

Doing and evaluating community research

A process and outcomes approach for communities
and researchers

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Learning Points

Learning points for academics

<i>Academics should try and engage with a partner community in advance of a research project and get to know them. This makes processes easier increasing the likelihood outcomes will be delivered. Although in this case the community were approached at the last minute, this is not best practice.</i>	9
<i>Knowledge outcomes that academics want can often be delivered on a different timescale to community outcomes. This raises ethical issues around shared goals and continued engagement with community partners.</i>	9
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<i>If working with community organisations respect their autonomy. An academic can almost never know the community well enough to do the community organisations' jobs for them.</i>	19
<i>Discuss data needs with community partners and other stakeholders. Don't always assume that you know what kind of data will be useful to different</i>	21

groups.

Communities may want honest, robust evaluations ('not sugar-coated') for their own learning, but care needs to be taken with the audience for negative evaluations. Negotiating the presentation of evaluation findings is important. 22

Learning points for communities

Building relationships with academic partners takes a long time, and therefore it can be a long time before outcomes are delivered for your community. 7

Work with academics to make sure that short-term benefits – during the project or soon after – as well as longer term academic results are achieved. 9

Academic projects can bring a lot of resources into a community – this could be investment or even human resources. Make sure you ask for these. 12

Be confident enough to negotiate and say 'no' to things you do not want to do or agree to. 12

Community organisations should find out about research programmes and funders. Ask academics clearly what they can and cannot do with research funding and check funders' websites. 12

In the right project with the right funding, academics can be less risk averse and more experimental, than other funders and partners. The outcomes of this may be unexpected and very useful. 16

Academics are doing research and make sure you are clear about what this is and the flexibility allowed for you. You can either collaborate on the research, or take community development benefits from the research process and outcomes. 17

Academic partnerships may open up new networks or channels of influence and resources for communities – either directly or through introductions and influence. 18

All partnerships are risky. Community groups may want to make sure they find out about the academics in advance, from university websites or other community organisations. Don't be afraid to ask for "references". 19

Choose your approach and your partners carefully, and take advice over how best to do the evaluation 21

Evaluation outputs are useful for funding bids etc. but the fact of an external evaluation having happened may be just as important as any specific findings. It can offer support, legitimacy and credibility to your projects and organisations. 22

Communities are more likely to accept robust or negative findings from academics they know and trust. 22

Learning points for everyone

Evaluation should be a central part of the reflection and ethics of research coproduced with communities. 5

Community organisations and academics need to discuss what would be sensible beginning and end points for a research project, and how to deal with outcomes which may only come to fruition after the project. 8

Not all the details of an evaluation can be 'nailed down' at the start – 'stuff 8

happens' and new issues may emerge during an evaluation. Projects need to be flexible to account for this, including running over "official" deadlines.

Funding is never going to see a community-based process through to completion – outcomes take a long time to deliver. There are ethical implications to this if academics leave a community to complete a development process without sufficient support.

9

Recognise that all partners can, and will, learn from each other – you will come out of the process with different perspectives on your work and your communities. Make time for this to happen.

13

There can be a tension between different outcomes – academic knowledge or community development. These outcomes can remain separate or even diverge, as long as this recognised and negotiated.

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You cannot always evaluate outcomes in a formal before and after way. Many outcomes will be "soft" or intangible, and possibly distant in time.

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Outcomes will be dependent on local histories and experiences. They cannot be guaranteed but carrying out a developmental evaluation will help identify outcomes that have been delivered.

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A focus on process in evaluations as well as outcomes is important and useful for developing projects. This means recording learning during projects so you know why outcomes are, or are not, achieved.

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An embedded community researcher will give you the most useful community-led evaluation because they will understand the messiness and complexity of the situation and can help develop projects as they progress. The less embedded a researcher is the less useful an evaluation is for community partners.

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Introduction

This guide aims to help community partners and academics maximise the benefits of research that is coproduced between communities and academic researchers based in a university. It is divided into three parts:

- [Learning points](#)
- [The research story](#) – themes and lessons
- [How to evaluate](#)

The text is hyperlinked for easy access for those who are reading the electronic version. The page numbers in the learning points above take you to the relevant text, as does the underlined text in this section.

The learning points are presented above as a summary for academics (pink), community partners (turquoise) and some that relate to both (grey). You can either use the learning points to reflect on at the outset of any project, or keep coming back to them as the project is delivered.

The research story provides the evidence behind the learning points. It tells the story of an extended collaboration between community organisations in the Edinburgh neighbourhood of Wester Hailes and a number of university researchers. Rather than being presented as a “how-to” guide or a toolkit, it narrates the process of the research highlighting lessons learnt as the process developed.

The how to evaluate section provides some pointers to consider in building-in evaluation into your own coproduced research. It is not a prescriptive guide, but offers theory and techniques that might help.

The guide is a product of the AHRC *Valuing Different Perspectives* project that sought to evaluate the impact of these research projects on the community.¹ We worked with community partners to ensure this guide would be useful to them and other community organisations. It is presented in a way suited to current policy and grant application practice – the language of outputs and outcomes is used throughout. This language may be alienating to academics

Why evaluation?

For a community group evaluation often has two ‘faces’ – to provide evidence of effectiveness for external bodies such as funders, and to help the group understand itself better and to learn and improve. These two aspects *can* be brought together, but they are often in conflict. An evaluation can seek to be a supportive, critical friend, or it can be judgemental and damning.

However, evaluation knowledge is growing in importance for government as it seeks to demonstrate value for money and the impact it is having. Further, the knowledge provided by an evaluation can also be invaluable for third and community sector

¹ *Valuing Different Perspectives* was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council’s Connected Communities programme as a legacy project. Award number AH/L01310X/1

organisations. It is often required to support funding applications and to provide evidence in partnerships working.

Evaluation has become an incredibly complex and technical field, and a vast body of academic and practice-focused literature has emerged on what is the best way to do evaluation with a range of different methods seeking to overcome the many challenges.

There has also been a growth in university-community collaborations. This is driven in part from academics' desire to empower communities to produce knowledge. It is also driven by the pressures in higher education policy and funding context that seeks to maximise the impact of university research. This research used an evaluation approach to understand how we can ensure the processes of this research deliver positive outcomes for communities.

Evaluation can take many forms and this project shows that good evaluations could combine, say, numbers and narratives. None of these are intrinsically better or worse than others – what matters is that the form of evaluation is appropriate for the purpose and the context.

It can also be useful to think in terms of what the evaluation literature terms 'utilisation focused evaluation' which:

*'involves identifying and working with primary intended users to design and interpret an evaluation. This includes the process of working with primary intended users to render judgments about the extent to which the preponderance of evidence supports a meaningful and useful conclusion about degree to which an intervention has affected observed outcomes and impacts.'*²

At its best academic can work with community groups in what has been called 'developmental evaluation'³ (that is 'long-term, partnering relationships [between academics and groups] who are, themselves, engaged in ongoing programme development') to help ensure that outcomes for communities are maximised from these partnerships.

There is a close link between these aspects of *evaluation* and the idea of *group learning*. Therefore we argue that evaluation should be part of the ethics of good research coproduced with communities – learning what works and why to ensure outcomes and benefits are maximised for everyone.

Our first learning point for everyone is:

Evaluation should be a central part of the reflection and ethics of research coproduced with communities.

² Patton, M. Q. (2012) 'A utilization-focused approach to contribution analysis' *Evaluation* **18**(3): 364-377, page 364.

³ Patton, M. Q. (1994) 'Developmental evaluation' *Evaluation Practice* **15**(3): 311-319, page 311.

Background

About this report

These guidelines are based on the AHRC Connected Communities *project Valuing Different Perspectives*, led by Peter Matthews, University of Stirling. The project sought to learn what had, and hadn't, worked in some previous Connected Communities projects: Community Hacking 2.0 and Ladders to the Cloud.

Importantly, these evaluations fell into two parallel groups: a community-led evaluation supported by a community-based researcher employed by Heriot-Watt University (Janice Astbury, Heriot-Watt University, working with Allan Farmer, WHALE Arts, Caroline Richards, Prospect Community Housing Association (PCHA), Linda Arthur and Tracey Lee, Wester Hailes Health Agency and Eoghan Howard, community activist) and a set of academic-led evaluations from a variety of different perspectives (carried out by Dave O'Brien, Goldsmiths, University of London, Laura Brown, University of Manchester, Julie Brown Southampton Solent University).

The original concept was that the "community" and "academic" interventions would be different but equal. In the end, due to a variety of constraints, including funding, the community evaluation was far better supported. Understanding this difference, and why it eventually mattered so much, helped us produce the lessons learnt.

What were we evaluating?

The two Connected Communities projects had produced a number of outputs, using digital technology together with social history, and also included a number of data-collection exercises. Ultimately the community partners, WHALE, PCHA and the Health Agency, were brought together into a stronger partnership under the banner "Our Place in Time". The outputs were:

Digital totem pole

The most striking output was the "Digital Totem Pole" at a central location in Wester Hailes. This included a number of "quick response" (QR) codes so people could access information about the neighbourhood from their smartphones.

Code books

These included social history walks around the neighbourhood and also included QR codes that took people to galleries of photographs provided by previous project partner the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. They were distributed through partner agencies in the neighbourhood and the local library.

The Digital Sentinel

Catalysed by the Connected Communities, and supported by funding from the Carnegie Trust, the Digital Sentinel was an online, "hyperlocal", or neighbourhood-focused news source, inspired by the previous community newspaper *The Wester Hailes Sentinel*.

From There to Here...

This was a social history Facebook page set up by Prospect CHA allowing people to comment on historic photos of Wester Hailes. The projects supported some expansion of this page and analysis of its use.

If you want to read the reports that were provided for the community partners from the evaluations, they are available in the University of Stirling online repository:

Engaging Wester Hailes <https://rms.stir.ac.uk/converis-stirling/publication/18813>

Valuing Academic Perspectives <https://rms.stir.ac.uk/converis-stirling/publication/18814>

The research story – themes and lesson

In this section we present the story of the research projects in Wester Hailes that we wrote based on the evaluation. The story is broken down into four thematic sections:

- time
- working with communities
- research and community development
- partners and relationship building

This provides the evidence base for the learning points that end each thematic section.

Theme I – Time

A key finding of the evaluation was the different ways in which time effects research coproduced with communities. As evaluation is often about starts and ends of projects, and other aspects of measurement over time, taking an evaluation approach helped us to reflect on this.

Just how long is a project?

The two original research projects and *Valuing Different Perspective* had a fixed timescale, with start and finish dates, defined inputs of resources in that time and a schedule of expected outputs, all set out against a timetable of months. An evaluation expects to be able to ‘see’, often ‘measure’ the impact of a project from the beginning to the end. Just like in policy or community development work, research projects create artificial beginning and end-points. Many bits of all the Connected Communities projects got going before their official start dates, and the relationships and level of engagement have continued long after official end points.

In all the collaborative research in Wester Hailes it was apparent community activities cannot necessarily be neatly planned or predictable in this way. Stuff happens – new possibilities develop, people come and go, external forces change the situation, and so on. In *Ladders to the Cloud* this was delays in getting planning permission as Edinburgh Council went on their summer break. In *Valuing Different Perspectives* this included for us the referendum on Scottish independence which meant many people we wanted to speak to were otherwise very busy! Another part of the evaluation was affected by a researcher moving jobs and moving house across the UK. We ended up calling this our “emergent implicit strategy”. Research coproduced with communities, and evaluation, needs to be able to adapt to these changes: evaluate new opportunities and take account of unforeseen events.

An evaluation often tries to understand final outcomes after an intervention has taken place. A key theme running through the evaluations in *Valuing Different Perspectives* ended up being described as “not yetness” – there was little evidence of impact on community outcomes *yet* but there was sense that progress had started. One evaluation described the outcomes as “fragile”.

Valuing Different Perspectives provided valuable resources for continuing the activities from the previous projects. For example, the funding kept a worker employed on the *Digital Sentinel* for a further six months so it could continue to develop and be evaluated. Without this funding the projects might have ended at the stage of “not yet”. Academic research funding, like any community development funding, is short-term, competitive and definitely not guaranteed. The uniform finding across all the evaluations was that the original projects had not had the funding to continue until the community outcomes were completed.

We learnt that this “not yetness”, or questions of sustainability, might create tensions between academics and the community over a project. For example, as research projects, sustainability might not be an issue, and may not be high in academics’ priorities. In fact academics might be just as interested in why something does not work as quickly as expected. In contrast, if a community group expects to get community outcomes then sustainability is a big issue. Research projects may raise serious ethical questions about starting a process which cannot be supported to a sustainable point.

Academic time and community time

Academic and community timescales can be very different. Academics will often take time to develop a project, though they may come looking for project partners at short notice if they have an unexpected funding opportunity with a short deadline to hit. This was the case with *Valuing Different Perspectives* itself – where previous community partners pulled out at the last minute and the Wester Hailes partners agreed to come on board.

The attitudes of academics to data collection and the production of reports, and their concern about having any academic impact may also be on a different timescale than that community groups are used to. However, the increasing pressure on academics to demonstrate that their work has social impact (i.e. effects outside the university!) may make them willing partners in achieving short-term impacts, but they may not be skilled in doing this.

Outcomes for academics are predominantly new knowledge within academic disciplines (books, journal articles etc.). What is important to recognise is that outputs and outcomes for academics are delivered in very different timescales to community outcomes.

Unravelling time in evaluation

Evaluations provide a snapshot of a project, sometimes two (at the beginning and the end) or at best a view of a short period in the complex processes of a community’s ‘life’. A lot of the evaluation literature highlights how artificial these limits are. This makes establishing ‘natural’ start and end points for processes difficult. It may be impossible to disentangle different projects and processes if you are trying to work out exactly what worked. It might be that the complex muddle of projects and interventions were working together to deliver outcomes.

What this means is that an evaluation which simply looks at the impact of a project within the project lifespan is likely to miss important future impacts which are only foreseen during the project. Some outcomes can only be measured a long time after the end of a project. Laura Brown specifically chose not to use her traditional quantitative methods because they would have demonstrated no impact as quantifiable changes in wellbeing take a long time to happen, and some are so intangible as to be unquantifiable. She understood the possible changes through qualitative methods instead.

This complexity may also mean project impacts are not understood correctly in evaluations. Many may come out of processes which were happening long before the project started. In Wester Hailes there was a long tradition of community organisation, *and* a succession of earlier projects, which are important to understand the outcomes of Community Hacking 2.0 and Ladders to the Cloud.

Managing time

This messiness around time could cause conflict or frustration between academics and communities. It is important that projects try to manage time well and have discussions about timescales, particularly when they are slipping. However, a key strength of Connected Communities, was the flexibility that the AHRC had around timescales and outputs meant the pressure was far less than it would be for other community development funders who would often want a final report on a specific date.

Learning points

Academics should try and engage with a partner community in advance of a research project and get to know them. This makes processes easier increasing the likelihood outcomes will be delivered. Although in this case the community were approached at the last minute, this is not best practice.

Knowledge outcomes that academics want can often be delivered on a different timescale to community outcomes. This raises ethical issues around shared goals and continued engagement with community partners.

Building relationships with academic partners takes a long time, and therefore it can be a long time before outcomes are delivered for your community.

Work with academics to make sure that short-term benefits – during the project or soon after – as well as longer term academic results are achieved.

Community organisations and academics need to discuss what would be sensible beginning and end points for a research project, and how to deal with outcomes which may only come to fruition after the project.

Not all the details of an evaluation can be ‘nailed down’ at the start – ‘stuff happens’ and new issues may emerge during an evaluation. Projects need to be flexible to account for this, including running over “official” deadlines.

Funding is never going to see a community-based process through to completion – outcomes take a long time to deliver. There are ethical implications to this if academics leave a community to complete a development process without sufficient support.

Theme 2 – Working with communities

Many guides to research coproduced with communities assume that working with a community is a good thing and that, although there may be ethical challenges, with the right skills it can be done well. Taking an evaluation approach, we could identify the practical challenges and the various approaches that helped smooth the processes of working together.

Practically, resources matter

Valuing Different Perspectives and the previous Connected Communities projects provided a substantial amount of money directly to community partners. The amounts of funding increased as the partnership developed. Also, the freedom for the community partners also increased. These were relatively small sums for the university partners but represented substantial sums to the community partners who could deliver a lot in the neighbourhood. In the words of one partner they “bought goodwill”.

This may prompt ethical questions, particularly that the universities were buying involvement. The money was used to cover running costs within the organisation hosting the community research assistant, Janice Astbury, as university overheads are covered. It also funded the *Digital Sentinel* for an extra six months for it to be successfully evaluated. Overall, given the officer time and volunteer time provided by the community organisations the funding was an investment into the neighbourhood.

Compared to grant funding these organisations had used in the past, this provided a good source of funding. While it was not guaranteed, once it was received by the universities, bills were paid promptly and did not require onerous reporting. It was therefore treated as funding to support community work and community development. While recognising it was research funding, this was not central to the community partners’ activities.

Wester Hailes is a community with long experience both of activism and of engaging with externally funded projects. Over time they have learned a great deal. This enables them to engage with academics as equal partners. They have also gathered knowledge of the funding and policy environment. This leads to a more informed choice of academic partners who come asking for collaboration, and of funding streams. It also enables them to deliberately make a contribution to wider community development debates, extending the benefits of investment in activities beyond Wester Hailes.

People are an important resource too

The community research assistant for *Valuing Different Perspective* was employed by one of the universities and became a valuable resource in the community. The job specification for the role was drawn up by the project leader Peter Matthews with the community partners with a focus on community development skills. A manager from one of the community partners also helped shortlist and was a member of the

interview panel. This process ensured that the project employed someone with the adequate skills to deliver outcomes for the community partners as well as academically robust research. The community research assistant, who had a wealth of community development practice as well as academic research experience, ended up being a highly valuable contribution to community development and partnership-building in the neighbourhood. Such people are unusual but very useful – perhaps indispensable – for effective community-led evaluations.

Learning to get along

Looking back at the previous Connected Communities project and in *Valuing Different Perspectives* it became clear that academics and community partners have very different cultures and ways of communicating and working together and this means relationships need to be built slowly and with trust. Often conflicts and tensions will need to be ironed out.

The various bits of Connected Communities projects that *Valuing Different Perspectives* aimed to evaluate were quite confusing to many of the academics involved. Wester Hailes had a rich history that was difficult for the academics who only had limited time to spend on the project to fully comprehend. This could frustrate and even antagonise the community partners at times, for example academics unwittingly getting the name of an output or project wrong.

Other seemingly straightforward academic practices were alienating. One of the academic evaluations sent out a simple questionnaire to collect details of awareness and some wellbeing and place-attachment indicators. This was sent out in a mailshot being carried out by one of the community partner organisations. Peter Matthews and Laura Brown worked hard to make it as simple and clear as possible and also offered incentives for return – entry to a prize draw.

However, due to academic norms a substantial amount of the questionnaire was text on the aims of the study and ethical issues. Feedback from the community partners was that the questionnaire was very wordy. They felt it was unlikely their service-users would read and engage with such a document. What appeared to be a very simple questionnaire for the academic evaluators is likely to have been a barrier to engagement in the research – the response rate was 4.4 per cent.

Being on the ground matters

The amount of time spent ‘on the ground’ by evaluators really mattered. This affected the accuracy and depth of evidence uncovered by the evaluation i.e. its quality as *an evaluation*. The community-led evaluation produced by the Community Research Assistant was focused solely on the community’s needs as it was embedded in the community. The study of participation in the *Digital Sentinel* was carried out by an academic partner who had worked with community partners for a number of years – Peter Matthews – so he felt comfortable starting from this premise that the *Digital Sentinel* had “failed” to engage people and looked at how people might be encouraged to be involved.

Some of the academic evaluations did not have the time or resources to do ‘on the ground’ research and suffered greatly because of this. An interview by Skype did not offer the same richness as seeing the outputs in the community.

This might be a challenge if you are taking an evaluation approach as you might want to specifically bring in an outsider to ask challenging questions and use their perspective. If you do this, then they need to have the time to get to know people and the projects concerned.

The importance of being on the ground was highlighted by the use of the community as “peer review” of the evaluation findings of *Valuing Different Perspectives*. All the academics involved were very nervous presenting findings to the community partners. Academics are very used to presenting their findings, such as at conferences, and also subjecting them to the rigours of peer review. However, in this case the community were the arbiters of quality and this was extremely nerve-wracking. On a positive note, this also made community approval all the more welcome: the feedback that there ‘were no factual inaccuracies’ came as a great relief and tribute to the evaluators.

The biggest impact of all the research projects was on the people most heavily involved, both the academics and the community partners, both workers and residents. Time on the ground translated into better community development outcomes, and also better understanding of the community by the academics – hopefully in ways which will shape their future practice.

Learning points

Do your homework on the community you are going to work with – getting names wrong and other simple errors can antagonise. Time and resources should be made available for this.

Skilled, experienced communities may treat the academic funding as just another short term funding stream. Make sure you and funding bodies are aware of this and find it acceptable.

Traditional academic procedures – including ethics – can be alienating for possible participants.

Communities are powerful peer-reviewers. Presenting research findings to its subjects can be nerve-wracking and emotionally difficult - more so than presenting in other, more academic environments.

Academic projects can bring a lot of resources into a community – this could be investment or even human resources. Make sure you ask for these.

Be confident enough to negotiate and say ‘no’ to things you do not want to do or agree to.

Community organisations should find out about research programmes and funders. Ask academics clearly what they can and cannot do with research funding and check funders' websites.

Recognise that all partners can, and will, learn from each other – you will come out of the process with different perspectives on your work and your communities. Make time for this to happen.

Theme 3 – Research and community development

When carrying out research coproduced with communities it can often feel like community development work. However, it is important to be clear that research and community development are not the same thing. Taking an evaluation approach allowed us to understand how research processes can best produce community development outcomes.

Research as community development

As discussed above, community partners may treat academic research funding as just another grant to support their work. However, academic research projects often end after a short period – the longest research project in this case was *Valuing Different Perspectives* that ran for nine months. Community development takes a long time. If an academic project does aim to deliver community development outcomes this should be recognised. As already mentioned, there are ethical issues with beginning a community development process with a small amount of research funding which then stops when impact is only just beginning to be delivered.

On the plus side, academic research money can in part substitute for decreasing levels of other community development funding. One of the strengths of *Connected Communities* was that it was sympathetic to this. If the research money is there then community groups should use it. The evaluations in *Valuing Different Perspectives* found that using research money and academics in this way enabled the community partners to do things they might not have thought of before, or were so experimental they were unlikely to get other government funding, such as the digital totem pole.

Another important finding was that the initial research funding then levered in further funding and resources, such as the “community benefit” from the development of the Wester Hailes Healthy Living Centre when the contractors raised the totem pole. The evaluation of *Valuing Different Perspectives* also helped with this. The community could use the reports and findings to make a case for further funding of projects such as the *Digital Sentinel*.

Not all funders are as generous as the AHRC. For example, the Economic and Social Research Council often require research partners to match their resources. The challenge is therefore to ensure that the community also benefits from the research in some way. This can be from research findings delivered in an accessible way, or from development activities which take place within the project, or both. In an ideal world you will be able to jointly produce outputs which meet all partners’ different needs. What *Valuing Different Perspectives* taught us was that this is not always possible and often the community are the greatest beneficiaries.

Academics and community development

In the case of *Valuing Different Perspectives* the community and academic partners agreed that they wanted to extend the original research projects through a

community development process. A research assistant was funded and appointed with a job specification focused on community development skills. This meant the community development aspects of the project were carried out professionally and effectively. It was explicitly recognised that there would be some academic outputs that would also be produced which would have no impact on community development.

All the academics involved in *Valuing Different Perspectives* were interested in the community development aspects of *Connected Communities*, and in engaging critically with how they are evaluated. This is not the case with all academics, who may be more motivated by research objectives or even the need to bring funding into their institutions. In almost all cases they will need some kind of academic output – usually data they can write up in academic journals – and their funders will be looking for research results, not community development outcomes.

The evaluations here found that the academics in all the Connected Communities projects were mainly focused on delivering outputs through the research process – either the objects produced in, or for, the neighbourhood or end of award reports. The visibility of the outputs raised the profile of the academics leading to invitations to important events and furthering careers.

Learning points

Research and community development are not the same thing, but you may end up doing both. Funders need to allow for this and as academic researchers you need to be comfortable with this.

The line between research and community development needs to be discussed between academics and community partners. Community development raises many difficult issues and is often best left to skilled and knowledgeable community organisations.

Academics doing community development may use time in what seems like an inefficient way. You might not quickly produce research outputs expected of universities and funders.

In the right project with the right funding, academics can be less risk averse and more experimental, than other funders and partners. The outcomes of this may be unexpected and very useful.

Academics are doing research and make sure you are clear about what this is and the flexibility allowed for you. You can either collaborate on the research, or take community development benefits from the research process and outcomes.

There can be a tension between different outcomes – academic knowledge or community development. These outcomes can remain separate or even diverge, as long as this recognised and negotiated.

Theme 4 – Partners and relationship building

Building trusting relationships is often highlighted as the key to success in research coproduced with communities and this is apparent in the three themes already discussed above. While the section on learning to get along was on day-to-day relationships, this section focuses on building lasting partnerships. The evaluation approach showed how important these partnerships are for delivering outcomes.

Starting and forming a partnership

It is widely recognised that the best research coproduced with communities comes from developing partnerships over time. This allows communities to engage in writing research proposals to make sure their outcomes are delivered.

Valuing Different Perspectives started at the end of a three year process where two successful research grants and other income had supported a range of activities. This time spent working together meant trust and a rapport developed between the community partners and some of the academic partners. This enabled a constructive relationship based on mutual respect and most importantly for an ethical and reflexive relationship to be maintained. The evaluations highlighted that this was a process in development and that a lot had already been achieved.

Importantly, the community partners had learnt to make sure they would get a benefit for them out of the projects. This was made very clear at the start of *Valuing Different Perspectives* when the community stated that they would only engage in the project if they got something out of it and this was non-negotiable. The process where Community Hacking 2.0 went from being a digital design project to “hack” the Big Society agenda to a project that produced the Code Books and the totem pole was part of an ongoing learning process for the community realising that this was possible.

The love-hate relationships with academics

The conflict between academics and community partners is often presented as an ethical issue in participatory research. *Valuing Different Perspectives* highlighted that they were also perceived as a barrier to delivering outcomes. The literature on participatory and coproduced research does acknowledge that there can be tensions between community partners and academics. Well-meaning academics can forget how different cultures of academia, such as time pressures and working patterns, are unique to the academic world. One clash highlighted by the community partners in *Valuing Different Perspectives* was the ease with which academics will argue points. This is normal in the academy, for example in seminar, but can appear rude and dismissive in meetings with communities. The way these working practices rub up against each other gets easier to manage over time, but it is important to recognise and reflect on, especially when new academic partners are brought into a project.

For example, in the earlier projects, some academics had a very small buy-out of their time so were only minimally involved. These partners would often just attend one meeting and never be seen or heard of again. For the community partners, knowing these academics had a funded role was frustrating especially since this money could have been spent on resources for the neighbourhood and delivering outcomes. These small roles could have been better explained to community partners.

What was valued by the community from academic involvement was exactly what academics are good at – providing good ideas and research input to spark new approaches to working with people and develop services. It was also found that working with academics can open up new networks to community groups, with resources such as people, funds and knowledge. Academics often have networks which include policy makers and agenda-shapers such as think-tanks, so they may also open up opportunities for influence outside the local area. The digital totem pole was a good example of this, being used by the AHRC in high profile presentations and publications.

That communities are working with academics can be useful in its own right too. They can provide important legitimacy for a community's work – 'people know it but you have to prove it' as one community activist put it. They can also raise the credibility of an organisation with external bodies – being seen to work with academics was important to the Wester Hailes organisations in showing the City of Edinburgh Council that they could and did work collaboratively in partnerships and were ideally positioned to deliver outcomes.

As noted above, Wester Hailes has learned from experience that academics have differing approaches to working collaboratively. It can be disappointing for a community if they left feeling 'used' by academics – in *Valuing Different Perspectives* the community partners spoke of academics gathering data and then they would never be heard of again.

Communities in the lead

As discussed above, academic research and community development are different activities. In all the Connected Communities this led to divergent focuses on outcomes, between the external academics' research outputs and the community development needs of the community partners. The community side of the project focused on producing objects such as the totem pole and Code Books and also supporting longer-term activities such as the *Digital Sentinel*. The academic outputs were focused on understanding why these were, or were not, successful.

As the research projects progressed the level of community participation and leadership by the community partners increased. In *Valuing Different Perspectives* this meant the community leading an evaluation process with very little engagement or framing by academic partners.

A lack of strong partnerships, or being embedded in communities, does not need to be a problem, *if* issues are acknowledged and mutually acceptable solutions found.

Valuing Different Perspectives suggests that evaluation might be a good tool to develop this. The learning that goes on with evaluation can be developmental and take a participatory approach with communities. This can then develop good processes of working together and focus activities on achievable outcomes. The key is to identify the needs of each partner, and also of any external stakeholders and choose the evaluation and research approaches which best meet these.

Learning points

When working with community partners don't behave like an academic – many norms of behaviour can appear rude or off-hand such as the argumentative style of speaking. Make sure you reflect on your behaviour and work towards having a relationship where you can openly discuss these issues.

If working with community organisations respect their autonomy. An academic can almost never know the community well enough to do the community organisations' jobs for them.

Academic partnerships may open up new networks or channels of influence and resources for communities – either directly or through introductions and influence.

All partnerships are risky. Community groups may want to make sure they find out about the academics in advance, from university websites or other community organisations. Don't be afraid to ask for "references".

How to evaluate

We now turn from what our evaluation taught us about doing research coproduced with communities and coproduced approaches to evaluation. Evaluation is useful in a number of ways:

- For accounting to external bodies;
- For bidding for new money;
- For showing the value of an organisation and its activities in other ways;
- For giving credibility to an organisation's claims through external, academic reporting;
- Learning for all partners.

All these are valid aims, but involve different kinds of evaluation, different amounts of time and inputs, and often different kinds of academics. In particular, many academics are happier with either qualitative methods or quantitative methods. Other academics may not see the value in paying attention either to utilisation or to developmental aspects of evaluation. These are the types of things a community organisation needs to know about an academic partner.

Choosing your type of evaluation

There are many possible approaches to evaluation. The best approach in any situation should be driven by the needs of stakeholders – in particular of community organisations as well as any external funder. If these have different needs – for example quantified outcomes data or an understanding of processes – then a hybrid evaluation methodology should be considered. Academics should be ready to adapt their familiar approaches to meet the needs of the situation. However, don't assume that different organisations will require stereotypical outputs. If you can, discuss needs with them before starting the evaluation.

Once you have chosen your evaluation approach a number of problems, all of which we faced in *Valuing Different Perspectives*, and are common across evaluation, will come your way. These make it difficult to attribute specific outcomes to specific activities or outputs.

In most communities which host a project being evaluated there will be other forms of community activities going on as well and there will also be histories of various kinds of community activities. This creates problems for some approaches to evaluation which focus only on outcomes, or on relating inputs to outputs and outcome over a particular timeframe. It is almost never possible – except in simple cases – to say for sure that 'the project caused this' and therefore 'it succeeded or failed'. Other activities or changes may have an impact, and the changes may have their roots long before the project being evaluated. In evaluation jargon this is the 'attribution problem'.

Secondly, every place is different: in its current state, its history, and the social, economic and political context which surround it. This makes it even harder to

attribute outcomes to projects, as it means that similar projects might work in one place but not in another. So a 'zero' result may not mean that the project had no impact – merely that other factors got in the way.

Our preferred way of addressing these problems that we took here is to make sure that evaluation focuses on process as well as outcomes, so that the 'How?' and 'Why? or Why not?' questions are answered as well as 'What changed?'. These are questions you may wish to ask at various times throughout your project. This will probably involve some kind of qualitative, narrative (story) based approaches and interviews, but can also be quantified. What matters is searching imaginatively for plausible evidence of cause, effect and outcome.

It needs to be remembered though that establishing outcomes and attribution – the link between doing one thing and a change happening elsewhere – will be very difficult to establish whatever methods you use. From *Valuing Different Perspectives*, it seems that taking time to do evaluation, and in particular 'embedding' a researcher in the community, is a good way of increasing understandings of these impacts. Researchers have more time to understand pathways of possible influence and the ways in which a specific intervention might be linked to specific outcomes within a community. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that it may only be possible to show that changes have occurred as the result of a mix of different activities, and it *may not be possible* to isolate the impact of a particular project.

This kind of evaluation, where you attribute outcomes to projects through narratives is relatively unfamiliar to many academics, communities and policy makers. Community activists in particular may see the benefits of causal stories for understanding how projects make change happen for communities.

It's not all good news

Some of the findings of the evaluation studies were negative. The evaluation of engagement in the *Digital Sentinel* started off by asserting that it had not been successful. What the evaluation could offer was to help the community partners understand why this was the case and what might be done about it. The community-based evaluation similarly suggested that the focus on digital engagement might not be the most fruitful because this was not the way most people in Wester Hailes engaged with one-another or with service providers.

As already mentioned, the academics, including the community research assistant, were nervous about presenting their findings, but the trust developed between these academics and the community partners made the delivery of negative outcomes less problematic. However, the community partners did appreciate the tough findings so they could learn themselves and work better in future. They did not want these to be 'sugar-coated'.

Without a longer-lasting, trusting relationship, negotiating the presentation of findings with community partners is therefore important. In this project one of the most useful questions asked by an academic in the workshop where the evaluation findings were presented was directed at the community partners: 'do these findings match your

experience? You live and work here'. The moment of reflection, highlighting the relative lack of knowledge of the academic, was good at establishing a sense of how correct the research findings were and the limits of the academic's expertise.

Doing your own evaluation

Overall, from *Valuing Different Perspectives* we would recommend embedding evaluation approaches in your coproduced community research. It helped all partners reflect on what had gone well and what had not gone well with the previous research projects. It also allowed for a reflection on what parts of the project were delivering the best outcomes in the local community, and that had the chance of moving from being "not yet" to being fully fledged community-led, sustainable activities.

We would advocate a developmental, utilisation-focused, participatory approach to evaluation. These three key words will find a host of easy-to use resources through a web search. This will help the evaluation become part of an ongoing learning process. Before you set out, you might want to consider these questions:

Do you want to bring in an outsider? Bringing in an outsider may help bring different perspectives to your projects and someone who will ask the obvious questions that may have got overlooked through "group think". However, this can antagonise existing relationships and any tensions will have to be managed. This can be difficult and uncomfortable.

Do you have the resources to embed an evaluator in a community and in your team? The resource of the Community Research Assistant was invaluable for *Valuing Different Perspectives*. If you have the resources, this type of outsider, who has the time and resources to work on the ground to get a feel for what is, and is not, working and why, is ideal.

Do it yourself or use academics? Academics can bring brilliant skills, knowledge, networks and resources to your project. For example, they can carry out robust interviews for you and then interpret the data in an appropriate way using their training and skills. However, they can be difficult and expensive to work with. Community organisations should not be scared of using developmental evaluation approaches themselves. If community organisations need support, such as doing some interviews or wanting a specific piece of data or knowledge, then they should seek this from academic partners.

How will you decide what to evaluate? Working out what the project being evaluated, and what its possible outcomes are, is difficult. For *Valuing Different Perspectives* we use a community logic-modelling session with community partners. Facilitated by Peter Matthews, this allowed for discussion about taken-for-granted assumptions about activities, inputs, outputs and possible outcomes. This then shaped the evaluation.

What methods will you use? This is a big question, and there were a range of different methods used in *Valuing Different Perspectives*. The quantitative survey was time-consuming to organise and poorly engaged local people, with a very low

response rate. Interviews by the Community Research Assistant collected a wide range of rich data. Focus groups with local residents were difficult to recruit people to, but gathered rich data on the experience of living in Wester Hailes and engagement with the outputs of the Connected Communities projects. Ultimately, what methods you choose needs to be driven by what data you want and what you want to use it for. Community organisations should make clear that they know what approaches academics they are going to work with will use and whether this will be useful for them.

What theoretical approach to use? When interpreting your data you use a wide range of theory to understand what it means and why it is important. The academics in *Valuing Different Perspectives* used a wide range of different approaches that focused their analysis on different factors within the data. Community organisations should not be afraid to use their own theory to interpret data and finding. This could be “local knowledge” of what does and does not work, or theory they have picked up from other places.

Learning points

Discuss data needs with community partners and other stakeholders. Don't always assume that you know what kind of data will be useful to different groups.

Communities may want honest, robust evaluations ('not sugar-coated') for their own learning, but care needs to be taken with the audience for negative evaluations. Negotiating the presentation of evaluation findings is important.

Choose your approach and your partners carefully, and take advice over how best to do the evaluation

Evaluation outputs are useful for funding bids etc. but the fact of an external evaluation having happened may be just as important as any specific findings. It can offer support, legitimacy and credibility to your projects and organisations.

Communities are more likely to accept robust or negative findings from academics they know and trust.

You cannot always evaluate outcomes in a formal before and after way. Many outcomes will be “soft” or intangible, and possibly distant in time.

Outcomes will be dependent on local histories and experiences. They cannot be guaranteed but carrying out a developmental evaluation will help identify outcomes that have been delivered.

A focus on process in evaluations as well as outcomes is important and useful for developing projects. This means recording learning during projects so you know why outcomes are, or are not, achieved.

An embedded community researcher will give you the most useful community-led evaluation because they will understand the messiness and complexity of the situation and can help develop projects as they progress. The less embedded a researcher is the less useful an evaluation is for community partners.

Conclusion

At the time of writing a range of bottom-up initiatives are springing up throughout Wester Hailes – a renewal of engagement for many. The evaluation carried out by *Valuing Different Perspectives* demonstrates that the activities initiated by the various Connected Communities projects are contributing to these broader activities – community gardens; food projects; guerrilla gardening; campaigns for redevelopment to name but a few. To return to the aims of the first project funded – Community Hacking 2.0 – it seems the community in Wester Hailes is now hacking the Big Society. As the state fails to improve the neighbourhood they are actively working to improve it themselves.

The contribution of the Connected Communities projects to this has been facilitated by the slow process of partnership development between the academics and the community partners over the course of four projects – ultimately a substantial investment in the community by the researchers. This was a haphazard process of bidding for different funding over a period of four years, some of which was unsuccessful. If research councils are to carry out similar strategic programmes coproducing research with communities in future then a strategic approach to timetabling the release of resources and funding, with a focus on partnership development is likely to maximise outcomes for communities and make emergent processes more structured.

Valuing Different Perspectives with its developmental evaluation approach also helped the partners develop a learning and reflective process. This was valued just as much as the earlier investment, and should be included as part of research coproduced with communities. However, the cuts due to public services could put these gains at risk. If organisations are losing their funding, and basic services are being stopped or struggling to work, then time and resources for learning and reflection will be minimal.

Overall we have valued the opportunity to evaluate our previous activities through *Valuing Different Perspectives* and would encourage other coproduced research projects to add an evaluation stage to their work. By focusing on processes as much as outcomes these evaluations helped the community partners develop their activities and to continue delivering a wide range of outcomes. It was clear from the various evaluations that the more embedded the evaluator, the easier this developmental, process evaluation is. Community groups themselves are therefore in a brilliant position to do this sort of evaluation themselves.

