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## Five tips for doing research with schools, charities and NGOs



*Conducting research on children, young people and learning often requires access to and help from schools, charities or NGOs. **Alicia Blum-Ross** draws on both struggles and success from previous projects with learning institutions and presents five key strategies to build*

*meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships. Alicia is a researcher at the LSE's **Department of Media and Communications**. She is interested in youth media production and is part of the **Parenting for a Digital Future** research project.*

You are a busy researcher, interested in children, young people and learning. They are a (probably even busier) NGO, charity or school working with children and young people (or vice versa).

Possibly an ideal match; possibly a source of stress for both.

Partnering with schools, charities, NGOs and community organisations can make or break a research project. It may be how we observe learning practices, meet young people, or learn from facilitators, teachers and organisers.



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But often these potential partners are at best too busy to answer sceptical or downright suspicious (sometimes rightly) about academic research.

In our **current** and **previous projects** we negotiated great (and sometimes not so great) research relationships with schools, charities, the world and NGOs. These are our top tips for successful relationships

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Researchers increasingly emphasise the importance of **working with** 'ethical symmetry' to do research *with* their participants – including organisations – instead of research *on* them.

Think of these relationships as partnerships, where sometimes your research goals may be called into question. This isn't a hurdle to be overcome, but something that can enhance your research.

## 2. So you think you're busy?

Bouncing from teaching to research to committees, you may have a lot going on. But try working in a (sometimes severely) under-resourced school, arts or learning organisation, or volunteering for a community group. *Now that's busy.*

Make things as easy as you can – limit the emails you send, keep them to the point, make sure any action items / deadlines are clear, and get all your research materials (consent letters, project descriptions, any ethics approvals or police checks you might need) in order *before* you contact anyone.



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while

of understanding (MoU), spell out what they can expect from you. Can you collect evidence (quotes, photos etc.) that they could use in an evaluation report or a future funding bid? How

might your research help them answer their own questions about the world

impact? Will you be collecting any data they can use as evidence of meeting key performance indicators (KPIs)?

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There is a **huge burden** on organisations to ‘measure outcomes’, so your partners will love it if you can help them find evidence to do this, but be careful that you aren’t compromising the point of your research or confidentiality.

You can also be helpful in smaller ways – do they need more chairs for the meeting you’re sitting in on? Do they need an extra pair of hands to serve food? Helping out builds goodwill and also gives you opportunities to get to know both staff and participants.

#### 4. Put it in writing

Okay, we said above to keep it simple. But also make sure that everyone is on the same page about what you need / want from each other. We suggest writing a document (sometimes called an MoU) that clarifies the following:

- *The aims of your research.* What are you trying to find out and why? Highlight why this would be interesting to them and how they might benefit from it.
- *Your source of funding.*
- *Your research methods.* What are you going to do, and where? Will you be asking to use an empty classroom for interviews? Will you be audio-recording or taking notes? How will you inform participants of the research? How will you get consent? Are there any research activities (like participant-observation) that may impact on their programmes? Also note your policy on anonymity – will you anonymise the school/organisation or just the names of the children/young people? What about in photos or video, if you are using them?

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*Relationship with the organisation.* Is the organisation recruiting your behalf? Do you have a specific named contact in the organisation? How will you notify them if there are any problems that are raised in your research (e.g. evidence of criminal activity, feedback on the programmes)? Clarify what you would be expected to tell them and what you would keep confidential.

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*Who will see this research?* To whom and how will you be disseminating your research? Academic articles or in something more public-facing? Highlight especially if you are trying to create public impact or influence policy.

## 5. Don't disappear

You've done your fieldwork, you're back writing up the research, and the school or community organisation seems pretty far away (although not *that* far away if you're still transcribing or coding interviews!). No matter how distant you may start to feel from the research, don't disappear – find ways of involving the site in disseminating the research, or at least in giving them access to it. They may not take you up on it, but it's good ethical practice to at least try.

Yes, this list does place a burden on you as a researcher, and adds a few more hoops to jump through. But in our experience, making sure that you honour the time you're given, clarify expectations, and communicate about the process and the findings is not only good for building a relationship with a partner organisation, but it will also enhance the research itself.

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March 18, 2015

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