

University of St Andrews
RESEARCH UNIT FOR RESEARCH UTILISATION

Mini-symposium on co-producing academic-practitioner research

Monday, 25th November 2013

The Gateway, North Haugh, St Andrews KY16 9RJ

Summary of Proceedings

Introduction

For the past twelve years the work of RURU has been motivated by growing interest in increasing the use of research and promoting more evidence-informed policy and practice. Since 2001, there have been many developments relating to these concerns, and RURU has become a point of reference on these matters. At the RURU meeting in May 2013 - in which participants had considered current understandings of research use, priorities for future research and practice development, and how RURU in partnership with the participants might take this agenda forward - the theme of 'research co-production' – especially collaborations between academics and practitioners or policy-makers – was identified as a topic of particular interest. This mini-symposium in November therefore was organised as an opportunity to explore concepts, practices and politics of research co-production.

More than twenty people attended the meeting and participants included researchers and practitioners from a variety of disciplines and service areas (including education, healthcare, social care, social policy, and sustainable development). The following summary is organised according to the three sessions used to structure the day's discussion.

Session 1 – The Politics of Academic-Practitioner Co-production

The day began with a presentation by Kevin Orr (St Andrews) on the politics of academic-practitioner co-production in which he unpacked the concept, situated the increasing interest in this mode of research within debates about the role of the academy and wider conversations about relations between academics and practitioners. He reflected on the politics he had encountered in his own academic-practitioner collaborations and used work on 'traditions of scholarship' to help illuminate some of the dilemmas involved. This presentation was followed by a Q&A and then small group discussions which considered:

1. How do you see the respective roles for academics and practitioners in the research process?
2. What has been your experience of co-production?
3. How do you see the complementarity (or otherwise) of interests and expectations of academics and practitioners?
4. What is your reading of the opportunities and constraints on developing research co-production in your own work?

The purpose of these discussions was to identify different perspectives on research roles and to encourage reflection on people's experiences of co-producing research, including thoughts on the complementarity of interests, opportunities and constraints and experiences of 'navigating the coproduction waters.'

There was a rich and lively discussion around these questions. It was agreed that there are different definitions of coproduction from narrow to broad, each implying a different level of

practitioner/ policy maker involvement at particular stages of the process. Some suggested that academic research might seek to provide 'generalisations' which are only of limited use in practice settings'. It was further suggested that coproduction relationships may involve unequal power relations – the practitioner being invited to play on the academic's terms rather than vice versa.

Experience of involvement in coproduction varied across the groups, with most practitioner involvement tending to come at the agenda setting, dissemination and 'securing improvement' stages, and less involvement in research design, evidence gathering and analysis.

In terms of roles, it was suggested that academics bring 'refining questions' and methods, good abilities to conceptualise problems and issues, a space or capacity to do the work, some sense of objectivity and credibility, and also some awareness of what is already 'known' in the area. Practitioners bring an in-depth knowledge of the context and great sensitivity to the nuances of the situation and setting. Equally they can be adept at 'cutting through' policy rhetoric and identifying the reality on the ground. They can also provide the 'language of the context'. They can facilitate access to key informants and are vital to the implementation process of any research findings or recommendations that follow from the work. Relatedly, some suggested that the practitioners are in a position of risk as they may partly be using the research findings to then act as change agents within their organisation. Academics are less exposed to the consequences of this. It was agreed that there are tensions between academics' needs to publish research in high-ranking journals and do evaluation studies or achieve 'practitioner relevance.'

What helps in navigating the copro waters? It is helpful to have some alignment of interests and overlapping motivations, as well as a shared sense of what outcomes are being sought. It was noted that these shared goals cannot necessarily be 'forced by contract'. Others felt that it is fine and indeed necessary to recognise that each can have different goals and bring different resources to the table – the idea of insights being generated through this very difference - but momentum can be generated by an awareness of mutual benefits. Other helpful factors can include: support from third party facilitators and brokers, good project management and frequent communication, clear boundaries and a clarification of accountabilities. One group suggested the idea of setting up a 'pre-nup' agreement beforehand aimed at articulating roles, responsibilities and accountabilities as well as the process for a parting of ways.

Some of the discussion focused on the idea that research is a situated but personal process. Coproduction can also be messy and there can be quite dynamic changes across the lifetime of the project, e.g. a practitioner may start off as a co-researcher but end up as an informant. The risks and dangers are also differentially experienced. Some participants suggested the dangers of 'stepping too far into the other's world' or research involvement becoming something which can sideline rather than empower a practitioner or policy maker.

Amongst participants great interest was expressed in the possibilities and potential of this mode of research. It appears to hold the promise of generating work which is both academically rigorous and practice-relevant. Opportunities ahead may involve thinking about the language used to foster talk between the different actors to bridge interests and establish possibilities. More generally this potential might be helped to fruition by fostering a culture which is open to coproducing research knowledge.

In ways which picked up on threads from the RURU meeting in May 2013, it was recognised that there is now more legitimacy for research-based knowledge, and that research use involves the interaction of different sources and types of knowledge. With this comes an enhanced focus on the context within which research knowledge is both constructed and

applied. The co-production of knowledge may now be more common than it was hitherto but there are dilemmas involved in embracing this mode of working.

Possible further reading

Kevin Orr, and practitioner co-researcher Mike Bennett, have examined the politics of co-production practices – in the context of public management research - in a series of articles and in a journal special issue:

Public Administration Review: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2011.02522.x/full>

Management Learning: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2011.02522.x/full>

Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management:

<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/journals.htm?articleid=1789632&show=abstract>

Special Issue of Public Money and Management:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rpmm20/30/4>

Session 2: Practitioner Research: Networks, Knowledge and Voice

This session began with a presentation by Neil Lunt (University of York). He explored definitions of practitioner research (PR) and suggested ways that we can understand this mode as representing another form of research co-production. He discussed two interesting initiatives that he has been involved in: an action research model working with nine social services agencies in Auckland; and a project in Glasgow which involved supporting and training practitioners to develop and undertake small-scale research projects. For Neil, practitioner research offers a form of work that brings together and contains different career-life concerns that otherwise may remain scattered. In this way, involvement in practitioner research 'stirs reflection on the meaning and value of research and professional work.'

This presentation was followed by workshop discussion which considered:

1. What role does practitioner research play in your field or in your experience?
2. What are the challenges to generating and sustaining practitioner research?
3. To what extent do you see practitioner research as one type of co-production?

Again, there was a rich and lively discussion around these questions. Some noted that 'practitioner research' was not a term used in their field. Others felt that an initial motivation to change things can become frustrated and cited a lack of obvious examples outside of healthcare (where there is a tradition of combined academic/practitioner roles) of when PR has come to set a particular organisational or policy agenda. The need to provide academic support to practitioners undertaking research can itself become problematic – at what point does this become an academic takeover?

Again the issue of language was a focal point for discussion, with some participants suggesting the label ‘practitioner inquiry’ as a more helpful alternative to ‘research’, a term which can be a ‘turn off’ in certain settings. Related ideas included re-classifying ‘research’ as ‘innovation’, ‘audit’, ‘quality improvement’, ‘CPD’, and so on, perhaps to take advantage of different resourcing opportunities and judgements about quality. Others remarked that the very malleability of the term in use might suggest a danger whereby particular projects elude governance and accountability regimes.

In general, it was felt that PR shares many of the same constraints and opportunities offered by other forms of coproduction. Challenges of PR include: does it fit in the job description?; is it recognised in employment discourses (promotion & recruitment)?; is it supported by CPD or training routes?; and is it limited by the lack of career routes which are based on research skills? Others identified questions about the quality of the research which is achieved in this mode, as well as its wider salience and credibility, including how it is perceived by both academics and policy makers/ practitioners. In general, there are only limited funding opportunities for practitioners to undertake research and the result is a myriad of small-scale projects that are often judged as ‘thin’ in quality terms. The non-financial costs of practitioner research may include that it carries the risk of making visible institutional limitations or failings (at the potential risk to the practitioner researcher), or that it may not be valued as a piece of work.

Others saw that fostering ‘research mindedness’ was one important benefit of PR. This mode can also contribute to agendas around the knowledge society, informed democracy. Some participants made a connection with participatory action research and emancipatory research, including a potential for giving articulation to marginal voices. Such a view reflects a belief in the power of research to transform things for the better. One ‘test’ of PR is the extent to which it contributes to this aspiration.

There was also consideration of whether PR represents a form of coproduction, given its absence from many typologies. Most were open to this idea – insofar as PR involves collaboration then it makes sense to include it in a broad definition of coproduction. Indeed others remarked that elements of PR are integral to coproduction.

Session 3: Further activities and developments

The agenda for potential action outlined in the May 2013 meeting was wide-ranging and the group did not set itself the challenge of trying to take this forward in any co-ordinated way. Instead it was decided that it was up to individuals to decide what aspects of the agenda were important to them: the day on coproduction represents a start to that process.

As ever for a RURU event, the day had brought together people who often work in isolation from others interested in research use issues and there was agreement that the main benefit of the day’s interactions was cross-sector and cross-disciplinary learning – conversations about experiences in different fields and settings and being introduced to a different perspectives on or conceptual languages for familiar problems.

Possible future actions involving participants and an extended list of invitees included:

- Building on the success of the day, continuing to hold future forums, where a key topic could be addressed ‘in the round’. Suggested themes for future forums included: mapping cutting edge research on knowledge exchange/research use practices; reflecting on the emotions of the research/research use process; and how to tackle the sustainable implementation of research-based interventions and practices at scale.
- Applying for ESRC seminar series funding to host collaborative workshops and to help pay for participants’ costs in attending these gatherings, thus helping to sustain the network.
- Acting as a resource for one another in more ad hoc ways. For example, acting as speakers for each other’s events or acting as advisors on specific projects.

Information about future activities and useful resources will be posted on the RURU website (www.ruru.ac.uk).