

“A soup of different inspirations”: Co-produced research and recognising impact as a process, not an outcome.

Co-produced research involves external partners from start to finish, builds lasting relationships and is actively involved in generating impact. Yet co-production sits uncomfortably with how impact is currently understood. [Rachel Pain](#) and [Ruth Raynor](#) explore how the process of co-production has the potential to make research and its outcomes richer as collaborators pool diverse ideas, expertise and skills. Impact becomes the driving (and uniting) force behind research, rather than a separate after-product.



Research and impact as soup is a far cry from the way that Universities began to conceive impact in the run-up to REF2014. Shaped by [HEFCE's guidelines](#), a mythology developed that our [new report](#) calls the 'donor-recipient' model of impact. This mythology revolves around a caricature of an apparently benevolent knowledge producer (university/academic), whose research, through a mechanistic and linear process, eventually impacts on an external community, organisation or policy. But the knowledge producer reaps the institutional reward, as Impact Case Studies contributed a [significant chunk of the £1.6 billion](#) that universities will receive from the last audit.



This model of research has been debunked by those with an interest in the co-production of knowledge, an increasingly popular alternative. For impact, too, the idea of a one-way process (and its associated assumptions about who owns research) doesn't fit the reality for researchers who collaborate with [external partners from start to finish](#). Our project, [Mapping Alternative Impact](#), explores other ways of thinking about impact. It draws on the reflections of members of Durham's [Centre for Social Justice and Community Action](#) on doing participatory action research over many years; a review of recent literature; and a day-long conference where members of voluntary and public sector organisations came together to cross-pollinate ideas and generate recommendations.

We also analysed the process of staging a community theatre play from Ruth's original participatory research. The project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council via N8 ([Making Knowledge that Matters: Realising the Potential of Co-Production](#)) and [Durham's Impact Accelerator Account](#)). For Ruth, coming to academic research from a background in community theatre, co-production was already a natural way of working. In July 2015 she brought *Diehard Gateshead*, her play about the effects of austerity on women's lives, to [three sets of audiences](#). The script had been developed over two years with a women's group as part of her PhD research.



Image credit: [Empty theatre \(almost\)](#) by Kevin Jaako

While Ruth was centrally involved in researching, writing and staging the play, creating *Diehard Gateshead* was co-production in action – it involved numerous other people whose input changed its form during the process. From developing the initial ideas, story and script with the women’s group; working on the script with a dramaturge, then director and set designer; rehearsing with actors and finally staging in front of audiences – at each stage fresh ideas and energy were injected into the play.

“The idea of precarity that filtered into the play came from the academic background, but it wasn’t separate from the experiences the women were describing... It became a soup of different inspirations” (Ruth, interviewed after the staging of Diehard Gateshead, August 2015).

Similarly, our report argues, this kind of shared process has the potential to make research and its outcomes richer, as collaborators pool diverse ideas, expertise and skills. At its best, the ‘soup’ that results from this is made up of multi-faceted knowledge that reflects lived experience and is stirred up and checked by many different people throughout the process. This is not to gloss over the tensions and differences that can arise.

But it is now widely accepted that co-production can make for better impact – changes to policy, practice and attitudes should be more relevant and useful to communities if they are closely involved in research from the start. Impact becomes the driving (and uniting) force behind research, rather than a separate after-product – as Ruth describes it, “the boss, in a weird way, is the play itself...we’re all serving that scene that we want to share with an audience”.

However, what is less often acknowledged is that co-production thrives in the right conditions, and can be challenging to orchestrate without them. And despite being in vogue among universities and funding councils, our report shows that there are serious barriers that include funding, development time, institutional structures, priorities and reward mechanisms. Fundamental to co-production is an open and flexible research process, and the relationships that are its backbone.



Image credit: Still from Diehard Gateshead

At present, these stand in stark contrast to both the inflexible proposals that are the expected starting point for research, and the cold metrics by which impact is usually measured. Impact may certainly be large and measurable – for example, bums on theatre seats, national reviews, income generated for the arts sector – but just as importantly they may be interpersonal, affective and less tangible. As many writers on social movements and the path of social change contend, broader actions tend to work outwards from these small-scale shifts, moments and encounters.

For example, Ruth's research had impacts for members of the women's group who worked to develop the play, building stronger bonds with each other and growing in confidence: "It brought out what people didn't realise they could do, a bit of achievement...you can notice a real difference" (group lead); "I do think I learnt a hell of a lot from the drama...it made me more confident in myself" (group member). The play affected audiences through its use of humour to create empathy and understanding: "With humour and feeling it presented the reality behind the headlines about cuts, and shows how even a modest group can have profound effect on women's lives" (audience member).

Indeed, the intention of community drama is often to stimulate these collective emotional responses. Half of the audiences who came to see *Diehard Gateshead* said that the play changed the way they thought or felt about the issues raised: “A reminder that we all have a part to play to ensure community cohesiveness”; “It made me think about how important these [women’s] projects are – the need for these voices to be heard – how real austerity is and how individual and differentiated it is”; “Heightened [my] awareness and desire to do more” (audience members). And all of those involved in producing the play felt that working together deepened these powerful impacts. Speaking of the closure of women’s groups; “If the people who sat in boardrooms had any sort of understanding about what this means to people, they might think twice about it. They should be dragged out and they should see this [the play]” (actor).

What does this mean for the ways that HEFCE, funding councils and universities envisage and count impact? As well as documenting the common issues that researchers and community partners experience in co-produced research, our report makes a series of recommendations, many informed by our co-authors’ practice and expertise of measuring impact in other sectors. Given the support for co-production that now exists within funding councils, our hope is that further changes will lead to more amenable conditions for this approach to research and impact.

The full report: [Mapping Alternative Impact: Alternative Approaches to Impact from Co-Produced Research](#) .

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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