) libraries as sites for multiple stages of the research process.

Librarians as Research Partners. In the *Swappin’ Stories* project, the university-based research librarian, metadata librarian, and archive librarian each brought essential expertise to support the successful archiving and preservation of Towns County’s Appalachian

history as a part of the community-based participatory action research team. Integrating university librarians from the beginning allows them to contribute their specialized knowledge—skillsets often undervalued or unknown to educators (Kammer et al., 2021). This early involvement ensures that the project is structured around quality practices for data collection, storage, and accessibility (e.g., Casey et al., 2023; Grant et al., 2019), which is crucial for community-based projects that focus on preserving history and culture (Poole, 2023).

Kim, a research librarian, played a pivotal role in coordinating the research aspects of the project, including the initial visits to established archives, training in digitization techniques, and identifying appropriate archival tools and equipment (e.g., scanners, microphones, hard drives). Kim also supported the educational outcomes by helping develop school-based resources and facilitating community research. The research librarian collaborated with the team to ensure that the digitization process goes beyond data storage to meet preservation standards (Woodward, 2016). Furthermore, she framed the purpose of research on community and continually refocused the collaboration to keep community at the center of research (Johnson, 2017; Kammer, 2021). Research librarians are often the faces and voices of libraries, making them ideal collaborators for creating a safe and welcoming environment for the community to share their artifacts (Roehley & Kim, 2019).

Presley, a metadata librarian, assumed a crucial role in documenting materials for long-term accessibility and preservation by utilizing the Dublin Core metadata standard to record key elements like dc.creator, dc.title, and dc.subject, thus enhancing interoperability and discoverability across digital repositories. This method aligns with James and Punzalan's (2015) belief in the importance of metadata for connecting historical records to contemporary research. Following the "DACS Required Elements at the Collection Level for KSU Archives" (Kennesaw State University Archives, 2022a), Presley developed workflows that linked

descriptive elements with the necessary contextual depth for scholarly use, while implementing quality control procedures from the KSU Archives documentation (2022b) to ensure the metadata preserved cultural significance and met professional standards. These integrated practices positioned the archive as both a valuable cultural resource and an academic tool.

The archive librarian, Tamara, managed the preservation and long-term accessibility of the materials. Her expertise in organizing and preserving the oral histories, artifacts, and documents contributed by community members ensured that the digital repository was created with best practices in archival standards. This role involved working closely with the research and metadata librarians to establish the special collection within Kennesaw State University's archives, and then with Lindsey, Leah, and Tyler to ensure the materials reflected the community's goals and vision. Ultimately, she ensured the longevity and educational value of the digital archive for future research.

Collaboratively, all three librarians played a critical role in training community members, volunteers, and student interns in essential archival skills, such as handling artifacts, navigating which artifacts to prioritize, and documenting metadata. By equipping dozens of individuals with these skills, librarians ensured the integrity and inclusion of the community in archival work, fostering a deeper understanding of the archival process and encouraging sustained involvement in building community archives (Grant et al., 2019). This was done alongside an interdisciplinary team of educators and community members who also took shared responsibility for building the reciprocal and sustaining relationships with the community and community members, acknowledging the workload constraints of each team member while drawing from their individualized strengths (Hall, 2023). Ultimately, the collaborative aspects of the participatory action research team resulted in empowering individuals to contribute meaningfully (Hall, 2023).

Libraries as Research Sites. When we think of *research sites*, the focus often narrows to locations where data is collected: a sterile lab extracting samples, a boisterous elementary classroom under observation, or a survey on a glowing screen. However, research unfolds across multiple interconnected spaces and times, and libraries emerge as pivotal research sites both before and after data collection. In *Swappin' Stories*, data collection was rooted in community spaces, yet much of the research process—analyzing artifacts, managing metadata, and planning dissemination—took place within libraries. These spaces supported the transition from raw data to actionable knowledge essential for the participatory action research process.

Libraries are uniquely equipped to serve as hubs for the preservation and accessibility of participatory research. Their infrastructure allows for the creation of long-term repositories that align oral histories with artifacts (e.g., Tummino & Fernandez, 2023), ensuring that materials are systematically preserved and accessible for future generations. Participatory archives housed in libraries foster inclusivity and trust, bridging the gap between academic institutions and local communities (Howard, 2022). Libraries also support the ethical responsibility to document and preserve complex or underrepresented histories, providing space for honest engagement with community narratives (Jorio & Hellweg, 2022).

Moreover, libraries' hybrid function as community centers and academic resources makes them ideal sites for bridging diverse perspectives. They offer tools, platforms, and spaces that transform raw community contributions into polished, publicly accessible archives. By facilitating the alignment of community knowledge with academic standards, libraries expand the definition of research sites to include spaces of collaboration, analysis, and dissemination. Ultimately, their role is not just to safeguard knowledge but to amplify its reach, making libraries indispensable to participatory

research and the preservation of cultural heritage.

In bridging the gap between academic institutions and local communities, community archives provide opportunities to include diverse perspectives and address historical and cultural misunderstandings. University librarians are uniquely positioned to bridge academic institutions and local communities through their expertise in designing accessible, sustainable archives (Benoit & Eveleigh, 2019). By aligning oral histories with existing artifacts (e.g., Tummino & Fernandez, 2023) and establishing long-term repositories, librarians ensure that collections are preserved for future generations and remain valuable resources for ongoing education and research. Participatory archives, as Howard (2022) notes, foster trust and inclusivity, addressing historical and cultural misunderstandings by centering community voices. This work requires librarians to balance academic standards with ethical responsibilities, ensuring that histories—however complex or uncomfortable—are preserved authentically (Jorio & Hellweg, 2022).

Moreover, librarians actively seek to amplify untold stories, creating thoughtfully designed entry points for representation and inclusivity (Barnett & Witenstein, 2020). Their institutional connections enhance the visibility and impact of community archives, extending their reach to academic and public platforms. Libraries, as Kitzie et al. (2020) observe, serve as trusted spaces that foster belonging, making them ideal hubs for participatory research. By facilitating these collaborations, librarians uphold the dual mission of preservation and celebration, ensuring that community contributions resonate far beyond their original contexts.

Conclusion

Librarians are more than custodians of knowledge—they are innovators, educators, and connectors who breathe life into participatory action research projects like *Swappin' Stories*. Their ability to adapt to changing technologies,

train community volunteers, and create accessible archives transforms what might seem like ordinary collections of oral histories and artifacts into powerful living records of community identity. These efforts not only preserve the past but actively shape the ways in which communities understand themselves and envision their futures.

However, the success of participatory projects like *Swappin' Stories* depends on recognizing and supporting the expertise of librarians at every stage. Interdisciplinary teams, educators, and community advocates must champion librarians as indispensable partners in this work. This involves creating spaces where librarians can share their knowledge, allocating resources to sustain their efforts, and prioritizing their leadership within research teams. When educational institutions and communities invest in the professional growth of librarians and celebrate their contributions, they create opportunities to reimagine and expand what is possible. Librarians, with their commitment to access, innovation, and collaboration, are uniquely positioned to bridge the past and present, ensuring that the voices of today echo far into the future.

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