Symmetrical leadership and participation for cross-learning

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Symmetrical leadership and participation for cross-learning in WISE

Kerstin Hemström, John Holmberg, and Jonas Nässén

In Gothenburg, the Well-being in Sustainable Cities (WISE, 2012–2016) project explored a focus on well-being as a driver for sustainable development. The project was based on identified knowledge needs among Mistra Urban Futures' local partners – to further the understanding of how the city can move towards low-carbon urban lifestyles without jeopardizing individual well-being. Altogether, it involved over 30 participants, with co-ownership and representatives from the City of Gothenburg, the Västra Götaland Region, the Swedish Transport Administration, Chalmers University of Technology, Gothenburg University, and the national Research Institutes of Sweden (RISE).

Setting the stage

The project work started with a two-day stay overnight workshop arranged by researchers, at which interested practitioners and researchers briefly introduced their perspective on the project theme, and interest to participate in project work. Based on this, individuals who retained interest in the project proceeded to co-develop the problem formulation, focus areas, research questions, and a project design of interest to all participants.

To maintain a balance between academic and non-academic perspectives throughout the project work, the project was co-led by a senior researcher and a high-level city practitioner. Research work was organized in five different sub-projects of varying scope, focusing on a set of sub-research questions relating to the overall aim of the project. All sub-projects involved collaboration between research and practice in different ways, depending on how much research was involved and how the sub-project related to ongoing processes in politics or public administration. One sub-project was led by a practitioner but involved several researchers, another was led by a researcher and developed through workshops with practitioners. A third sub-project was first led by a researcher and later by a practitioner, a fourth was led by a practitioner and a fifth by a researcher.

To build mutual trust and jointly reflect upon the progress of the project work, the project leaders organized regular meetings involving all sub-project leaders. These meetings took place monthly or bi-monthly throughout the five-year project period. The chairmanship alternated between the two main project leaders, to create an appreciated learning situation for everyone involved. In parallel, the sub-projects held workshops, seminars, presentations, and conferences with external participants and high attendance to discuss preliminary results. At times when it was difficult to bring about the joint

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project leader meetings, or when there were changes to the project design and organization, these contributed to retaining fellowship between project participants and their mutual interest to contribute to the overall progress of the project.

Key lessons

Project participants witnessed how the close-to-symmetrical representation of researchers and practitioners led to a balance between researcher and practitioner perspectives and needs throughout the project work, and that the repeated meetings with rotating chairmanship built a community of trust and a shared understanding of the different components and perspectives of the project. Also, the stay-overnight kick-off established a joint interest and enthusiasm for the project work which was kept throughout. The participants perceived the initial workshop as crucial for the relevance for practice, and for relating the project to ongoing processes in policy and practice.

There were continuous feedback learning activities during the project, both within the participant organizations and externally. The set of results generated through the project activities were communicated in various ways, including scientific and popular publications as well as decision-support models for planning practitioners; the development and incorporation of a consumption perspective in the city and regional climate strategies; a policy brief; and an interactive computer game targeting high-school students illustrating the connection between consumption and climate change.

Several things contributed to the high societal relevance of the research results. The project was well-funded, and participants experienced broad interest in the research theme from their home organizations as well as from public administration in general. The practitioners had long-term experience and could identify important knowledge gaps and issues in previous strategies and plans; and the participating researchers had a history of problem-driven research in relation to public agencies. Most of the team had also worked together previously.

Further, mutual respect for different perspectives and knowledges was considered a cornerstone of the overall experience of the process. Because of the joint problem formulation and the shared project ownership, design, and leadership, participating practitioners felt equally entitled to the process and worked proactively in formulating the research focus and questions. This changed their expectations on research collaboration. To achieve societally relevant results, these practitioners would expect equal entitlement to and responsibility for the research process.

Despite a general perception that experience-based knowledge was valued in the knowledge-producing process, concern was raised by a few participants regarding the discursive power of scientific knowledge and the exclusionary

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effects of, for example, semi-academic seminars. Thus, openness and motivation among researchers was regarded as crucial – but not a guarantee – for the status of experience-based knowledge. Maintaining practice-based credibility required constant vigilance on the part of practitioners.

Suggested readings

Hansson, S. and Polk, M. (2018) 'Assessing the impact of transdisciplinary research: the usefulness of relevance, credibility and legitimacy for understanding the link between process and impact', *Research Evaluation* 2018: 1–13 <https://doi.org/10.1093/reseval/rvy004>.

Westberg, L. and Polk, M. (2016) 'The role of learning in transdisciplinary research: moving from a normative concept to an analytical tool through a practice-based approach', *Sustainability Science* 11: 385–97 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-016-0358-4>.

Joint problem formulation and solution through iterative practice: design thinking

Johan Larson Lindal

Design thinking (DT) is a challenge-driven innovation method developed at Stanford University using basic principles and tools from the design field to solve practical problems. Visualized as a 'double diamond', the design thinking process is shifting from specific to general and then back again, repeated twice. The double diamond goes through five stages: empathize (with the users), define (the problem), ideate (possible solutions), prototype, and test (selected solutions) (Figure 4.1).

Although design thinking was not a pre-assigned method for the Stockholm node, it was one of the preferred methods used repeatedly to plan and develop the joint work among the local partners. It was used successfully for initiating the work of applying for funding for the Stockholm node and for designing parts of the formation and application process. When the funding was received, the first steps of design thinking were used to help co-formulate a work plan. The events below account for these instances and show how DT becomes an efficient methodology for co-creation among actors from different sectors, facilitating a common understanding and way forward, addressing shared needs.

22 June 2016

A first workshop was conducted to generate ideas for the formation of a co-creation platform in Stockholm. Participants came from the City of Stockholm, Stockholm County Council, the Swedish World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF),

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