



Eisenstadt, N., & Mclellan, J. (2020). Foregrounding co-production: building research relationships in university-community collaborative research. *Research for All*, 4(2), 242-256.
<https://doi.org/10.14324/RFA.04.2.08>

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**RESEARCH FOR ALL**

The open-access journal for public engagement with research

ISSN 2399-8121 (Online)

Journal homepage:

<https://www.uclpress.co.uk/pages/research-for-all>

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How to cite this article

Eisenstadt, N. and McLellan, J. (2020) 'Foregrounding co-production: Building research relationships in university–community collaborative research'. *Research for All*, 4 (2), 242–56. Online. <https://doi.org/10.14324/RFA.04.2.08>

Submission date: 27 June 2019

Accepted date: 12 May 2020

Publication date: 22 September 2020

Peer review

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-blind peer review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymized during review.

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Foregrounding co-production: Building research relationships in university–community collaborative research

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Abstract

Emerging scholarship on university–community co-production rightly emphasizes the importance of preparatory work to build research partnerships. Such preparation creates the necessary common ground on which to build a meaningful collaborative relationship. Drawing on our experiences on a large university–community co-production experiment in historical mapping, we argue that this work is particularly important in partnerships where relationships are characterized by difference. If academics wish to work with individuals and groups beyond the bounds of those with whom they already agree, 'foregrounding' co-production is a critical component. We identify three dimensions of foregrounding co-production: practical, epistemological and affective. Each become increasingly important in cases where communities lack trust in, or actively mistrust, the university. Understanding and navigating difference, historical harm and power asymmetries can be time-intensive, and it may require a reorientation of the relationship between process and output in collaborative projects such that initially intended aims are not met. In order to encourage co-production across difference, we conclude that foregrounding should be valued as an end or 'output' in and of itself.

Keywords: co-production, university–community research, foregrounding, difference

Key messages

- Meaningful collaborative relationships require extensive preparatory work. We call this work 'foregrounding'.
- Foregrounding is particularly important in partnerships where relationships are characterized by difference and/or where communities lack trust in, or actively mistrust, the university.
- Taking foregrounding seriously means being prepared to redesign projects, or even walk away from them. These outcomes, and the work that results in them, should be valued as an output of the collaborative process.

Introduction: The 'participatory turn'

Over the last decade, participation, collaboration and co-production have gained increasing traction as valued components of academic research, especially in the social sciences, and (to a lesser extent) in the arts and humanities. This 'participatory turn' has its roots in emancipatory research practices/methods that have long sought to

destabilize hierarchies of power/knowledge, as well as in those that favour participation on more pragmatic grounds – that it produces ‘better’ or ‘more accurate’ knowledge of a particular ‘problem’, into which participants or ‘communities’ have a privileged or ‘authentic’ insight. The impact agenda, while undoubtedly problematic in its emphasis on the measurable, has contributed to the increased salience of participatory work, as academics have increasingly used participatory and co-productive methods as a route to producing ‘impact’ (Pain *et al.*, 2011).

With the growing emphasis on community co-production, researchers have embarked on a range of innovative, experiential and participatory projects deploying novel forms of analysis and knowledge production, including performance (Pratt and Johnston, 2013) forum theatre (Cross and Brookes, 2015) and community mapping (Amsden and VanWynsberghe, 2005; Perkins, 2007), and have created an array of non-traditional outputs, from crowdsourced digital archives to a plethora of community toolkits (see, for example, Valley, 2018; New Economics Foundation, n.d.; Nesta, 2012). Work oriented to the social justice goals of participatory action research (see Kindon *et al.*, 2007, among others), even if not explicitly referenced as such, has tended to dominate this emerging terrain. Thus, numerous projects have sought to provide tools for individuals and groups to give voice to their experiences of oppression and to move from ‘knowledge transfer’ to ‘knowledge exchange’ and collaborative knowledge making. Johnston and Marwood’s (2017) ‘action heritage’, for example, blends ‘heritage’ and action research, arguing that it has the potential to challenge social inequalities. Meanwhile, Bell and Pahl (2018) argue for the ‘utopian’ possibilities of co-productive methodologies and the ways in which they might challenge (and/or be co-opted into) neo-liberal agendas. Others stress the value of these approaches for a more nuanced, dynamic *understanding* of ‘community’, for example Campbell *et al.* (2018) on Rotherham, and Studdart and Walkerdine (2016) on the divided social landscape of a Welsh market town.

Yet parallel to, and informing these novel approaches, the very terms of the debate through which they emerge have undergone profound critique. Over the last two decades, scholars have articulated rigorous criticism of the concepts and practices of ‘community’ (Joseph, 2002; Banerji, 2000), ‘empowerment’ (Murray Li, 2007) and ‘participation’. The ‘empowerment’ of communities, as a process through which unpaid ‘active citizen-subjects’ take responsibility for social provision, has been analysed as a central technique of neo-liberal rule (Hall and Reed, 1998; Herbert-Cheshire, 2000; Ilcan and Basok, 2004; Marinetto, 2003). Meanwhile, and especially in ‘development’ contexts, discourses of community engagement have been criticized as offering participation without substantive decision making or, worse, for cultivating consent for decisions that were not, nor ever could have been, to the benefit of the communities they claimed to help (Cooke and Kothari, 2001).

Much more recently, Facer and Enright’s (2016) extensive survey of the Economic and Social Research Council/Arts and Humanities Research Council Connected Communities research programme identifies the risk that such research may intensify existing inequalities and the barriers faced by economically excluded and minority groups. In a subsequent piece of research, the *Common Cause* report, Bryan *et al.* (2018: 11) examined the particular challenges faced by collaborations between universities and Black and Minority Ethnic communities, concluding that such collaborations face ‘profound structural obstacles’. As Bryan *et al.* (2018) suggest, how we deal with difference and inequality is a key challenge in collaborative research. In part, it is difference that makes such projects exciting and worthwhile. Not only does each partner bring their own ‘distinctive knowledge and experience’ (*ibid.*: 105),

but together these qualities can become more than the sum of their parts. Yet, within any collaboration across difference, there is not only the excitement of connection, but also the material possibility for harm. This is particularly the case when asymmetries of power are present, where one partner may be better able to absorb the costs of failure or, conversely, disproportionately benefit from the project's success.

In this paper, we argue that the greater the differences between partners – in background, life experience, professional priorities and epistemological positions (that is, in their approach to, and understanding of, what knowledge is and how it is and *should* be made) – the more difficult it can be to develop a meaningful working relationship. This can contribute to risk aversion in developing new research relationships. As Facer and Enright (2016: 37–8) point out, the Connected Communities Programme built on an existing landscape of collaborative relationships between communities and universities. Crucially, '41% of the university partners and 26% of the community partners responding to [a] survey [about the Connected Communities Programme] had already worked with their collaborators before receiving Connected Communities funding' (ibid.: 38). Of course, there are significant advantages to developing projects with existing community partners. It is important for researchers to sustain existing relationships, and to respond to the fear that community partners will be 'dropped' when funding cycles end. What is more, it is often towards the end of one project that a common and genuinely co-produced research agenda for the next piece of work begins to emerge. Nevertheless, there can also be a tendency within universities to stick with what (or who) they know, whether out of benevolence or neglect. When funding frameworks valorize the most measurable of outputs, new research relationships are risky – if projects fail to get off the ground, do not develop in ways that are meaningful, and/or fail to deliver on anticipated and/or measurable outcomes, future funding may be less forthcoming. Yet sticking with organizations and groups they know, and feel 'safe' working with, universities risk developing a select group of partners at the expense of others – intensifying existing inequalities in the sector in which they are working. Moreover, they may miss the valuable opportunities for new ways of thinking that working across differences of epistemology, approach and background can bring. How, then, can academics work across difference, and do so in ways that transform – or, at the very least, do not intensify or exploit – existing inequalities?

In the *Common Cause* report, Bryan *et al.* (2018: 13) point out that all successful projects build on the 'identification of mutual interests and the creation of common ground'. In order to do this, potential partners need to be 'willing to come together, understand and engage with each other's distinctive knowledge and experience, and explore opportunities and barriers to mutually beneficial outcomes' (ibid.: 16). Elsewhere, Facer and Enright (2016: 63–4) make the case for this process of preparation as a key moment in the project, describing it as:

a moment of profound reflection for all participants in which fundamental questions are addressed: who 'counts' as community, and how and through whom can such communities be represented in research? What is this thing we call research that can translate lived reality into credible arguments? What do we mean by knowledge and who gets to decide this? What processes – experiment, design, interview, archival analysis, ethnography, social action – really help us to understand and contribute to improving the realities of communities? These reflections can lead some project teams to return to familiar and well tested methods and processes.

For others, they trigger transformative moments in which the complexities of these questions are addressed head on, and new methods and ways of working emerge.

In this paper, we centre specifically on this process of preparing for co-production. We call this process *foregrounding*. The term 'foregrounding' appears first in the English language as a rendering of Czech literary theorist Jan Mukařovský's term *aktualisace*, referring to a range of stylistic components that bring a story or idea into focus or centrality. Foregrounding, Mukařovský (1964) argued, disrupts the automaticity of an act. As an ethnographer might, it renders the familiar (or 'automatic') strange (Miner, 1956), and therefore available to conscious reflection. Yet foregrounding in this literary sense advanced by Mukařovský is also about cultivating attention to the felt or affective in language (Miall and Kuiken, 1994). In bringing feeling to the foreground, the rational or ends-oriented component of communication is rendered secondary – or placed in the background. Building on these origins, we use 'foregrounding' to refer to what is placed in front (temporally), in 'centre-stage', or emphasized for co-production, but also to refer to this reorientation of ends-oriented acts, and those acts that strive, or perhaps simply work, to create affective or felt ties and reverberations between subjects. The call for foregrounding of co-production is both practical – centring ethics by making the otherwise automatic visible and subject to reflection – and ephemeral – emphasizing, indeed seeking to valorize, the felt and non-output-oriented dimensions of collaboration.

In delineating this foregrounding, we build on a rich literature on research relationships between academics and their collaborators (Friedman Ross *et al.*, 2010; Hart, 2016). Some of the scholarship in this area focuses on the different ways that relationships can develop over the course of a project, from friendship (Owton and Allen-Collinson, 2014) to failure and those that never got off the ground (Dolson, 2013). We have much to learn from these practice-based accounts. The particular contribution of this paper is to focus on the *beginnings* of research relationships and the preparatory work that is necessary to find out whether they are viable or not.

Foregrounding, we argue, is primarily concerned with cultivating shared understanding across three distinct terrains of knowledge or experience: (1) the practical, pertaining to what the project is for and how it will progress; (2) the epistemological, pertaining to shared understanding about how knowledge is and should be produced; and (3) the affective, pertaining to the felt ties between, or aversion to, collaborators, including the degree to which historical trauma or oppression is addressed through the collaboration process. Foregrounding involves developing trust and 'rapport' (O'Reilly, 2009: 175–81) with collaborators through practices of listening, sharing and negotiating shared and distinct values.

We propose that this time-consuming and often emotionally charged 'work' should be better recognized and valued, and perhaps even measured as part of co-production itself. As the quotation from Facer and Enright (2016: 63–4) illustrates, foregrounding is not just a piece of necessary housekeeping that needs to be got out of the way before the 'real' work of research can begin. It has the potential to transform, to 'impact' on and with all collaborators, and to change or challenge deeply held views or beliefs – all and any of which may themselves be important outputs of a project, particularly in emergent collaborations. Foregrounding can also be a critical moment for a project, where key differences emerge and are overcome, or are not. Foregrounding is, then, necessarily experimental – it does not necessarily lead to a co-produced project. Some experiments, by their very nature, do not lead to a positive result, just as some collaborations are best avoided – the sooner we figure out which ones, the better for all concerned.

Know Your Bristol on the Move

This paper draws on our experiences working on a Research Councils UK-funded project, Know Your Bristol on the Move (KYBM), as well as the outcomes of a three-day reflective workshop series with the project team. KYBM was a collaboration between the University of Bristol, Bristol City Council and eight Bristol ‘communities’ – defined very broadly by shared life experience, interest or commitment, or by geographical location. The project aimed to enable people to explore and to co-create Bristol’s history, heritage and culture using participatory and digital tools that we co-produced to varying degrees. Academic leads were responsible for the engagement of, or co-production with, a particular ‘community’ – with the aim of helping that group to collect, archive and represent their history on a digital map layer on one or both digital mapping interfaces – Know Your Place and Map Your Bristol. Crucially, research was not the core aim of the project – at least, not in the sense of academic peer-reviewed journal articles. The aim of the project was to co-produce the tools for participatory heritage making and to populate the key tool – a digital map – with content. Alongside this process, the knowledge-exchange fellow (Eisenstadt) conducted research on the challenges and benefits of digital tools-led co-production as participant observer in the project, and through the design and delivery of three, day-long participatory workshops with partners and academics reflecting on the project in motion. Thus, academics were also ‘participants’ in the research component. Information about the research component was communicated to participants by Eisenstadt verbally, and via participant information sheets and consent forms signed by community partners and academics alike, and agreed by the University of Bristol Arts Faculty Ethics Committee.

The first phase of the project was called Know Your Bristol and was initiated in 2011, when Peter Insole from Bristol City Council’s planning department approached the University of Bristol to explore ways in which the city council and the university could work together to enrich and expand the community-generated content on Know Your Place (KYP). KYP is an existing multilayered digital mapping interface that allows users to overlay historical digitized maps on a contemporary digital map of Bristol and its surrounds. Crucially, KYP also features a series of ‘content layers’ that can be viewed as ‘pins’ ‘overlaid’ on the historical maps. These pins contain additional data from City Archive Collections, the Historic Environment Record, and from members of the public on crowdsourced or ‘community’ layers. KYP is owned by Bristol City Council and was designed to contribute to the *Bristol Development Framework: Core Strategy* (2011: 127), which aims to ensure that ‘all new development safeguards or enhances the historic environment’ (4.22.1). Thus, all material uploaded to KYP becomes part of the Historic Environment Record (HER) and has material weight in planning-related matters and local planning policies. For example, planners may refer to the historical use of a site as recorded in the HER when making planning decisions. The HER can also contribute to local regeneration strategies and urban design processes, particularly where neighbourhood improvements are proposed. Adding community-generated content thus represents a tangible way in which local residents (or indeed any interested party) can mobilize history/archives to intervene in or *democratize* the planning process.

Between 2012 and 2013, as part of the Know Your Bristol project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, Bristol City Council and the University of Bristol worked with local groups to create and upload material, including photographs and oral histories, to KYP. This involved bringing people together at a series of events to share stories about their neighbourhood, home movies, family photographs and historical artefacts. These were digitized on the spot, and later uploaded to KYP and

linked to their place of origin or significance. While this series of events was regarded as a success by the project team to the extent that it produced mapped content, it tended to reach only a fairly small group of people who were already interested in, and engaged with, local or family history.

The next and larger phase of the project, Know Your Bristol on the Move, continued and built on the collaboration between the University of Bristol and Bristol City Council's Know Your Place site. The new project aimed to reach out to participants and communities whose stories tended to be absent from dominant histories and maps of the city, and (as the funding discourse and imperative was simultaneously shifting to this goal) to work *with* 'communities' to shape not only the content but also the parameters of content production. KYBM was composed of eight 'strands', each pertaining to a different 'community' (be it geographical, of interest or of shared experience) or local organization, plus a ninth strand in collaboration with Bristol Record Office, where volunteers researched historical postcards of Bristol and uploaded the digitized postcard with user-generated metadata to the Know Your Place map. Each 'strand' was led by an academic with an interest in, or connection to, that group. The initial aim with each group was to work together to co-produce a map layer of the group's or community's history – to literally put their history on the map. The communities/groups that the project set out to work with were:

- 1) the geographical community/communities around a local park in South Bristol
- 2) Bristol's 'deaf community'
- 3) Knowle West Media Centre, and Knowle West residents with home movie archives and/or with an interest in, or connection to, the Bristol Channel – a community cable television station transmitting in the early 1970s
- 4) the local branch of campaign non-governmental organization (NGO) Action for Southern Africa (ACTSA) and former members of Bristol Action Against Apartheid Movement (described in the bid as a 'political community')
- 5) the local NGO Single Parent Action Network and women who use its services
- 6) the geographical community around a street in Greenbank, East Bristol
- 7) the 'music community' involved in the blues, reggae and dub scene in Bristol from the 1960s to the present day
- 8) young people at two local secondary schools, St Mary Redcliffe and St Katherine's School
- 9) people with an interest in local history recruited via Bristol Record Office to research and add metadata to the digitized Vaughan Postcard Collection held at the record office.

The project proposal acknowledged that 'one size will not fit all', and that 'repertoires of complementary tools and approaches' would be needed to 'support and enable different "types" of group'. The project thus used multiple methods, including community events, street parties, walks, mapping, digitization and co-design workshops, as well as the collaborative development of the Map Your Bristol website and mobile app. Key project partners were not only the 'communities', but also local digital media company Calling the Shots and the Research IT team at the University of Bristol. Calling the Shots made a series of short films during the project explaining, publicizing and recording strand activities, as well as offering a way of reflecting on and interpreting them. Research IT worked on the development of digital tools in collaboration with academics and via a short workshop series with local secondary school students. The result was the co-design of a new digital mapping tool (website and app), Map Your Bristol, which was intended to be more user-friendly and responsive than Know Your Place. Material uploaded via Map Your Bristol was unmoderated so it would appear on the map almost instantly.

While it was the intention that much of it would eventually migrate to Know Your Place and form part of the Historic Environment Record, this was not automatic.

The aim of the project was to enable material to be generated by communities in their own terms, and to be uploaded to the map (either KYP or Map Your Bristol), in order to capture a more diverse range of perspectives on, and ways of knowing, local history. Whereas in the first phase of the project (Know Your Bristol), researchers had asked communities to provide historical material in the form of photographs, maps and oral history – what Carletti (2016: 201) calls a ‘contributory’ model of ‘heritage crowdsourcing’, phase two (Know Your Bristol on the Move) sought to involve communities in the project as co-researchers and co-creators. This ‘participatory heritage’ approach highlighted questions of difference in ways that had not troubled the previous phase of the project. In the following sections, we describe how these differences – or the lack of them – necessitated foregrounding work to varying degrees. We also explore how the extent of foregrounding required affected the visible or initially intended outputs of a particular project strand. In some cases, it was relatively easy to make swift and measurable ‘progress’ with digital mapping; in others, much less tangible outcomes took precedence. We begin with some examples of the former, and then move on to more challenging collaborations.

Sure footing: Working with familiarity

The ‘political communities’ strand was a clear success by the measure of meeting the initially intended outputs of the wider project. This strand was a collaboration with the local branch of campaign NGO Action for Southern Africa (ACTSA), founded in 1994, which emerged out of the anti-apartheid activism in the 1980s, specifically the Anti-Apartheid Movement. Several participants already had significant personal archives of political memorabilia, including pin badges, posters, pamphlets and letters, which they sought to combine, digitize and make publicly available. Led by an academic with a long-standing interest in, and commitment to, the cause, in this collaboration university researchers and community partners shared an interest in South Africa and in the history of anti-apartheid activism, and an understanding of what the project was ‘for’ – to archive and commemorate the organization’s history. Little was needed to foreground the practical aspects of the project, and there existed a tacit (and normatively coded) agreement on the epistemological dimension. Partners broadly shared an unwritten agreement, first on what counts as ‘history’ – or what is considered of sufficient value that it should be remembered – and second, on *how* history should be recorded – here through archival practices. That archives exist, are a good thing, and that archiving is a valuable and effective practice were all tacitly known or agreed upon. Meanwhile, particular normative and/or affective positions that upheld these assumptions were also present, and tacit. Thus, that an archive is effective requires a confidence or trust in the authorities – to preserve, and not lose or damage, the material and, crucially, not to use the material for ends that run counter to the group – for example, for surveillance, criminalization, disruption of activities or profit. This was a trust that did not have to be built from the ground up, nor did this strand have to overcome significant scepticism or fear rooted in historical contraventions of trust or historical trauma. It was thus able – not entirely without challenge, but, nonetheless, more readily than some – to put pins on the map.

The Vaughan Postcards layer was similarly privileged (in the sense of benefiting from a pre-existing arrangement): the volunteers tasked with uploading the postcards were predominantly White, retired, middle-class men, with an affiliation to an

already-existing local history group. For them, as for the strand leads, local history is seen as good/worthwhile, and Bristol Record Office is an institution that they recognize as standing up for – indeed existing in part to serve – that good. Most were already familiar with the Bristol City Archives, and broadly shared with the university team a belief in the importance and inherent value of historical maps and images. The footing upon which a successful project stands was already in place – little to no foregrounding was necessary in any of the three dimensions we have identified. Both the ACTSA and the Vaughan Postcards projects were among the most visibly productive parts of the project overall, and they remained, in their outputs, closest to what had been initially envisaged. Each made a significant measurable contribution to their community map layer, with the Vaughan layer – helped by plentiful and time-rich volunteers – uploading some three thousand digitized postcards to the Know Your Place map.

In other parts of the project, differences between community participants and academic leads were more pronounced, but were mitigated by strong existing working and interpersonal relationships with key local partners, which obviated the need for foregrounding work. One strand of the project worked with Knowle West Media Centre (KWMC), located in a predominantly White working-class outer suburb of Bristol with a high percentage of social housing. Here, collaboration was facilitated by three factors. First, the strand leader and the director of KWMC had a well-established and close working relationship and friendship: trust, communication methods, and shared commitment to the kinds of knowledge production in which they were involved had largely been agreed upon in advance over the course of previous projects and conversations. Second, KWMC is a successful cultural institution with extensive and celebrated expertise, and experience of working with university researchers (KWMC, n.d.) – it therefore embarks on a collaboration with the university with a degree of confidence and skill at navigating questions such as authorship, recognition, finance process and power relations that come up in dealing with a partner of the size and might of the University of Bristol. Third, KWMC and the academic lead largely shared a tacit normative agreement about the practical purpose and values of the project: they agreed that the home movie footage was a valuable resource for the history of a historically neglected community; that it should be treasured and carefully archived; and that local voices *should* be privileged in the research and representation/‘dissemination’ process. Foregrounding had already taken place. As a result, this strand was able both to meet its aims and to successfully engage a large public audience via well-attended participatory workshops that gained traction in local news and social media.

Foregrounding: Working across difference

Elsewhere in the project, building trust was more difficult – and not always successful. The strand that sought to work with the deaf community had a particularly difficult legacy to overcome. The closure of the Centre for Deaf Studies at the University of Bristol two years previously had sown deep disaffection between many deaf Bristolians and the university (Limping Chicken, 2013). The reasons behind the closure were complex, but at its root were very different assumptions and normative claims about how we know – and whom knowledge production serves. The hearing university privileges the written word – gearing curricula and assessment around this and written-word-world demonstrations of expertise, while assessing researcher performance through (hearing) peer-reviewed exercises such as the Research Excellence Framework. But for deaf academics and students, signed knowledge and commitment to the values of deaf community and culture are often more important. The closure of the Centre

for Deaf Studies signalled to many that neither deaf knowledge nor signing people were sufficiently valued by the university. Many were left feeling abandoned, angry and betrayed. Although the KYBM project team were not involved in the closure, for many in the deaf community, the closure destroyed trust in the institution as a whole. The degree of this mistrust was something that the principal investigator was unaware of when the project was proposed. The strand leader was aware of the tension, but believed that the value of the project in its own right, and the co-productive involvement of deaf people in shaping its evolution, would establish its credentials in the eyes of the deaf community. Crucially, however, due to the short time period between funding call and submission, deaf community members were not involved in writing the bid. In the eyes of the strand leader, this was a situation that could be retrieved by incorporating strong deaf leadership in the strand at a post-award stage. What he failed to factor in, however, was another complicating element: the forced sale (due to local authority cuts) of the city's 'deaf club' the preceding year had not only reduced the community's willingness and capacity to engage with any form of external collaboration to virtually nil, but the clearance of the club had scattered the deaf community's archives into deaf homes across the city.

The KYBM deaf community strand, then, started out with awareness of two significant known challenges. First, to rebuild sufficient trust so that any project actually involving deaf and/or signing people not already affiliated to the university might proceed, especially since the project had been proposed in their absence. Second, how to map and represent deaf knowledge, culture and heritage in ways that did not simply translate and appropriate this knowledge into hearing-oriented text. In practice, however, this attempt to foreground knowledge production, and to include the community in shaping the parameters of the project, foundered. And it was at this point that the strand lead began to wrestle with the challenge of how to even begin to raise any significant interest in the project in the eyes of a community who were utterly preoccupied with other concerns.

To address these issues, the lead on the project drew on the support of deaf academic colleagues who lived outside Bristol – and were therefore less affected by the immediate local context – to formulate an engagement that, even if it did not generate material for the KYBM web resource, would highlight and explore very pertinent questions of knowledge, capacity, agency and power. That engagement drew, in particular, on the Kaupapa Māori idea of autonomous Māori schools, where the philosophy and practice reflect Māori cultural values and ways of knowing. By setting up a deaf space of knowing and handing it over entirely to deaf people themselves, deaf scholars and community members (mostly from outside Bristol, but including some from Bristol who found themselves individually able to engage) explored questions like those that the Vaughan Postcards project were able to take for granted: what is research, how can or should knowledge be represented visually, what heritage, to what end, and for whom?

The Kaupapa Deaf event was a one-off. However, it generated over six hours of deaf-centred, sign-language discussion on the nature of knowledge, which was subsequently published (O'Brien, 2017). Thus, while the project 'failed' in terms of the production of mapped content, it foregrounded a collaboration that yielded rich findings – albeit of a clearly 'theoretical' and 'methodological' rather than 'material' nature (O'Brien *et al.*, 2019). The strand leader heard and respected a clear 'no' from the community, rather than going ahead with the project. Stepping away sent a clear signal that the university understood the pain and mistrust experienced by the prospective partner. Subsequently, the strand leader was involved in encouraging the

deaf academic in question to return to the same questions of Bristolian deaf heritage, but this time with more success – notably a map, and a film of ‘Lost [deaf] Spaces’. However, all of these outputs fell outside the reporting cycle of the bid. When working across difference, especially where there is historical trauma/mistrust, outputs failure may occur. This may be the best possible outcome in that context.

The ‘music’ strand similarly faced the challenge of historical mistrust of the university and a lack of participation by the ‘target community’ in the bid-writing or pre-bid project scoping process. Like the other strands of KYBM, the initial aim was to collect, archive and map the history of the target community – in this case, Bristol’s African-Caribbean community with an interest or involvement in Bristol’s African-Caribbean music subcultures of the 1960s to the present day. Led by a White academic who was fairly new to Bristol, a huge proportion of the work of the project entailed seeking and making connections with local people involved or invested in these ‘scenes’. Following meetings, emails and phone calls with numerous contacts, it became evident that while there seemed to be some interest in the project in general, there was little interest in using either of the mapping interfaces (Map Your Bristol or Know Your Place). This may have been due to the fact that these ‘tools’ had not been initially conceived with the ‘target’ community group, or simply because they were not of interest. Research fatigue may also have been a factor – that is, being fatigued by *being* researched – and/or a lack of perceived recognition for this labour. One participant recounted feeling like they were often being ‘brought out’ to give information about their culture but never getting paid, and there rarely being any follow-up – ‘these projects come, it sounds great, then you never hear anything again’. This prior experience sits alongside the historical position of the university as a disproportionately White institution, and one whose early funding came from families whose wealth had been accrued through the use of enslaved Africans. The resulting context is not one where we should expect participants to want to hand over (even if they technically retain ownership) deeply personal and family archive material for digitization and mapping. Prior questions must be addressed first: why archive, why map, whose history and to what, or whose ends?

With content creation as envisaged in the bid almost a non-starter within the confines of the funding period, a different, less output-oriented approach was taken. The principal form this took was to hold a series of free-form events with food, music and discussion – the idea being to create opportunities for connection and trust building that may or may not lead to content creation. The largest of these events, an event entitled ‘Scenes, soundsystems and shebeens’, drew a crowd of sixty for a half-day centred on the role of informal music spaces in the cultivation of shared identity and sense of belonging.

Interestingly, while the event had been framed as centred on music as a mode of entertainment, release and escape, many of the panellists explicitly linked music and music spaces to their personal spiritual-political transformations. Rather than talking about music as entertainment, participants linked the spiritual ‘awakening’ experienced through a connection to Rastafarianism to the political ‘consciousness’ that went with it, made up both of Black Power, and a critique of political authority and White Western institutions/colonialism (or ‘Babylon’). Thus, what seemed to be an ostensibly apolitical framing (to and by White academics) was reordered by the panellists. Their reflection on their personal experiences took the discussion in a direction that squarely engaged with race, racism and the politics of belonging and difference of African diaspora communities. That this was able to happen resonates with our experience in other strands where co-production across difference must be open to spontaneity: it is first about getting people to ‘the table’ – ideally at the scoping phase before bid

submission – and then opening space to take the project somewhere else. Whether foregrounding takes place before or after the official project start date, it takes time. This strand thus produced very little in terms of tangible outputs such as material on the map. Instead, the time was taken up foregrounding co-production – building trust and connection, and opening space to talk about historical harm.

It is worth noting that payment raised particular problems on this strand. Panel speakers were paid in recognition of their otherwise unpaid time and contribution to the project. However, both local (university) and national (government) regulation meant that payment was a lengthy and laborious process, involving extensive forms to be filled out, and requiring speakers to produce their passports in order for payment to be signed off. This local manifestation of national border enforcement, and the unduly long wait for payment, further widened the felt divide between us, as securely situated researchers within the institution, and those whom we selectively brought in.

The final strand to be discussed in this paper similarly required a high degree of flexibility around intended versus feasible outputs. This strand worked with women at a local community organization, Single Parent Action Network (SPAN), situated in a gentrifying, yet also working-class and ethnically diverse, neighbourhood of Bristol. Difference in this strand was relatively high, the project being led by two middle-class White women with PhDs, while the participants were predominantly working-class, Black and minority ethnic women, with some having English as an additional language. As SPAN was at that time a significant inner-city adult education provider, the strand had been structured as a seven-week short course that took place during school hours with free childcare for participants. This was a format that was familiar both to the organization (the university had run similar short courses before) and to potential participants, most of whom had taken several short courses in the past. This allowed SPAN to act as a ‘broker’, encouraging women to participate (Bryan *et al.*, 2018: 48).

Initially the intention was to create a digital historical map of women’s work in the area, drawing on the project lead’s interest in the history of work, and the project’s focus on digital mapping. However, as the project developed, it became clear that producing mapped content would be unlikely. The mapping idea raised little interest among the group – in sharp contrast to the assertion at one of our academic workshops that ‘everybody loves maps’. The paper historical maps we brought along did not raise much interest, and the Wi-Fi at the venue we were using was so poor that all attempts to look at the online maps failed. In any case, the participants spent very little time on computers, which made the idea of a digital history map seem a remote activity of dubious relevance.

Our early discussions about the nature of work also revealed important areas of difference. The project lead, following debates in academia, was interested in exploring unpaid work, and putting domestic labour ‘on the map’. The group participants were far more interested in the histories of women outside the home, seeking to recover the stories of women who were in some way exceptional or inspiring, rather than in exploring histories that mirrored their own lives too closely. In fact, the project really began to come alive during a local history walk led by a member of a local heritage organization. It was a cold, wet day and the group were sceptical about the focus of the walk, which seemed initially to focus largely on worthy male worker-activists. But a plaque about locally born opera singer Ruby Helder set the group buzzing. The contrast between the prosaic location of the plaque – on the end of a mid-rise council block next to a dual carriageway – and the glamorous picture evoked by its text lit up the collective imagination.

Fortuitously, the structure of this strand, with its weekly meetings and enquiry-led format, allowed us to identify that we had different starting points, and different interests, and to adapt the project accordingly. We moved away from the digital, and from the initial focus on domestic work, and concentrated our efforts on developing an exhibition instead. After a workshop on 'what is research?', a visit to a local history museum, and some oral history training, participants set out to interview women in the neighbourhood, including Sue Cohen, one of the founders of SPAN, and Ena Lindsay, a Jamaican immigrant who had worked for forty years as a nurse. Using this material, and also our own reflections on the nature of women's work, an exhibition began to emerge, designed and made by the group. Here, too, we worked primarily in a non-digital way, making exhibition boards by hand using collage techniques, and using material objects such as a cleaner's overalls. Ruby Helder featured prominently, in a small 'shrine' featuring a rose, a candle and a recording of her music (Map Your Bristol, 2020). The project culminated with a 'family history day' on SPAN's premises, incorporating the launch of the exhibition, talks and workshops, and craft activities for children and adults. This tangibly put women's history 'on the map', even if not in the way we as academics had initially intended.

In this strand, tacit assumptions about the character and value of historical research and archival practices were not shared at the outset. The work of the strand consisted in building relationships, building trust through responsiveness to participant preferences for the direction of travel, and in using the tangible tools that participants created for themselves. Doing this drew on much more researcher time than had initially been anticipated and required a high degree of flexibility around desired outputs. If success here was measured by meeting predefined aims – content on the map – the strand failed. If the aim was co-production, it met that aim.

Conclusion

As co-productive and collaborative projects establish themselves in the research landscape, reflective analysis of these methodologies has increasingly drawn our attention to the importance of beginnings. Here, as so often in life, it seems that 'well begun is half done'. The preparatory work that goes into scoping, planning and establishing a research relationship between a university and its community partners, and to conceptualizing a planned project, is often critical to the success of the research that ensues. This was our experience on KYBM. Collaboration ran most smoothly, and anticipated outcomes were delivered most consistently, where academics and community partners shared either an existing collaborative relationship, or where existing similarities of interest, approach or positionality made working together more straightforward. In other cases, where the relationship was characterized by difference, extensive foregrounding work was required to establish a sufficiently shared basis from where to begin. As Facer and Enright (2016: 158) astutely put it: 'Time is to collaborative research what a supercomputer is to big data.'

The goal of foregrounding is, fundamentally, a mutual understanding of one another's positions, rather than an agreement on the primacy of one. This may lay the foundations for successful collaboration, or it may result in a mutual agreement that collaboration is not possible or desirable at a particular time. As we have argued, such 'understanding' has three dimensions: (1) the practical, pertaining to the different interests and goals at play; (2) the epistemological, pertaining to how knowledge is thought to be made and which forms and practices of knowledge are valued; and (3) the affective, pertaining to the 'gut feeling' about the other that arises in response

to perceived similarity, difference, oppositionality and/or directly experienced or inherited trauma.

This understanding, and the relationships it underpins, should not simply be seen as a necessary precondition for research. It can – and should – be valued as an output of the research process (Rappaport, 2016). Existing metrics (and institutional cultures) privilege visible output/content production over the ephemeral/relational/process work that is required when working across difference (King and Rivett, 2015). This can be problematic in that it encourages academics to favour 'safe' partnerships where visible outputs are assured. In our experience on the Know Your Bristol on the Move project, it was much easier to produce content with those who shared our subject positions. Inevitably, these subject positions tend to be historically privileged (for example, White, highly educated, middle class). Thus, the existing measurement frameworks (which valorize content over process) serve to further advance collaborations of already privileged collaborators.

A project that targeted only the low-hanging fruit would have produced more content, but it would have reached a less diverse sample of Bristol communities. We were fortunate in that the design and scope of the project allowed us also to pursue strands where difference – and risk – were higher, and where the visible outputs were lower. The foregrounding work we were able to do on these strands created the foundations of research relationships that have subsequently led to new and more ambitious projects. We conclude that foregrounding should be valued as an end in itself, and a product in its own right.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Dr Mike Gulliver and the reviewers and editors of *Research for All* for their helpful comments on this article, and the partners and academics involved in Know Your Bristol on the Move.

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