The complexity of roles of the community partner in collaborative research and knowledge production

When the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) introduced the role of the *Community Partner* into its Connected Communities programme, it marked a significant shift in the way interdisciplinary research was to be funded, designed and delivered by higher education. Giving community groups and organisations involved in the projects partner status empowered those not working within the academic community to play an active and sanctioned role in research, not only as subjects of that research but as collaborators in building, curating, disseminating and applying knowledge. In broad terms, these collaborations, which have been rooted in an interdisciplinary approach, have led to significant cross-fertilisation between academia and practice, and have given the communities in which they work considerably more influence on the direction and outcomes of the work.

However, the term *community partner* has been the source of much discomfort among those who carry that status. The ambiguity of the word *community* is challenging within any context, but its use within the Connected Communities programme to describe a broad spectrum of relationships and roles within research teams has led to difficulty in speaking with any consistency about the issues, both the opportunities and challenges of community partners engaging in this research and the academics working with them.

There has also been some confusion over the difference between the community partners on the research team, and the community groups and organisations with whom the research team engages when carrying out the action research. This is further complicated by some community partners being locally-based groups, and others being regional or national bodies, often working with a spectrum of *communities* in their own right. The communities that engage with the research (sometimes referred to as *participants*, *beneficiaries* or more generally *collaborators*) also come in many shapes and forms and play a variety of roles within the project, as well as having variable relationships with the research team. It is no wonder that the term *community partner* means different things to different people and that the lines between *community partners* and *community participants* so often blur.

The Glass-House Community Led Design has now gathered significant experience as a Community Partner within the context of AHRC-funded research. Having been involved in eleven collaborative projects within the Connected Communities programme, and with the benefit of both hindsight and the evolution of relationships with our partners, it has struck

me that it might be useful to look back on the projects and extract some observations on the role of community partners. These reflections are anecdotal, and the experience of only one organisation, but it is my hope that they will help others engaging in this type of collaborative research to clarify roles and manage expectations. It should be noted that The Glass-House, and I personally, have benefitted from ongoing collaboration with two academics, Dr Katerina Alexiou and Dr Theodore Zamenopoulos at the Open University (OU), across all but one of these projects. Our evolving mutual respect and trust, both on a professional and personal level, and indeed growing friendship, has undoubtedly had an impact on the work we have done together and the nature of our collaboration.

For those who don't know our organisation, The Glass-House Community Led Design is a national charity supporting community participation and leadership in the design and development of the built environment. Put simply, we help diverse groups and stakeholders work together to shape better places through a collaborative approach to design. Our role is always as an independent enabler, and our work over the past 15 years around the UK means that we have a large network of communities and professionals who are working together to shape places, both through community-led initiatives and those led by the public and private sectors.

Our organisation started life as an action research project, and we have always been committed to testing new ideas and processes and to learning through the support we offer. One of our key objectives is that learning produced should affect positive change for people and places and that it should help inform and influence practice and policy. We also support and promote interdisciplinary discussion and debate around community-led, participatory and co-design practice.

Looking back on and using the Connected Communities projects in which we have been involved as points of illustration, I would like to propose seven categories of Community Partners. While some terms are similar to AHRC titles, I have given each my own definition. It is worth noting that in some cases, community partners often take on more than one of the roles identified within any given project.

1. **The subject of research**
   The community partner and/or its work is the subject of the research.

   In our case, our first collaboration through Complexity and the Creative Economy, saw our academic partners observing a particular Glass-House workshop, *Design by Consensus*. The research tested what we believed to be true about how the workshop influenced relationships within a group, but for which we had no scientific evidence. Our academic partners observed these workshops and others being delivered with

two different communities in a comparative study, applying the complexity theory to map participant interactions.

While there was collaboration throughout the planning, delivery and reporting, as the subject of the study, our input was essentially our practice and observations about that practice. The knowledge that was produced answered an operational question for our organisation and contributed to a larger exploration of complexity theory within a community development context.

The OU knowledge output was a report to the AHRC. While The Glass-House contributed to the report, the main outcome for our organisation was being able to talk about the workshop with more authority and credibility.

2. **The broker**
The community partner enables relationships between the research team and community group(s) with/on which the research team carries out action research.

In the project Media, Community and the Creative Citizen, The Glass-House played an important role in identifying community groups that may be interested in taking part in the research and in benefitting from the action research activity. Drawing on our networks of community groups we had supported over the previous decade, The Glass-House helped broker the relationship with researchers, both in getting the community groups involved and in helping to support the relationship between academics and community participants/beneficiaries.

The Glass-House did play an active role in some of the action research activity, but our primary objectives were to ensure that the community groups we brought into the project found the research relevant and useful and that the learning and methodologies developed through work with specific groups engaged in the projects could inform and support other communities in the future. In a sense, we had a brokerage role both in connecting people engaging with the project, and in connecting the research with practice in communities on the ground.

3. **The advisor**
The community partner brings knowledge, skills and experience to the research team in order to help the team shape their research or to support the team's investigation of the field in which the community partner is active. The community partner does not in this case, play and active role in the delivery of action research in the field but rather, provides the knowledge to support the research team carrying out that work.

The Glass-House was invited to play the role of an independent advisor in the project

[Localism and connected neighbourhood planning](#) led by the University of Birmingham. The project developed techniques to unlock the creativity of communities, gathering materials to inform neighbourhood planning. In this case, our input was through discussion and signposting in response to a series of questions from the research team.

Interaction with this project was largely about making our knowledge and experience available to others to support their work. Our main objective was to support our community of enquiry and research, and to learn from the work of others.

4. **The facilitator**
The community partner plays an active role in supporting dialogue and action within the research team, or between the research team and the community group(s) with which the team is working in the field.

In [Valuing Community Led Design](#), The Glass-House worked with the Open University to develop an online sharing platform, Community Design Exchange, for groups leading community design projects. One of the key elements of our work was to help facilitate a conversation with a number of community groups around what they would find useful about such a platform, and to explore the mechanisms that would make it easy to use and something with which they would engage.

This project built on a line of enquiry that was of shared interest to The Glass-House and our academic partners. The project aimed to produce a tool that would be a resource to our beneficiaries and other community activists, and an evidence base for the movement of community-led design. Glass-House participation was all about working with the OU to test a concept and to produce a resource, and our facilitation role was to help ensure that the communities it would serve were actively engaged in the development of that resource. Our facilitation served as a bridge between the academics and communities, helping to make the research accessible and relevant to them, and ensuring that communities felt engaged and respected through the process.

5. **The consultant**
The community partner provides one or more commissioned service, drawing on their particular area of expertise, for the benefit of the research project. The community partner is simply paid to come in and deliver a discreet piece/element of work, rather than contributing to the thinking and delivery of the whole research project.

In the project [The role of creative interventions in fostering connectivity and resilience in older people](#) led by Newcastle University, The Glass-House was commissioned to deliver an interactive workshop as part of one of the research project events. In this

case, we responded to a brief to deliver a workshop from our repertoire and placed it within the context of the event to support discussion. Our workshop and particular area of focus was used as a catalyst to help stimulate discussion and debate within the context of the research project and question.

For The Glass-House, this presented both an opportunity to inject one of our workshop methodologies into a research project, and to use this occasion to enter a dialogue outside of our usual networks. With no role in shaping the research project beyond ensuring that our workshop would sit well within the context of the event into which we were invited, our investment was similar to that of any commissioned service. Our learning from the project was limited to areas of exploration addressed at the event, though useful new relationships were forged that supported other work.

6. **The co-investigator**
   The community partner is invited into a research project by an academic partner, and takes on shared responsibility in shaping and delivering the work, outputs and outcomes, and in producing and disseminating knowledge and tools that emerge from the work.

   In Bridging the Gap, Starting from Values – Evaluating Intangible Legacies and Co-Designing Asset Mapping: Comparative Approaches we were invited into a developed research question, in some cases with some input into the emerging research proposal. Once the project kicked off, we were asked to contribute ideas and methodologies into a research process that had been set and was guided by the Principle Investigator. We were actively involved in shaping elements of the research activity, but within an already established research framework.

   In Scaling Up Co-design and Unearth Hidden Assets we benefitted from an unusual two-stage project format, which introduced important elements of co-design into the projects. While partners were not all actively involved in the initial research brief and proposal, the first stage of the project created space for all of the partners to work together to co-design the research activity and refine the research questions. This was significant, as it allowed all partners to bring their relevant skills, experience and practice to the table and to combine them with others in new ways to support the research activity, which was made richer by combining approaches and methodologies. It also made the research more relevant and useful to partners, as they could shape the research activity to fulfil their individual objectives as well as those of the collective research project and team.

   All of these projects saw The Glass-House playing an active role in key decision-making as well as the research activity. Though we had not been actively involved in

developing the initial research proposal, these projects all created space within the project for partners to come together on equal terms and develop approaches and activity to support the research question. In each, we and other partners were able to bring our experience, practice and relationships into the projects in order to support shared lines of enquiry and exploration.

In all of these projects, The Glass-House played an active or leading role in producing dissemination materials to capture and share learning for a broad audience, which included the academic and research community, Glass-House networks, and the general public. In some cases, this consisted of dissemination materials produced with other partners on behalf of the research project and team, and in others, The Glass-House produced material in our own right as a means of making the research relevant, useful and engaging to our audiences.

7. **The co-designer of research**
    The community and academic partners develop the research question and project together in response to a shared area of interest and investigation, and built on a shared commitment to a collaborative approach in which both academic and community partners have equal influence on shaping the project and investment in its success.

In [Empowering Design Practices](), The Glass-House worked with the Open University and other partners to develop the research brief and proposal, through a series of joint conversations that identified shared interests around community-led design as a means to improve design quality and to empower communities. Partners worked together to shape a set of research questions and to place them within the context of historic places of worship, as a means to support the research objectives of all of the partners involved.

This marked a dramatic shift change for The Glass-House and our collaboration with our Open University partners. A shared investment in bringing together diverse collaborators and in developing the research outline and proposal, and now a shared investment in and responsibility for the continuing development and success of the five-year project is rooted in a longstanding collaboration and aligned values and objectives. There is no doubt that we have a different sense of investment, responsibility and accountability in this project than if we had been invited in as we had with any of the other roles.

There is also a considerable expectation for the production of dissemination material, tools and resources that will emerge from this project. What is most interesting about this, is that from the outset there has been consideration and planning for the

production of a range of learning and resources, and for their dissemination and use, that cater for a number of different audiences from the outset. The co-design of the project has allowed us to embed clear objectives for gathering and disseminating our learning, and for applying it across the disciplines and sectors of the various partners. The knowledge produced is guided by and belongs to all of us, with a clear intention for us all to play a role in sharing it and making it accessible for the common good.

Where does the knowledge go?

What has been striking when reflecting across the many projects and associated roles is the varying levels of engagement with the knowledge produced. Our experience shows us that different levels of engagement all have their value, but that it is important to be clear with partners what your are able to contribute to and hope to gain from that knowledge. When engaging with this kind of collaborative action research, it is essential that the knowledge holds some value to you, whether it is experiential, simply dipping your toes into an area of exploration, or seeking to build knowledge to support your area of research, practice, and in the case of our charity, our mission.

When considering any new projects, we now make a careful assessment of our potential engagement in the following:

Knowledge production

Community-based action research shaped and delivered by interdisciplinary collaboration between higher education, practice and communities on the ground offers special opportunities in producing knowledge. It builds on past research and a combination of academic theory and knowledge and the practical, experiential knowledge of community partners, networks and groups. It draws on a spectrum of methodologies and approaches from the various partners, and from this interaction, new approaches and methodologies can be tested and developed. Knowledge also emerges directly from the stories and experiences of those engaging with the project.

How the research question is defined and the project shaped will rely both on the combination of partners and the approach to collaboration. In co-designed projects, there is scope for all of the partners to inform the research question and project to ensure that the knowledge produced is relevant and useful to them and their organisations. If the starting point is not defined by all partners, then it is important for those joining a formulated question and project to ensure that the knowledge they bring to the project will serve the research team and help develop new knowledge in the context of the research question. In either case, it is important for all partners of the research team to see how they will learn from the project and how that learning can serve them, their organisations and networks. It is also important to ask the fundamental question, how can this knowledge help people?

Applying knowledge
In very simple terms, how will we use the knowledge produced? The traditional academic output of research papers and publications, and the application of new knowledge in teaching offers a clear route to academic partners, but one that does not always engage or satisfy community partners. For the community partner, the practical application of the knowledge produced is often the motivator for taking part, and that application can take a variety of forms.

In some cases, the project will produce evidence. In academic terms, this may progress a theoritical pursuit. For community partners, this evidence often becomes a valuable commodity in influencing practice, levering in collaboration or support, or in supporting campaigning. Very often, it simply helps community partners better understand the communities in which they work and people's needs and aspirations.

Sometimes, knowledge production will lead to the development of new tools, methodologies and approaches either within the life of the project or following it. When considering collaborative research, we always consider what practical tools and resources will emerge that we can make available to others to support their work or community-based activities. We may not always be actively involved in every stage of the development of these tools and resources, but are keen to ensure that we have helped produce the knowledge required to develop them.

Curating knowledge
Community partners have a valuable role in making knowledge production relevant and useful outside the sphere of academia as well as within. This involves both informing the research objectives for the production of knowledge, and how that knowledge is then packaged up for consumption by others. This is what I refer to as curating knowledge.

What each partner chooses to do with the knowledge produced following any project is in effect their own business. However, collaborative research should offer a unique opportunity for partners from different disciplines and sectors to work together to mark a number of paths for the knowledge to take and a clear sense of how to make it relevant and useful within a number of different contexts.

The way this new knowledge is presented and shared with a range of audiences is crucial. In order for it to be applied outside the academic arena, it needs to be presented in a way that is accessible, engaging and relevant to its audiences. In collaborative research, there is a spectrum of talent and experience to curate knowledge, and in the best projects, time and resource are dedicated to curating knowledge together within the life of the project, not as an afterthought when that pool of talent and experience has dispersed.

Disseminating knowledge

Each partner brings with it a network (or a number of networks) of colleagues, collaborators, beneficiaries, clients and so on. Each of those networks offers an opportunity for dissemination of the knowledge produced. If that knowledge has been curated well, there is potential for the impact of any research project to reach well beyond the confines of the project or of academia.

Each partner will also have a range of methods for dissemination and a sense of which methods will be most accessible, engaging and effective with their various audiences.

Conclusion

The experience of being or working with a community partner will vary enormously from project to project and person to person. However, clarity about roles within the project and in the production, application, curation and dissemination of knowledge from the outset can help make the experience of interdisciplinary and cross-sector research more rewarding and productive for all involved. It can also significantly increase the sphere of influence and impact of the knowledge produced by the research.

In the context of community-based action research, that clarity can also ensure that communities engaging with a project at ground level can get a better understanding of how the research team will work with them and why. This is particularly important when it has been the community partners who have connected the project with communities on the ground, so as not to compromise that relationship.

Careful collective consideration by the project team of how what they learn might be applied beyond the confines of the project, can help make research more grounded in the needs and aspirations of people, as well as in academia. There is a real opportunity for this interdisciplinary and cross-sector research to produce a broad spectrum of legacies, from the direct impact of the action research on the ground, to the learning and influence that is rooted in real life and draws together a spectrum of voices and experiences. That diversity brings not only richness, but a new kind of experimentation and rigour, with the practical testing the theoretical, and the academic methodologies testing and pushing practice. How this learning is then applied, articulated and disseminated to the diverse audiences and networks can extend its reach and impact exponentially. We must constantly challenge ourselves as a research community to create and make the most of new routes to influence through this kind of collaboration. Learning can and should be translated into affecting change and bringing real benefit to people.

I firmly believe in the potential of interdisciplinary and cross-sector research to bring new qualities, opportunities and value to research. The Connected Communities programme has laid fertile ground for community partners to contribute to research and to find practical applications of the knowledge that the research produces. It is now for the academic and community partners to work together, with mutual respect and awareness of what each brings to their collaborative interdisciplinary research, and what each can do with the knowledge produced, to make the most of this opportunity.

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