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Chapter 2

Between research and community development: Negotiating a contested space for collaboration and creativity

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Abstract [for the e-book only and for indexing]

This chapter discusses the relationship between co-produced research and community development. In particular, it addresses longstanding debates about whether certain forms of co-produced research (especially participatory action research), are, in fact, indistinguishable from community development. This question is explored with reference to *Imagine North East*, a co-produced research project based in North East England, which was part of a larger programme of research on civic participation (*Imagine – connecting communities through research)*. The chapter offers a critical analysis of three elements of *Imagine North East*: an academic-led study of community development from the 1970s to the present; starting with the national Community Development Projects in Benwell and North Shields; a series of community development projects undertaken by local community-based organisations; and the challenges and outcomes of a joint process of reflection and co-inquiry. It considers the role of co-produced research in challenging stigma, celebrating place and developing skills and community networks – all recognisable as community development processes and outcomes. It also discusses the difficult process of bringing together a disparate group of people in a co-inquiry group; the time taken to develop identities as practitioner-researchers; and the skills required to engage in a kind of 'collaborative reflexivity' whereby members of the group critically reflected together on the group's role and dynamics.

Key words: co-produced research, co-inquiry, community development, Community Development Projects (CDPs), North East England, territorial stigmatisation

Introduction

This chapter explores the interface between co-produced research and community development, drawing on work undertaken in North East England as part of the *Imagine* project. Discussion of the process and outcomes of *Imagine North East* provides fruitful material for contributing to perennial debates about whether certain forms of co-produced research (especially participatory action research), are, in fact, indistinguishable from community development. In this chapter we offer a brief

overview of the work of *Imagine North East,* before outlining the debates about the relationship between co-production and community development. We then examine three elements of *Imagine North East*: an academic-led study of community development from the 1970s to the present; a series of community development projects undertaken by local community-based organisations; and a joint process of reflection and co-inquiry. We consider the role of co-produced research in challenging stigma, celebrating place and developing skills and community networks, and also the challenges of a co-inquiry approach.

Exploring community development from the outside and inside: the work of *Imagine North East*

Imagine North East was a partnership between 12 community-based organisations on Tyneside (including a local museum) and Durham University, officially running during 2014 and 2015, with dissemination and reflection work continuing in 2016. Community development featured in several ways. Not only did community-based sub-projects use processes of community development (mobilising people to work together) and generate community development outcomes (e.g. strengthened communities, improved facilities) in their work for *Imagine North East*, but also our study had community development as its main focus. We adopted three approaches to the study of community development, as outlined below:

1. ***Studying community development from the outside*** – The starting point of the research was the Community Development Projects of the 1970s in Benwell (Newcastle-upon-Tyne) and North Shields. These were part of Britain's first anti-poverty programme, combining community development work and research with a view to diagnosing and alleviating poverty locally (Banks and Carpenter 2017; Loney 1983). We also looked at community development processes over time (from the 1970s to the present) as these areas were subject to numerous regeneration schemes in which local people were more or less engaged. This research was largely done by academic researchers and then shared in the wider group.

2. ***Doing community development projects and then reflecting on the learning from the inside*** - At the same time, each community partner organisation undertook a project linked to the theme of *Imagine*, exploring aspects of the past, present and future of the areas in which they were based. These projects were designed to fit into the everyday practice of the community organisations involved, engaging existing and new 'service users' and/or residents. Hence they were, in effect, community development projects, involving local people in undertaking oral history, film-making and other creative projects. In many cases, the activities undertaken were not necessarily regarded by the people participating in them as research projects or as part of a larger research project.

3. ***Co-inquiry: bringing the outside and inside together and creating new knowledge*** – The drawing together of all elements of *Imagine North East* happened in quarterly meetings of academic and community partners, and also in the preparation for and participation in local exhibitions and workshops and national *Imagine* events. The meetings were originally designed as 'co-inquiry' groups (Heron, 1996), with the aim of sharing experiences and reflecting on learning. In practice, these meetings often had as much of a focus on business items (e.g. reviewing progress with projects, planning exhibitions) as they did on co-inquiry (reflecting together on learning). A smaller Writing and Reflection Group, convened after *Imagine North East* officially ended, effectively functioned as a co-inquiry group and members of that group pulled together and developed material for this chapter.

Debates about co-produced research and community development

Research is often carried out in teams (especially in the natural sciences) and partnerships (e.g. between companies, universities and government agencies). However, the term 'co-produced' tends to be used when the research team, partnership or group involves people who have a direct experience of, or interest in, the research topic (e.g. young people, local residents) working as 'co-researchers' alongside academic or other 'professional' researchers (people who do research for a living). Hence co-produced research, as described in the Chapter 1 of this book, is an umbrella term covering a variety of types of research, entailing diverse groups of people creating knowledge together.

This type of research is often undertaken as a way of bringing to the surface the existing experiential knowledge of people who may otherwise be marginalised or ignored, enabling them to create new knowledge and evidence that can contribute towards positive changes in their communities and in society. Described in this way, co-produced research almost inevitably entails both a process of community development (facilitating shared learning and engendering respect for diversity amongst a group of people with something in common) and community development outcomes (people feeling increased power and agency, development of new services/facilities). This helps explain why some critics question whether co-produced research is actually research at all – because it often looks and feels like community development.

What we are calling 'co-produced research' draws on a long tradition of participatory and action-oriented research, inspired by radical social movements concerned to democratise knowledge production (see, for example, Fals-Borda, 1988; Freire, 1972; Smith, 1999) and counter what has come to be called 'epistemic injustice' (privileging powerful people's knowledge, see Fricker 2007). These approaches to research may be more or less radical in practice, but what unites them is a commitment to an 'extended epistemology' (valuing experiential as well as theoretical knowledge) and a 'participatory worldview' (valuing inter-connectedness)

(Heron, 1996; Heron and Reason, 2000; Reason, 1998). This means that co-produced research as we understand it is essentially a value-based practice, drawing extensively on theoretical and methodological traditions of participatory action research (Kemmis et al, 2014; Kindon et al, 2007; McIntyre, 2007).

The link between participatory action research (PAR) and community development is long-established, and there have been some debates about whether PAR is just a particular approach to community development. As Grant et al. (2008, p. 298) comment: 'Some question whether PAR confuses community development with research'. Indeed, according to Krimerman (2001, p. 63):

> … there appears to be no way for PAR practitioners to distinguish good scientific research carried out according to their precepts from good community or social change organising.

This argument may have some justification, as it is difficult to separate the 'research' element from the community development process and outcomes in a PAR project. PAR is traditionally seen as comprising a recursive (continuous) cyclical process of moving from reflection to research to action to reflection and back again. There is not necessarily a point when it can be said 'this is research' or 'this is community development'. The processes are interwoven. Arguably what distinguishes PAR from community development is the intention of its practitioners. As Wadsworth (1998, p. 7) comments: 'PAR sets out to *explicitly study* something in order to change and improve it' [our emphasis]. Arguably this is how PAR differs from community development on its own:

- *PAR* is an approach to research that uses a community development process and leads to community development outcomes.
- *Community development* is a process of bringing people together in an egalitarian way to create social change. Sometimes it uses research, informally and formally, to provide evidence.

If a co-produced research project is a partnership between a research–focused organisation and a community development-focused organisation, each party may view what they are doing through different lenses. The research-focused organisation may regard their activities as research that takes a community development approach; while the community organisation regards their activities as community development with a research focus (see Banks, 2015). Some aspects of the organisation of *Imagine North East* tended to exacerbate these differences, as there were two substantive strands to the project: a university-led element studying community development practice from the 1970s to the present using fairly traditional methods (interviews, archival and statistical research), and a community organisation-led element that involved doing community development projects and reflecting on them. The third element, a co-inquiry group, was where the co-production was most explicitly built in. However, the creation of a 'co-inquiry space' –

a space for co-production of new knowledge – was challenging to achieve, as the first two elements were happening in parallel, making attempts to interweave them quite difficult.

We will now discuss each element of *Imagine North East* in turn, culminating with a discussion of co-inquiry and how this group of co-authors finally managed to reflect together on our learning and engage in collaborative reflexivity (critical reflection on how we ourselves worked as a group).

1. Studying community development from the outside: creating the context for *Imagine North East*

The starting point of *Imagine North East* was the Community Development Projects (CDPs) that happened in Benwell and North Shields during 1973-78. These areas were selected as two of the 12 sites that comprised the Home Office's experimental National Community Development Project in the 1970s, as they were relatively 'deprived', suffering the effects of de-industrialisation, reducing employment opportunities, poor housing and other services and facilities. In *Imagine North East* our aim was to re-examine the North East CDPs of the 1970s, considering what happened and what the lessons and legacies were, as well as tracing the subsequent history of regeneration and community development in these areas, which still remain relatively 'deprived' today. This part of *Imagine North East* was essentially the context, or backdrop, against which the community-based projects were designed to be conducted and interpreted. Or, from another perspective, the community-based projects were designed to add contemporary texture and grassroots voices to the historical and policy backdrop.

The findings of this part of the *Imagine North East* project are published elsewhere (Armstrong and Banks, 2017; Banks and Carpenter, 2017 ; Green, 2017; Robinson and Townsend, 2016a, 2016b). Here we summarise some of the key points relevant to the theme of this chapter, particularly: the action-research focus of the CDPs and some of the reflections of local residents, current and past activists, community workers and policy makers on past and contemporary community development processes and outcomes. This short section essentially provides the background for the following two sections, as it outlines the context for the study and the bigger picture into which the community projects described in the next section were deigned to fit.

The CDPs were described as 'action-research' projects (Lees,1975), employing community development workers and researchers, with the aim that community development work would generate issues for research, which would then inform community development practice and policy recommendations. The use of the hyphen in 'action-research' was, apparently, fought for by the CDP workers 'to demonstrate the linking of action and research in real time – not post-hoc evaluation

of the action by detached researchers' (Banks and Carpenter, 2017, p. 231). In many CDP teams, the researchers were based physically alongside the community development workers and there was some interchangeability of roles. They worked very closely with groups of local residents, collecting data for local campaigns and actions and producing pamphlets, leaflets and videos on topics such as social and housing conditions, changing employment patterns and property ownership. They also produced very detailed reports based on the collation of social and economic facts and figures, and statistical and political analyses of the global and structural causes of local economic and social problems (see, for example, Benwell Community Project, 1979; Benwell Community Project, 1978; North Tyneside CDP, 1978a, 1978b).These reports informed actions taken on the ground alongside local people, as well as contributing to bigger national campaigns and alliances with other CDPs and social movements of the time (CDP Inter-Project Editorial Team, 1977; CDP Political Economy Collective, 1979).

One of the criticisms of the CDPs was that they focused excessively on politicised research and campaigning at the expense of community development processes on the ground (Thomas, 1983, p. 34). However, the argument of the CDP workers was that unless they understood the broader political and policy context, then they would be colluding with the original Home Office understanding that the solutions to the problems in these areas lay solely in mobilising local people to develop self-help schemes and creating better communication between social services. At the time the analysis produced by the CDPs was new, challenging and unwelcome to many in both central and local government. The CDPs argued that the problems in the CDP areas were not the fault of the people who lived there, but were caused by processes of de-industrialisation and the movement of capital to other parts of the world (National CDP, 1977), one facet of what is now widely described as 'globalisation'.

Following the CDPs, North Shields and the west end of Newcastle were subject to numerous regeneration schemes, including the development of the riverside area in North Shields and demolition of large swathes of houses (especially in the west end of Newcastle) (Robinson and Townsend 2016a, 2016b). These regeneration programmes began to include increasing community consultation, involvement, engagement, participation and control over aspects of the agenda, and many of the community organisations involved in *Imagine* played significant roles in these prcoesses. However, the overwhelming feeling of residents and community development workers interviewed for *Imagine North East* during 2014-15 was that they were still marginal in the face of the juggernaut of major redevelopment schemes, as this interviewee commented:

> I feel like they ask you and then don't take any notice. They go ahead regardless of what you say. (Riverside Women's Group, Benwell, Interview, 2015)

Since the economic recession and impact of austerity measures on government spending, which gained momentum from 2010, large scale regeneration schemes have waned (Wilks-Heeg, 2016). Many local groups are struggling whilst at the same time being encouraged to take over facilities and services formerly run by local authorities. For example, one of the *Imagine North East* community partners, Cedarwood Trust in North Shields, recently took over a much larger building from the local authority, expanding its range of activities to meet growing local needs.

This was the context in which the *Imagine North East* community partner organisations embarked on their own small community development projects*, as* discussed in the next section.

2. Doing community development projects and reflecting on them from the inside

Twelve community-based organisations (four from North Shields, seven from Benwell and the Discovery Museum in Newcastle) participated in *Imagine North East*. Each planned a small project that could be delivered as part of their everyday work. The projects were coordinated and supported by Judith Green through St James' Centre for Heritage and Culture in Benwell. The projects involved workers and volunteers in each organisation engaging with residents and service users to explore aspects of the past, present and future of their neighbourhoods, using a variety of oral history, archival and creative methods. Judith Green also supported the projects to evaluate their work in the light of the *Imagine North East* themes and to reflect on the outcomes achieved and learning gained. The projects are outlined in Tables 1, 2 and 3, grouped under the headings of: 1. Exploring community history and change over time; 2. Using arts-based activities to engage communities; and 3. Providing support and training for participants.

Table 1: Exploring community history and change over time

Organisation and project title	Description of project
Cedarwood Trust, North Shields ***Imagining Community at Cedarwood***	A family and community history project that built confidence and pride amongst participants, producing films, booklets, skills in oral history and further projects
Meadow Well Connected, North Shields ***Bridging the History***	A community-led oral history project designed to create a positive image of the Meadow Well estate, producing a timeline display, handling book, Facebook page and

	a short film of the streets of the Meadow Well
Pendower Good Neighbour Project, Benwell ***Time traveller***	Two inter-generational history projects involving local children: *Illuminating Lives,* a performance and a lantern event in local graveyard; and *Today's News, Yesterday's History,* involving archive research, creating characters, arts-based activities, writing scripts, promenade performance
Search, Benwell ***Growing old in West Newcastle***	Engaging 300 older people in a series of events/trips to explore their lived experiences of change over time
St James' Heritage and Environment Group, Benwell ***Filming change***	Creating a film of the historic graveyard in Benwell. Participants learnt film-making skills and a greater understanding of local history and the wider historical context
Discovery Museum (Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums), Newcastle ***West End stories***	Creating a website called West End Stories, exploring connections between personal experiences and wider historical events. This enabled the Museum to strengthen connections with community organisations

Table 2: Using arts-based activities to engage people

Organisation and project title	Description of project
Phoenix Detached Youth Project, N. Shields ***A Journey through Time***	An inter-generational graffiti art project that produced a graffiti wall, film and inter-generational conversations
St James' Centre for Heritage and Culture, Benwell ***Benwell in Felt***	A felting art project involving 350 people reflecting on the area's past, present and future. They learnt new skills, producing 27 pictures in felt, a book and exhibition
Riverside Community Health Project, Benwell	Creating a prototype mobile interactive toy made from recycled materials through a

Playing with change and ideas	series of activities with local families
West Newcastle Picture History Collection, Newcastle ***Remembering Benwell***	Using historical photos and maps to engage residents through a series of slide and film shows, themed ring-binders, framed photos, exhibition, collecting and sharing new photos
Patchwork Project, Benwell ***Hopes and Fears***	A film-making project with young people, producing a film called 'Hopes and Fears' with about 50 young people involved in filming and 12 in editing from different ethnic backgrounds

Table 3: Providing support and training for participants

Organisation and project title	Description of project
Remembering the Past, Resourcing the Future (RPRF), N. Shields ***Training and support in oral history skills***	Providing support to North Shields projects through oral history and reminiscence training; acting as a 'buddy' during the process; support for exhibitions
St James' Centre for Heritage and Culture, Benwell ***Coordination of all community projects***	Providing support and coordination of all community projects, producing final evaluation reports and co-ordinating exhibitions

Drawing on the evaluations of each project (which involved interviews with some participants), case studies prepared for the Writing and Reflection Group (WRG) and discussions in the WRG, two broad themes emerged about the processes and outcomes of the projects. Firstly, significant learning took place during and after the projects for the organisations, workers and service users/participants involved, through the development of new skills, networks and ideas. Second, a key theme stressed during the WRG was the importance of challenging the stigma attached to the places and people in Benwell and North Shields. We will now examine each of these themes in turn.

Learning, developing and connecting

Based on interviews conducted by the community coordinator (Judith Green) with the lead person from each community organisation, and reflections and comments during events and the Writing and Reflection Group, the development of new knowledge, understandings, skills and community capacity was significant, and was identified as follows:

- *Creating material knowledge* – many of the projects created artistic 'products' (such as felt pictures, films, graffiti art, booklets or photo-displays), which could be regarded as 'material knowledge' in their own right (Carter, 2004). For example, Image 1 is a photograph of a picture in felt created by the children at Hadrian School, showing a play bus going down to the river, which is 'one of the things they would like to see happen in their area in the future' (St James' Heritage and Environment Group, 2015, p. 39). Thus knowledge of the children's hopes is embodied in the picture. The graffiti art project organized by Phoenix Detached Youth Project in North Shields resulted in a very strong and striking visual statement, as shown in Image 2.

Image 1: Benwell in Felt, The wheels on the bus, by Hadrian School

Image 2: Graffiti art, Phoenix Detached Youth Project, North Shields

- *Developing creative and practical skills*: Across the projects, participants consolidated existing skills and learned new ones in interviewing, archiving, film making, arts and crafts, internet use and writing scripts. For example, one of the projects led by Pendower Good Neighbour Project, *Illuminating Lives,* explored notable people buried in St James' Graveyard, Benwell. The children each chose a grave from the graveyard guide and imagined what the life of the person buried there would have been like. They conducted library research and participated in an historical tour around Grainger Town in Newcastle. They decided to present their findings at a lantern event in the graveyard:

  > The children then agreed what kind of light or lantern would be best for each grave and then made them. We made lanterns from willow and tissue paper, lampshades, recycled cartons and lit the carriage drive with flaming cans. It all looked very spectacular. The children then led small groups around the installations and read a script about each grave. (Ruth Taylor, case study, WRG, 2016)

- *Building and extending relationships (especially intergenerational) through group work*: Some projects involved people working in groups with people they did not know. Several projects also had intergenerational components. For example, the Phoenix project partnered well-known graffiti artists with young people and involved a 'sharing of ideas and a crossing of cultures' (Luke Johnston, evaluation interview, 2014).

- *Developing understandings of the past and reclaiming community identity*: Examining the past was an opportunity for the different community groups to reconnect with the history of their neighbourhoods and claim that 'they mattered and still do'. Yvonne Hall (Cedarwood Trust) commented about their history project in North Shields:

  > This project was an opportunity to honour the area they [residents] and their families had lived in, died in, had heartache and celebration in through listening, discussing, researching, learning, collating and producing, all collaboratively.

- *Creating impacts and legacies*: These projects benefited individuals, organisations and communities in numerous ways and were often part of an ongoing process of community development. Here is one example, from the Riverside Project in Benwell:

  > We have decided to evaluate our women's work using a similar method to the *Imagine* work we undertook. An artist is working with the group to help them

to reflect on their experiences at Riverside. Each woman is making a short book. (Anne Bonner, WRG Case Study, 2016)

Challenging stigma and celebrating place

A significant theme emerging strongly during the WRG was 'stigmatised neighbourhoods', including how residents can change the reputations of places where they live. We noted commonalities between Benwell and North Shields in the 1970s and how this continued into the present. For example, CDP areas were chosen because they were classified as 'deprived' in the late 1960s (Corkey, 1975). Both Benwell and North Shields experienced riots in the early 1990s (Campbell, 1993), contributing further to what Wacquant (2007) describes as 'territorial stigmatisation'. They have been subject to numerous regeneration initiatives (Armstrong, 2010; Robinson and Townsend, 2016a, 2016b). More recently, although housing and environmental conditions have improved, both areas are still relatively deprived within their local authorities, as illustrated by the Census statistics prepared for *Imagine North East* showing change between 1971 and 2011 (see www.durham.ac.uk/socialjustice/imagine).

Patrick Harman, visiting from the USA and working with the Writing and Reflection Group during early 2016 commented that the discussions about stigma resonated very strongly with his work in High Point, North Carolina: 'The baggage of an area is like a weight. It is hard to overcome a neighbourhood's reputation even when things have changed'. One of the challenges facing 'notorious areas' is that print media (particularly local newspapers) publish sensationalist stories, reinforcing negative images and contributing to poor reputations and stigmatisation (Kearns et al, 2013). An example occurred in North Shields when a local newspaper ran a story about the Meadow Well riots because it was the 25th anniversary[1]. It is unsurprising, therefore, that challenging stigma and celebrating place was both an explicit and implicit theme of a number of *Imagine North East* projects. One example is Bridging the History, facilitated by Meadow Well Connected, a community organisation on the Meadow Well estate in North Shields. A negative media portrayal, in this case a television programme, instigated local action, with social media playing a role in bringing the community together. A case study of this project is given below, drawn from the final evaluation report on the project and interviews with participants, community workers and visitors to an exhibition.

[1] www.chroniclelive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/meadow-well-riots-25-years-11848759 [accessed May 2016]

Case study 1: Bridging the History – challenging stigma on the Meadow Well estate

The Bridging the History project came about after a BBC TV programme called *Living with Poverty: the Queen of North Shields* in 2013[2]. The 'Queen of North Shields' was a refugee from Africa, living with her husband on the Meadow Well estate. According to the Chief Executive of Meadow Well Connected, many residents were unhappy about the programme because 'it made lots of stereotypical accusations about people's lives on Meadow Well' (Interview, Timeline Launch, May 2014). According to a member of the Bridging the History group, the programme reinforced stereotypes such as:

> … everyone's out of work, no-one wants to work, everybody lives on the borderline… It was awful the way it was portrayed.

A few people who felt the same got together and made a post on Facebook asking if people wanted to meet, discuss the TV programme and decide what they could do to challenge perceptions. They were aware that if anyone did an internet search for Meadow Well or The Ridges (the former name of the estate):

> The first thing that comes up is the riots. The first and foremost. And it's wrong. Because there is other stuff, and there's good stuff. (Member of Bridging the History, Interview, Timeline Launch, May 2014)

To counter the stigma they embarked on their project to reclaim the history of the estate by creating an illustrated timeline of events and developments they thought were significant. Starting in January 2014, a small group of people, facilitated by Philippa Southall (a worker at Meadow Well Connected) met weekly at The Meadows community centre in North Shields. It was the first *Imagine NE* project to finish and the timeline was launched in May 2014. Several visitors at the launch commented how important it was to challenge negative perceptions and celebrate place:

> I think it's a going forward thing, and it's moving away from the riots, and having a more positive spin on the place. It has a better history than that. (Interview, Timeline launch, May 2014)

The event was opened by Norma Redfearn, elected mayor of North Tyneside who commented:

[2] www.open.edu/openlearn/whats-on/tv/ou-on-the-bbc-living-poverty [accessed May 2016].

> I really think this is a wonderful project, because what it does is give everyone in this particular community a purpose, because they all want to tell a story about what happened to them, their families, and keeping them together. They've got so much to celebrate really, because they've had a lot of issues to deal with in this community, but the strength of the community has kept them going (Interview, Timeline launch, May 2014).

As this case study shows, the Meadow Well estate suffers from a persisting poor reputation, not just locally, but also nationally and internationally. The sociologist, Waquant (2007, p. 68) even mentions Meadow Well by name, alongside the Bronx (New York) and Cabrini Green (Chicago) as experiencing 'territorial stigmatization linked to zones reserved for the urban outcasts'. He describes these areas of 'advanced marginality' as:

> increasingly perceived by both outsiders and insiders as social purgatories, leprous Badlands at the heart of the postindustrial metropolis where only the refuse of society would accept to dwell. (Waquant, 2007, p. 67)

It is precisely this kind of unfounded reputation that the Meadow Well residents were keen to dispel. It is not clear whether Waquant ever visited Meadow Well (he mistakenly locates it in Newcastle), but he makes the point that:

> Whether or not these areas are in fact dilapidated and dangerous, and their population composed essentially of poor people, minorities and foreigners, matters little in the end: the prejudicial belief that they are suffices to set off socially noxious consequences. (Waquant, 2007, p. 68)

Benwell in the west end of Newcastle has similar reputational problems, although not named in Waquant's international roll call of 'neighbourhoods of relegation'. The second case study is of the Benwell in Felt project, the starting point of which was the celebration of place, which also served as a counter-story to an out-dated negative reputation linked with riots, poor housing and environment.

Case study 2: Benwell in Felt – celebrating place

Benwell in Felt was coordinated by St James' Centre for Heritage and Culture Partnership (a voluntary group based in Benwell). Designed as an intergenerational cross-community initiative, it brought together groups of

people of different ages, abilities, ethnic backgrounds and neighbourhoods to create an exhibition of felt pictures, depicting what people thought was significant and valuable about their area. The craft of felting was chosen as it is easy with the right materials and training, can be accomplished by a group working together and produces attractive and colourful finished products, even if people have limited experience, skills and abilities.

An estimated 350 people participated from 19 different local groups and organisations, producing 27 felt pictures. The completed pictures were launched in September 2014 at St James' Church at the opening of the Benwell and Scotswood Community Arts Festival. The exhibition was met with such enthusiasm that the group was invited to exhibit it at Newcastle's main library in the city centre, where it was officially opened at an event attended by the local MP, councillors and other interested people as well as some of those who had participated in the felting. The exhibition was on show during April 2015, thus reaching a larger audience.

The pictures are now permanently displayed in the Carnegie Centre (the former Benwell Library building adjacent to St James' Church, which has been developed by the Riverside Project as a community facility). This secured the long-term future for the pictures in a location where they can be seen by residents and may stimulate future discussions about the changing area. A book was created called *Never felt so good* (St James Heritage and Environment Group, 2015), featuring photographs of each felting picture accompanied by descriptions of what they depict and relevant photographs of the area showing the process of change. These pictures were described as helping to:

> … put the area on the map as a place of interest for reasons of culture and heritage rather than for its history of poverty, disadvantage and social unrest ...
>
> The individual images produced have shown in very different ways how much people value aspects of their physical environment and their community. In light of the dramatic changes experienced in the past decade, which have left large areas of former residential land as empty patches of mud, and the failed promises of large scale regeneration, we had expected some of the felting pictures to show negative images. This did not happen. Instead there was a clear emphasis on the positive. Nevertheless, there was a distinct sense of loss embodied in several of the pictures representing valued places and organisations that had disappeared or declined. (St James Heritage and Environment Group, Final Report, 2015)

Image 3: Benwell in Felt, Working with young people, by Patchwork Youth Project

These two case studies illustrate the important role of local community organisations in bringing together different groups of residents to take action together, not just to preserve and develop community facilities and support networks, but also to develop the social and cultural capital of an area through changing perceptions and attitudes and developing pride and a sense of belonging. Taking the long view through exploring the histories of places, and their location in bigger political and economic changes, helps understand and appreciate the present and look forward to the future. We will now look in a little more detail at how the learning from each of the separate community-based projects was drawn together.

3. Co-inquiry: Bringing the outside and inside together, creating connections and new knowledge

In order to hold the project together, make sense of complexity and co-produce new knowledge and learning, the original conception of *Imagine North East*, as outlined in the research bid, had at its heart a Co-inquiry Action Research (CAR) group that would meet quarterly. This collaborative approach to research had been developed and used successfully by the academic partners in previous projects (Banks et al 2014), drawing on a co-inquiry model. Co-inquiry entails bringing people together in a facilitated group to study a topic of interest to them, drawing particularly on their

own experiential knowledge. There are many examples of co-inquiry groups that comprise peers (people at the same level or with similar experience) in workplaces and community organisations, and some that include people from diverse backgrounds with different statuses and access to power, such as academics, students, residents, community workers (see Reason and Rowan, 1981).

Whole group meetings: the challenges of creating connections

The collaborators in *Imagine North East* included academics, voluntary and paid workers from community organisations and a museum. Each participant/organisation brought their own experiences of research collaborations, varying from no experience of research to being heavily involved, with some describing past negative experiences. There was resistance to the idea of 'co-inquiry' meetings by some members of community organisations on two counts. First, the prospect of quarterly meetings was questioned, as people were busy and wanted to contain the amount of time spent on the *Imagine* project. Second, both the terminology and concept of 'co-inquiry' were questioned by the community coordinator and some community partners, who wanted to know what they had to do to complete their projects, rather than spending time getting to know each other and undertaking group exercises. As a result, attendance at quarterly gatherings of representatives of the community organisations and key academics was made voluntary and they were simply called 'meetings', with agenda items for report and discussion and some spaces created for sharing and reflecting. Even this was too much for some members of community organisations, who felt the meetings were too long and unfocussed. The academics, on the other hand, were concerned to create sufficient space for sharing and creating knowledge together, on which the project was premised. For each person, experience of the group was different – some were (or became) more positive about its value than others. As Kath Smith commented, when reflecting later in the Writing and Reflection Group: 'The meeting schedule was heavy, but over the period there was a process of unconscious learning and development'.

The Writing and Reflection Group (WRG): connecting and creating new knowledge

The WRG, which was set up after the project officially ended, ran more smoothly and functioned, in effect, as a co-inquiry group. It comprised academics and representatives of community organisations who volunteered to participate. By this time we knew each other quite well, had built up mutual trust and were better able to process the learning from the project.

The WRG met three times to review learning from *Imagine North East* and develop material for this chapter. Six community partners volunteered with three academics during February – April 2016. Working in pairs or small groups then feeding back to

the whole group, the aim was to facilitate critical reflection, share ideas and identify key themes for the chapter. Each person wrote a case study from their perspective, reflecting on the process, successes and challenges encountered. We also drew on the numerous interviews, reports and statistical analyses already conducted as part of *Imagine North East*. At the final meeting a skeleton draft chapter was agreed. This was developed further by Sarah Banks and Andrea Armstrong, shared with all co-authors of the chapter and editors of this book, substantially revised and then sent to all project partners in *Imagine North East* for additional comments. We were not able to incorporate all comments in the final version, due both to space constraints and a desire not to overwhelm readers with too much complexity.

In this chapter, therefore, we consider just two key themes generated by WRG members in their reflections on *Imagine North East*. The first is how working together enabled people gradually to see more of the bigger picture of which they were a part – historically, regionally and internationally. This could be described as one of the outcomes of the project. The second theme relates to the process of working together and making connections: how this changed over time, what we learned from studying the process and how we engaged in a kind of 'collaborative reflexivity' (Banks et al 2014, p. 45; Finlay 2002, p. 220) as we reflected on the workings of our own group.

'Seeing the bigger picture': connecting through reflecting, remembering, re-thinking and re-imagining

Reflections generated as part of the WRG revealed that participation in *Imagine North East* led to being able to 'see the bigger picture' through making connections in several ways:

1. Beyond the everyday and local – through regional, national and international networks;
2. Beyond the 'here' and 'now' - through exploring history and imagining the future;
3. Beyond talking and writing - through visual and audio materials and exhibitions.

We will briefly elaborate on each of these points.

1. Beyond the everyday and local: Connecting through wider networks

For some partners, being part of *Imagine North East* provided time, space and encouragement for reflection on the wider context in which they operated – offering a critical distance from everyday work:

> This project encouraged us to *reflect*. We never have any time these days for reflection. (Ruth Taylor, WRG, 2016)

> It gave us *the breathing space to reflect* on the role of youth projects in developing graffiti art, and re-address the riots and developments since the 1980s and what has or hasn't changed. (Luke Johnston, WRG, 2016)

This reflective space for engaging with others from different organisations and with different experiences – reminiscent of what Torre, Fine et al (2008) talk about as 'contact zones' - enabled the work of re-thinking priorities, raising consciousness about the bigger picture and making connections beyond the everyday and local:

> This project was useful in *re-focusing us on wider and longer-term issues* rather than focusing just on how to tackle presenting immediate issues. (Anne Bonner, case study for WRG, 2016)

> Looking at the *bigger picture* of the Meadow Well estate and how people moved there, it shows there is a huge diversity of backgrounds on the Ridges (as it was called). (Yvonne Hall, WRG, 2016)

The benefits of engaging with people working in different parts of the *Imagine* project, including collaborators from the USA, Crete and Germany, was also enormously valuable in placing the problems and issues of North East England in a global context.

2. *Beyond the 'here' and 'now': Connecting through history*

A focus on history helped situate people and places throughout time and in the future, stimulating a process of remembering and re-imagining:

> It was useful to understand the history of the area better and also the subculture as this helped us to better understand why the attitudes that are around now may have been formed. It also allowed us to look at what the issues were in the 1980s and what has or hasn't been done to address them. (Luke Johnston, case study for WRG, 2016)

> By imagining the past this made us think about what our community is like now which in turn may help us to imagine the future. (Ruth Taylor, case study for WRG, 2016)

3. *Beyond 'talking' and 'writing': Connecting through materials and exhibitions*

The locally produced materials from the *Imagine North East* projects also mobilised connections and generated wider interest outside the area, especially those of a heritage and arts-based nature, demonstrated by the various exhibitions held in Newcastle and North Shields (Armstrong et al, 2016a, 2016b) and the collection of digital West End stories at the Discovery Museum in Newcastle. Some pieces were displayed outside the region, including one of the Benwell in Felt pictures by The Co-

op Guild (a long-standing local group linked with the cooperative movement), which was displayed at a national Co-op conference. These materials communicated with people at an emotional level, generating responses and memories (e.g. West Newcastle Picture History Collection's framed photographs and an exhibition of maps of Benwell through the ages).

There is no doubt that for many people 'seeing the bigger picture' was very important in terms of developing a greater understanding of other organisations, becoming less insular, widening horizons, and making connections. Indeed, involvement in *Imagine North East* was seen as a valuable, if not unique, networking opportunity, laying the basis for possible joint work, new ideas and other benefits in the future:

> It's about investing. So, if you decide to do a project, like something similar to the timeline at Meadow Well, you might be able to go and have a look at their things and know the people that are there, and – you know – get some ideas. That's all. Nothing complex or completely solid. It's just about knowing different organisations. (Clare Levi, Interview for Search final report, 2015)

It takes time to connect

We have already mentioned the difficulties of the whole project quarterly gatherings. These in themselves constituted a process of community development, as a diverse group of people came together to work on a shared project. While those people working in the same area already knew each other, Benwell and North Shields are 12 miles apart and participants from the two areas were not familiar with each other. Like all groups, it went through various stages of development (Doel, 2006; Heron, 1999, pp. 51-68), with some similarities to the 'community of practice' described in Chapter 4 on research retreats. Andrea Armstrong, Durham University Research Associate, felt that the co-inquiry aspect of the project was the most challenging:

> Calling them [whole project gatherings] 'meetings' meant they became just that – with Durham University chairing each of the eight meetings held over two years. We anticipated that community partners would lead meetings too. We did not want the 'University' to be seen as the sole 'experts' and decisions and control of the research process were meant to be shared. (Andrea Armstrong, case study for WRG, 2016)

Sarah Banks (Durham University, coordinator of *Imagine North East*) reported being greatly exercised about how best to facilitate the meetings, reflecting in the WRG (2016) that she 'struggled to maintain everyone's interest and hold the group together'. For the last meeting of the WRG she prepared Table 4, illustrating the phases of the group as she saw them.

Table 4: The *Imagine North East* journey

Time period	Theme identified	Description
1. Early phase Spring/Summer 2014	Confusion and separateness	***Confusion*** – 'what is this about, what is required?' Each organisation was separately doing their own projects to meet 'outcomes', wondering how much time to give to *Imagine North East* meetings when busy with everyday work.
2. Middle Phase Autumn 2014 to Autumn 2015	Some dissatisfaction and some celebration of success	***Mixed feelings*** - some people felt meetings were too long and unfocussed: 'is this really relevant to us?' Some celebration of successes and outputs (e.g. Benwell in Felt, Phoenix graffiti art, Meadow Well timeline) and making displays for conferences and exhibitions that focussed on each project's achievements in the context of all projects and *Imagine North East* .
3. Last phase Winter 2015 to Spring 2016, extending to Autumn 2016	Deeper dialogue and understanding	***Gelling as a group*** - digging deeper, more dialogue with each other. Preparing for Benwell and N. Shields exhibitions and workshops. Smaller and more focused Writing and Reflection Group and preparation for *Imagine* national exhibition, Sheffield.

One of the main messages from the discussions in the WRG was that it takes time to build a community-university partnership. The complexities of the project and different agendas of different individuals and organisations meant it took longer and was more challenging than expected. Some of the challenges and lessons we identified for building a co-inquiry group over time are shown in Table 5, which are relevant to all co-produced research. Although listed separately, there is overlap between them.

Table 5: Challenges and lessons for building a co-inquiry group over time

Challenge	Lesson Learned
A variety of understandings and experiences of research in general and confusion about structures and aims of the specific research project	A shared aim, purpose and vision takes time to develop and cannot be assumed at the start of a project. The focus of the WRG was much clearer as it had a defined purpose
A lack of enthusiasm for attending co-inquiry meetings	Reaching an agreement on all aspects of involvement (including meetings) at the start of the project is vital to ensure a commitment to a shared vision. The WRG was well-attended
Feelings of mistrust towards universities and research projects	Time is needed for people to get to know each other and their organisations, and to develop trusting relationships, where concerns can be expressed and disagreements openly acknowledged
Working with commonalities and differences	It is important to listen to each other and appreciate differences. Not everyone was comfortable with small group work, experiential exercises and reflecting collaboratively in the *Imagine North East* group. Group work can be introduced gradually and its purpose needs to be explained.
Variable skills in collaborative and reflexive working	For some people, collaborative working and reflecting on learning comes naturally, and for others it does not. These skills can be developed slowly through practice. They were very evident in the WRG.
The complexity of facilitation – maintaining everyone's interest and holding the group together	The role of a group facilitator is complex, and is not the same as chairing a meeting. It involves planning ways to engage people, drawing out experiences and creating spaces for dialogue. While the whole group

	meetings tended to be chaired, interspersed with small facilitated exercises, the WRG was carefully facilitated both by the Durham University Coordinator and by members of the group themselves, who started to take on roles of responsibility for ensuring its smooth running.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have attempted to draw together some of the learning from a complex co-produced research project, *Imagine North East*. The project had a substantive focus on community development as a topic of study; entailed elements of doing community development in local neighbourhoods; and involved reflecting on the learning through co-inquiry (which was itself a community development process). Most co-produced projects do not have such an intense focus on community development. However, in much co-produced research the co-researchers are from community-based organisations and collaborative projects tend to involve some kind of project group, research team or community of practice, which develops over time. So community development processes and outcomes might be expected, even if they are not consciously designed into a research project or identified and examined by the partners.

In the case of *Imagine North East*, the explicit community development focus and relevant experience of the community partners and academics meant we were readily able to identify what we were doing as community development. Indeed, the focus was so much on community development, especially in the community-based projects, that at times the research element was relegated to the background and more than once representatives of community organisations asked: 'how is what we are doing research?' One answer relates to the intentionality of the people asking the question: whether they conceive of themselves as practitioner-researchers (with a hyphen) and think they are creating new knowledge and reflecting on the practice of community development. Identities develop and change over time and to see community development activities also as research, and ourselves as practitioner-researchers emerges in the context of a group of co-researchers/practitioners undergoing a journey of discovery together, and coming to see their work as 'community development-research'.

Some of the lessons learned from our experience with *Imagine North East* include:

- The value of taking an historical lens to understand the present and imagine the future, especially in post-industrial neighbourhoods affected by territorial stigmatisation.
- When working with diverse groups and organisations with different priorities and understandings, it takes time and commitment to create together a shared learning space that facilitates co-existence, cross-fertilisation and eventually collective action.

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