

‘Re-thinking communication & dissemination strategies: towards practices of engagement & co-production in TRANSIT’

Olivotto, Veronica & Zuijderwijk, Linda

Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies (IHS), Erasmus University, Rotterdam

Keywords

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Summary

We seek to understand how a ‘mode 2’ science or “process-oriented” approaches may be situated and practiced in an institutional academic setting, used to practicing ‘mode 1’ science or “knowledge-first” approaches. In particular, we are interested in how the “process-oriented” approach is transforming dominant practices of communication and training. This interest is embedded in, firstly, universities seeing themselves confronted with a call for ‘integrated science’ and joint problem framing and ownership. Secondly, being part of a project studying social innovation, the notion of co-production is called upon as constitutive of what social innovation.

We reflect upon how we can engage innovative knowledge production through the social innovation approach. We aim to find strategies through which we can facilitate spaces for collaboration and joint knowledge production and to do a review in order to learn what practices of collaboration work between academics and practitioners in especially the field of social innovation.

Abstract

In this paper, we seek to come to an understanding of how a ‘mode 2’ science (see Rydin 2007; Schmale et al. 2013) or “process-oriented” approaches (Wittmayer & Schöpke 2014) may be situated and practiced in an institutional academic setting, used to practicing ‘mode 1’ science or “knowledge-first” approaches. These approaches reflect the ways in which scientists should position themselves in the practice of research and science. ‘Knowledge-first approaches’ acknowledge a boundary zone between science and society where the scientist is a knowledge provider, while in “process-oriented” approaches, other stakeholders than researchers are perceived as problem-owners and hence the definition of the problem itself becomes collaborative opening up a space of joint knowledge production where science and society overlap (Miller, 2013; Wittmayer & Schöpke 2014)

In particular, we are interested in how the “process-oriented” approach is transforming conventional and dominant practices of dissemination, communication and training. *How do notions such as ‘co-production of knowledge’, ‘engagement’, ‘and action research’ nurture our dominant understandings of academia and our practices as scientists and researchers?*

This urge is based on two observations. For starters, universities see themselves confronted with a societal call for ‘integrated science’ and joint problem framing and ownership, resulting in a call for institutional innovation towards integration (a point in case is the Dutch research council NWO, funding scientific research in Dutch universities at the celebration of 50th anniversary of the WOTRO Science for Global Development program).

Secondly, being part of a project studying social innovation, we find that the notion of co-production is called upon as constitutive of what social innovation is (see Voorberg et al. for a review). TRANSIT (Transformative Social Innovation Theory) is a project that aims to build a theory of social innovation, which is “practically relevant” for social entrepreneurs, practitioners, and policy and decision makers and “theoretically relevant” for theorists and researchers in the field. *How can we as researchers and scientists rethink communication and dissemination of research in TRANSIT by means of co-production?*

The notion of ‘co-production’ has been a longstanding topic of interest in public management and dates back to the work of Ostrom in the 1970s, for whom co-production in a broad sense means “the process through which inputs used to provide a good or service are contributions by individuals who are not in the same organization” (Ostrom, 1996). More confined definitions see co-production as relating to planning and service delivery (Boyle & Harris, 2009) with others seeing the concept as relevant across the whole policy process in terms of co-governance (planning and delivery), co-management (joint production) and co-production (citizen production) (Pestoff et al., 2006; Boivard, 2007). Forms of co-production have been studied in in policy development for disability, health, management research (Burns et al, 2014), community development and grassroots co-production (Mitlin, 2008). In this sense co-production is often seen as counteracting the effects of “new public management” especially those that tend to disempower citizens instead nurturing their integrity, autonomy and responsibility (Ryan, 2012).

The field of sustainability science is seen as a topical ground for discussions of science-society interface (Miller, 2013 in Wittmayer & Schapke, 2014) and the relevance of co-production is acknowledged in a wide range of applications. Rydin (2007) examined how knowledge is co-produced in planning theories, in ‘sustainable ecosystem management’ (Roux et al., 2006), in urban sustainable governance (Muñoz-Erickson, 2014), in European air pollution assessments (Tuinstra, 2008), in public management (Ryan 2012), energy innovation policy (Kemp & Rotmans 2009) and climate change and air pollution (Schmale et al. 2013).

Social innovation is considered as a process of ‘co-production’ because (cf. Voorberg et al. 2013): 1) it aims to *break with existing practices* which no longer meet societal needs or desires and in doing so pursues a transformative discontinuity; 2) it aims to produce long lasting outcomes *that are relevant for (parts of) the society*; 3) it strives for the *involvement of relevant stakeholders* in the planning, design and delivery of an innovation, assuming that these stakeholders have the means and willingness to co-create innovations that are relevant to them; 4) the nature of social innovation is to return to civil society, citizens and non-traditional researchers, then the *process of innovation is as important as its outcomes*, and this process can be seen as a learning and reflection process.

Therefore it can be stated that the social innovation process relies on the development of social bonds created by people who circulate in many networks and who are willing to share their knowledge, influence and social links with the goal of finding original solutions (Nussbaumer & Moulaert, 2007). These social bonds happen in a ‘space’ where collaboration and joint knowledge production can be exercised. In this approach “research is an activity apart from other resources. It is an activity of special kind that is the core of knowledge building” (European Commission, 2013:34) but, following a “process-oriented” approach, researchers are (only) one of the

knowledge providers in this space (Miller, 2013). These spaces need to be created and maintained by researchers in “process oriented” research (Wittmayer & Schöpke 2014).

The TRANSIT project serves as a strategic case to reflect upon the question how we can engage innovative knowledge production through the social innovation approach. In this paper we aim to find strategies through which we can facilitate spaces for collaboration and joint knowledge production in the TRANSIT project. We will do so by reflecting on key issues for creating and maintaining such kind of spaces in the project, as addressed by Wittmayer & Schöpke (2014). These are mainly related to the issue of ‘ownership’ and ‘power’. ‘Ownership’ refers to who is in charge of the formulation of the research question, whether it is science or whether this is done in a collaborative manner where problems are co-defined, the system of analysis is shared, contested and collectively redeveloped. In this space internal group dynamics will be influenced by relationship of ‘power’ where, in contrast with ‘knowledge first’ approaches, roles are more fluid and prone to contestation.

Secondly we aim to review policy and project documents of other social innovation projects in the European Union in order to learn what practices work or do not work in terms of collaboration between academics and practitioners, and what are the conditions that must be met to ensure that this type of research is efficient in terms of producing knowledge that is socially relevant. In this sense, taking an action research standpoint, Sommers (2009) provided a framework for dissemination of results in the realm of printed media, suggesting that there should not be a single article but different pieces tailored to different audiences which in turn, determine the goals of action research: to advance knowledge, to improve a concrete situation and to improve the practice of action research. The paper will relate these insights with TRANSIT and provide suggestions in order to guarantee the effect of the production/transfer process through dissemination.

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