

New Directions in Collaborative Research: Living Knowledge

October 2022



Ryan Casey

Digital Society & Economy IRT | University of Glasgow

Introduction

In order to understand the complex changing needs of communities, universities and community partners must work together to undertake collaborative research. In line with the participatory turn in knowledge production, we challenge ourselves to consider how collaborative research involving diverse partnerships between communities and researchers can support sustainable, embodied, and transformative legacies of collective knowledge, or what Facer and Enright (2016) refer to as 'living knowledge.' This challenge is raising questions in defining future research areas and in how we undertake research.

Such a future, which values wellbeing and sustainability at its core, is knowledge-intensive and requires critical reflections on how we – as researchers, stakeholders, and citizens – build knowledge that is meaningful and worthwhile for societies, communities, and individuals. A 'collective knowledge economy' of collaboratively produced, accessible, and beneficial knowledge is not straightforward. This report shares the main insights from keynote speakers and highlights from group discussions around problems and opportunities in collaborative research.

Digital Society & Economy at the University of Glasgow

This interdisciplinary workshop was hosted by the Digital Society and Economy Interdisciplinary Research Theme (IRT) within the College of Social Sciences. We are a diverse group of researchers exploring the dynamics of digital society, examining how digital technologies shape and intersect with social and economic change. Much of our research is around social challenges to wellbeing and sustainability, the future economy and better use of resources, and the future of education and alternative ways of knowledge building.

Summary of workshop

On 12 October 2022 the Digital Society and Economy interdisciplinary research theme (IRT) organised an agenda-setting workshop for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to discuss new directions in collaborative research. Four keynote speakers from across the research ecosystem addressed different aspects of co-created research.

Our first keynote was delivered by Professor Karen Salt, who is Deputy Director of R&D Culture and Environment at UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). Karen introduced the concept of 'pipework' as an integral aspect of collaborative research and working between researchers and communities. Pipework includes the fundamental processes that need to be in place for partnerships, such as contracts, agreements, payments, and other aspects of organisational infrastructure that facilitate collaboration. Professor Salt, talking candidly, acknowledged how this infrastructure could become easily blocked, leading to frustrations amongst research staff who find it difficult to navigate barriers. A key insight, therefore, was that collaborative research involves more than just academic researchers and partner organisations - professional services are vital to collaborative partnerships!

Our second keynote was delivered by Professor Sara Carter, who is Vice-Principal and Head of the College of Social Sciences at the University of Glasgow. Professor Carter introduced the noted organisational theorist Andrew H. Van de Ven's 'engaged scholarship' framework to explore the complex dynamics between theory, practice, research and action in collaborative research. Professor Carter, reflecting on her own research career, argued for deep collaboration, aligned with the University's research strategy on building external partnerships and reflexively engaging with society.

Our third keynote was delivered by Dr Emily Corrigan-Kavanagh, who is a Research Fellow in Design Research at the University of Surrey. Dr Corrigan-Kavanagh introduced participatory design methodologies, and in particular, the 'World Café' method which encourages small interactive group discussions with quality listening (i.e. one person speaks at a time) to encourage collective knowledge discoveries in a café-like environment. Dr Corrigan-Kavanagh highlighted that participatory design research can offer a diverse set of tools and approaches to collaborative research through a broad range of methods

for ensuring: inclusion of diverse users and stakeholders; collective comprehension between researchers and these groups; identification of the needs of users; and visualisation of research outcomes to facilitate understanding.

Our final keynote was delivered by Jennifer Challinor, who is Head of Research and Development at The Crichton Trust. Jennifer introduced the complex interconnected challenges faced by rural communities in Dumfries, such as ageing populations, climate change, fuel poverty, digital inequalities, and migration. Jennifer argued that communities need whole system approaches to enacting change and that community organisations can be an agent of change. However, in order to avoid gaps in support and echo chambers in community consultation, there needs to be participation, engagement, and trust in collaborative projects.

Recommendations

Based on the keynote speeches and latter discussions amongst workshop participants, we have generated the following recommendations for the future of collaborative research:

Ensure the research pipework is functioning well and there are no unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles to collaboration. Rules that do not foster collaboration should be challenged and justified.

Consider what kind of engaged scholarship best suits the collaboration.

Consider what tools are needed for the collaboration and how those tools can contribute to more inclusive research.

Focus on building long-term relationships with communities rather than transactional ones.

Ensuring the research pipework is functioning well

Pipework is a fundamental and often overlooked dimension of collaborative research. Institutional administration can often feel constraining, but it is important to recognise that professional services and finance departments face their own constraints too, which often overlap with those faced by researchers. It is important for all collaborative partners to get to know one another and understand each other's constraints, to work together creatively to solve problems rather than finding individualistic work-arounds. Equally, rules that do not serve collaborative relationships should be challenged, as there is often no good reason for the rule or process other than 'this is the way it has always been done.' It is beneficial to involve staff in the research support office in the formative stages of research, and important that processes for engaging with them are accessible and transparent, working together to identify ways to achieve this.

Before a collaborative project even begins, most pipework should already be in place. Partners need to understand from the beginning who owns what (outputs, knowledge, etc.). Information sharing agreements are an effective way to formalise these understandings. It is important that money can be moved in and out both efficiently and effectively. Pilot projects are helpful for laying pipework foundations in collaborative research.



Considering what kind of engaged scholarship best suits the collaboration

Engaged scholarship can take many forms and can mean different things to each partner in a collaborative partnership. It is important to be aware that each partner may have a different justification for the collaboration. Even within interdisciplinary 'grand challenge' style research projects, researchers with various individual expertise can have different roles, translating their skills in order to work together to address big, complex challenges. However, it is important for social science researchers to not be consistently typecasted into secondary positions within larger collaborative projects. The time investments needed for long-term engaged collaboration does not always align with the pressures of the academic workload model and the gradual and deep development of relationships. Academics also typically have to balance their time with publishing, teaching, training and more, but this can change over the duration of one's career.

Collaboration and impact ought to be cyclically embedded into the whole research process rather than just at one particular stage. As opposed to measuring impact by outputs, REF impact case studies are a way of measuring or accounting for impact that stems from the richness of a collaboration. In terms of translating collaborative research into policy, inclusive policymaking and soft policymaking are approaches that involve: asking different questions from the outset; shaping practice, guidelines or frameworks; trying to standardise practice; and, targeting other areas of intervention.

Considering what tools are needed for your collaboration

In line with the participatory turn in the production of knowledge, collaborative research involves important decisions to be made about what tools are needed for collaboration. This includes formulating research questions that meet the needs of the collaborative process. Collaboration also needs to be embedded in the methodological approach to a project. Creative methods, service design tools, co-design workshops, user-centred design, and participatory design are just some examples of the growing body of knowledge around participatory research methodologies. Choosing the right tools can support contributions and partnerships with diverse user and stakeholder groups, facilitate inclusive communication, help to visualise outcomes, and help to improve existing or generate new services, systems, or initiatives.

Social science is vital to such collaborations in order to avoid technological solutionism (i.e. where a solution is offered in search of a problem). Qualitative design research and social science research emphasises the needs and requirements of users, and brings together expert and public knowledges.

Ensuring you are building long-term relationships with communities

In order to build long-term relationships between researchers and communities, academics should be prepared to decentre the academic focus to engage externally. This entails a willingness to leave disciplinary comfort zones to address complex challenges. For example, there is a noticeable increase in funding opportunities for communities to lead on research projects. Academic researchers should support this by helping to build community capacity to lead research. This direction in collaboration could be a way to avoid consultation fatigue, as communities are tired of engaging in research in ways that leave them feeling researched *about* as opposed to researched *with*, that their perspective is not being heard, or that the questions being asked have too narrow a focus.

It can also often be difficult to find long-term funding to match the development and brokering of long-term partnerships. However, short-term funding is not necessarily a negative thing. Short project opportunities with gaps in between can give those involved time to reflect and discuss the collaboration in between new ventures. Engaging in conversations and understanding the implications of these possible ways of working on the pipework (including the contracting of ECRs and professional services staff) is also required.



Concluding remarks

In order to meet complex challenges such as climate and energy, cost of living and wellbeing, inequalities and social justice, and inclusive productivity, researchers, communities, and stakeholders need to work together collaboratively. However, bringing together diverse knowledges can be complex. This event on new directions in collaborative research has helped to explore the dynamics and ways forward in undertaking collaborative research: the infrastructures and processes that need to be in place; different ways of engagement; tools that can enable participation; and the role of communities as an agent of change. Going forward, we must challenge ourselves to consider how collaborative research involving diverse partnerships between communities and researchers can support sustainable, embodied, and transformative legacies of collective knowledge and address pressing social challenges.

We also wish to thank our speakers and participants for contributing to this enriching discussion and providing feedback on this report.

References

Facer, K. and Enright, B. (2016) *Creating Living Knowledge: The Connected Communities Programme, community-university partnerships and the participatory turn in the production of knowledge*. Arts and Humanities Research Council. Available at: https://connected-communities.org/index.php/project_resources/creating-living-knowledge-report/ [Accessed 18 Oct 2022].