



Book review

Creating Living Knowledge: The Connected Communities Programme, community–university relationships and the participatory turn in the production of knowledge, by Keri Facer and Bryony Enright

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Co-creation is a current buzzword, but also a growing research practice. It is top priority for many countries and for the European Commission (EC) to ensure that research and innovation addresses the grand societal challenges. Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) – another buzzword – is often put forward as a means for ensuring that the outcomes from research and innovation end up as acceptable, useful, desirable and sustainable as possible. A new report on a large UK programme funding collaborative research, offers topical insights into the opportunities and challenges for such joint ventures.

Creating Living Knowledge: The Connected Communities Programme, community–university relationships and the participatory turn in the production of knowledge, by Professor Keri Facer and Dr Bryony Enright, University of Bristol, is the result of an ambitious effort to find out about natures and conditions for collaborative knowledge production. As head of a Swedish non-profit association that works to promote openness and dialogue between the public and researchers, I was delighted to find out about the report, and keen to learn more about opportunities and challenges for collaboration between universities and community-based individuals and organizations.

The Connected Communities Programme was initiated by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in the UK. The programme supports projects, partnerships and networks that involve collaboration between university and community partners, and draws on methods and theories of the arts and humanities to understand what 'community' means and the roles the involved parties play.

Since 2010, the Connected Communities Programme has funded over 300 projects, involving more than 700 academics and over 500 organizations. The projects often originate from a desire of community partners for validity and of university partners for authenticity. But what are the actual benefits and outcomes of such projects and collaborations? The study looking into this took two years to conduct, using traditional evaluation, as well as collaborative methods: attempts to co-produce analyses, interviews, questionnaires, workshops, collaboration with projects and case studies of individual projects.

Research with, by and for communities

The commitment of the programme to methodological innovation and to *conducting research with, by and for communities*, means that it has attracted people who explicitly

value hidden or marginalized perspectives and experiences. The list of projects' working methods is impressive, and includes participatory and community-engaged arts, practice as research, post-colonial traditions, indigenous forms of knowledge, traditions of public history, patient engagement, responsible innovation, cultural studies, action research, communities of practice, co-design and co-production.

At the programme's best, 'it promises research which is both practically useful and intellectually ground-breaking', according to the report's authors (38). But of course the social contexts, language, people and politics involved, finances and unintended consequences all matter in how research is actually conducted and how successful it is.

The report describes a number of tensions between university and community partners, one of which is the slower timescale and longer horizon of research projects compared to the speed with which community members often want to move forward. Other tensions include where new ideas actually originate, who 'counts' as 'community', and whether projects see the world as being socially constructed through practice, or as being an external reality waiting to be discovered.

A key question for project parties is whether they are concerned with changing knowledge or changing reality. The programme aims to help develop new relationships between organizations and individuals. Some of the means used are two-stage funding models, funding guidance that requires deep community involvement in research design, workshops and events that encourage cross-conversations, academic and community involvement on selection panels and advisory boards, funding of networking activities and opening up of the co-investigator role to community partners.

Money matters

Funding community partners' engagement is key for the success of the programme. 'The price of a bus ticket can, for example, be a significant and insurmountable barrier to participation in a project', the report states (108).

Another problem that has been addressed during the course of the programme is the often bureaucratic and time-consuming processes for transferring funding. Some universities have developed new working methods and toolkits for administrative matters that smooth collaborations with community partners.

A type of cost that is often neglected is the cost of 'intimate labour', which translates as the personal and political engagement invested, and this can be very high for both university and community partners being immersed in project work, often after office hours.

The projects have not resulted in many academic publications: in Researchfish – an online facility that enables research funders and research organizations to track the impacts of their investments, and researchers to log the outputs, outcomes and impacts of their work – the Connected Communities Programme represents 14 per cent of the AHRC projects but accounts for only 4 per cent of total academic publications. But there is a richness of other outcomes. The programme accounts for 41 per cent of the AHRC total outputs classified as 'Artistic & Creative', as well as 41 per cent of 'Tools & Methods'. I agree with the authors that this is probably due to the researchers involved prioritizing outputs useful for society at large, rather than for their peers.

The outcomes are as varied as the projects themselves, and the traditional concept of impact may not be very useful. Instead the report lists broader categories of outputs: creation of *new products* (websites, guidelines, toolkits, academic papers, software, exhibitions, booklets, artworks, reports, performances); *new networks and relationships*; and *new theories, ideas and concepts*; as well as the strengthening

and *evolution of institutions*. Project participants also develop *new skills*, knowledge and understanding, as well as the confidence to put these into action. At the same time, the projects foster *researchers valuing and mastering collaborative methods*. Furthermore, the projects have resulted in a wealth of *experienced community individuals* knowledgeable in research collaborations and methods, which most likely will make future collaboration projects easier. A negative consequence might be that organizations and individuals stick to collaborations with partners they already know. Another challenge is that the principle of academic autonomy might be jeopardized, as academic researchers are dependent on community partners.

A university might be considered the stronger partner in collaboration projects but that notion is challenged by the report's authors, who stress the fact that research assistants are often young, relatively inexperienced and on short-term contracts. On the other hand, community partners tend to be more senior, well-established and knowledgeable individuals, with more experience in running collaborative projects. Furthermore, research assistants were often not involved in the original project design and might also be working outside their own areas of research training.

Lessons learned and insights gained

The legacy of the programme is also a legacy of ideas and concepts, as well as 'critical bifocality'. The authors stress the ability to see with two lenses, both the lived experience and the macro conditions in which they are taking place, and the ability to connect these through both practice and theory.

An interesting conclusion is that the actual writing is an important process in the projects, as is the production of films, performances, exhibitions, portraits, art and installations, prototypes, photographs and more. These products are not just ways of communicating the research but rather part of the research process. Projects might be compared to road trips, where the exploration and the journey itself is often more important than the end destination.

Another major project outcome is the mutual learning between partners, including gaining a deeper understanding of each other's perspectives, new tools and procedures and ultimately also personal insights and sometimes even transformations. According to the report, the most important legacy of the programme might be professional relationships and personal friendships.

Key prerequisites to foster such relations are suitable venues and meeting places, as well as processes encouraging dialogue and careful listening. The creation of a Community Partner Network is another tangible result of the programme, a mechanism being coordinated by the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement in the UK (NCCPE) to support the sharing of good practice in university–community collaborations.

According to the project participants, their own involvement has been a success: in a survey, 98 per cent of university partners and 97 per cent of community partners claimed that they would engage in this sort of research again – with 29 per cent and 25 per cent already planning follow-up activities.

The report is easy and interesting to read, with a good layout and beautiful photographs portraying project activities. Many project participants are cited, providing a richness of thoughts and experiences from individual projects. No concrete 'recipes' for collaborative research are given; instead the authors refer to the work of other organizations to learn more about how to design such projects, for example through the NCCPE.

In the last section, the authors give their recommendations on how best to promote robust, high-quality collaborative partnerships between universities and communities: *invest in infrastructure*, suitable funding models and basic training, for example; *allow more time* – it is needed to build partnerships, trust and mutual understanding; *mitigate the risk of intensifying inequalities* by addressing barriers to including minority groups and by offering enough funding to community partners; and *invest in civil society's public learning infrastructure* to allow the third sector to develop research partnerships.

To my understanding, the authors of the report are accurate in their statement that the Connected Communities Programme 'is about the creation of a new public knowledge landscape where communities, and the universities that form part of those communities, can collaborate to question, research and experiment to create new ways of understanding, seeing and acting in the world' (8). More important than the actual outcomes is the collaborative research process, where new knowledge and new relationships are jointly developed.

The report can be downloaded from: https://connected-communities.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Creating-Living-Knowledge.Final_.pdf (accessed 27 October 2016).

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