



See Me/IRISS Change Network Peer research Project: Our journey through co-production

We wanted to share our own journey through co-production as a group of diverse peer researchers and storytellers. As a part of the evaluation of our work together, the group's two facilitators wrote the group a letter about their experiences and reflections in co-production. Below are those two letters, and the frank and honest replies from the group. We hope that in sharing these, we can be open about some of the challenges and opportunities of working together.

Details about the project can be found in the About Us section of the Change Network Toolkit.

From the facilitators

Dear peer researchers/storytellers/colleagues/friends,

As we reach the end of our project together, I thought it might be useful for me to start the evaluation and reflection process with my own thoughts on the project.

I've been doing facilitation and variations of co-production for years, but this was in lots of ways new for me because of its peer research element, and because there was a very set output that we needed to produce.

Our rocky start was a challenge and probably my biggest lesson around how not to bring a group together. Our attempts to give structure and understanding by assigning roles made people feel cornered, defined, othered. I think that Laetitia and I realized that we needed to trust that you would find roles and space yourselves. And I'm happy that happened, but sorry that the process wasn't inclusive from the start.

Another challenge was around power and relationships, especially in trying to manage different voices, personality and styles. I'm still not sure we cracked it, but I was really pleased to hear more from our quieter group members as time went on. I am still in awe of the contributions that our digital storytellers have made by grounding us in personal experience.

From a research perspective, access was clearly our biggest barrier. The projects we were working with were time-poor and evaluation-rich and that made it hard for us to really engage with them in different ways. We relied on largely the same approaches and methods, which were appropriate to the constraints of the project but I still wonder whether people feel that they have learned new skills? We were relying on people taking

the initiative as independent learners, and I wonder whether or not people were comfortable with that approach.

The sessions themselves are tiring for me, because I feel a responsibility to monitor conversation closely and move us forwards. This, combined with the content and the way that it can sometimes touch on emotional (and for me, personal) experiences, can be draining. Saying that, I'm always satisfied at the end of the sessions and impressed by the group and what we manage to get through in fairly short bursts. At times, you've seen me huff and sigh like a substitute teacher, which I don't regret. I think it's important that you knew that often when you were stuck, we felt a little stuck with you. When you were frustrated, we felt frustrated too.

Laetitia and I also discussed the challenges around prompting action often. We struggled with people not meeting deadlines, or using basecamp/email to communicate. We wondered about whether people were connecting as peers, or relying on us for organisation. The ultimate test of this will be the future of the group. We always related as adult to adult, and trusted people to submit what they can when they can. But at times, it was disappointing when we expected submissions, and were excited about learning.

Reading above, I'm thinking I've probably exemplified some of our early co-production chat in my evaluation. The balance between expectation and limitation, struggles around role and power.. are all part of the package here!

I've learned so much from this group and feel that we've built an enormous amount of trust and respect.

Dear team members,

We are nearing the end of the project and the final resource and event in December start to take shape. As we can see more clearly what we have all been working towards all these months, it seems to be a good time to reflect on what has worked best, what we could have done better and how to use all the experience for future projects we might be involved in together or individually in our own communities and areas of work.

The thing that will come to mind for most of us is the shaky start of the project. A clear lesson is to think way in advance before getting started and make sure anyone involved also has to time to get prepared, get all the info they need and have all possible questions answered.

It was never a case of who to blame for this shaky start and tensions/confusion around roles and payments but although a structure must be flexible, a clear understanding of expectations from all parties and a deeper understanding of the aims and time/resources requirements are needed. All parties should from the start feel confident to ask all relevant questions and question all relevant aspects. So team work should kick in from the start.

The project got me to think about and often question the fundamental principles of co-production and whether it can be a linear process or something that gets used as and when needed. We had to start with something to offer to you and CIF projects and with a final outcome in mind, all of it within a budget and timeframe. In some ways co-production was flawed from the start as some decisions were made higher up but they should have been communicated to you in a clear, simple and uniform manner so you could all feel equally empowered to contribute. I do myself get frustrated by the limitations and missed

opportunities to use experience and creativity within a hierarchised See Me structure and I therefore empathised with your frustrations.

Once we did get going, an issue for me was to manage expectations whilst sticking to the equal partnership values. It sometimes felt like Rhiann and I had to fit around people's lives and requirements whilst fitting things around our own and our jobs and it sometimes felt we were not getting 'rewarded' when assignments were slow to come in or when people did not contribute to online discussions or other homework tasks but requested badges.

All this however was relegated at the back of my mind when keynote listeners all seemed to listen in awe when you had discussions and they were every time without fail amazed at the level of knowledge and expertise in the room. They should be, right, you have the lived expertise? But it still felt like a battle won when someone recognised the importance and value of peer involvement and leadership and acknowledge that it is not just about consulting people with lived experience.

Although we are still to get properly started on the final resource, it is starting to shape in my mind and all the pieces, creativity, experience, team work, ups and downs, findings are coming together to make up a resource we can all feel we have built as a team and can learn from for future personal and professional projects.

Responses from the peer researchers

"On the last group I was pleased to see you all. I want to thank you for what you have done for me in times of trouble. We as in I would like again to say thank you for listening to me and trying to understand my letters- as poetry is a subject I don't know much about. It has been fun knowing and getting to know people around me - paid and unpaid- it has been a learning curve for me. "

"At the start of the project I was a bit shy in the group and a newcomer to the discussions held. However, over the weeks and months I began to settle in and take part in the group. I found the conversation around various topics to be interesting and to be honest a bit of a learning curve. I've never been part of a project like this before and have enjoyed watching and listening to professionals tackle issues in and around stigma and discrimination. Getting out of the house and mixing with new people has been good for my mental health, I tend to be in my own company a lot. The group facilitators and keynote listeners have been great at giving momentum to the ground by moving and encouraging the various conversations on. "

"Dear Laetitia and Rhiann,

Thanks for all of your work on the project over the past few months. I've found it to be an enjoyable and rewarding experience overall and your hard work and commitment has been key in making that happen. In particular I value your flexible and reactive approach and the way you were often able to redesign things at zero notice when that was required.

It's not always been smooth going, but then trying something new will inevitably throw up its challenges. And I'm sure we were not always the easiest group of people to work with! There is often a tension between the creative side of co-production and the project management approach required to deliver a final product. My background perhaps leads me more to a highly structured approach and I've had to learn to accept some digressions,

personal pet theories and off topic discussions at times. And I know achieving the right balance of allowing discussions to flow yet also achieving results is not easy for any facilitator to achieve.

We are all aware that the project got off to a difficult start. Yet we were able to change course and redesign things very quickly as a team, which showed real flexibility and strength. The process actually helped us to come together as a group very quickly.

Perhaps in retrospect we should have had started with a “private” project initiation session (my project management training coming out!) so that we could have thrashed a few things out amongst ourselves before meeting with the projects. Hindsight is great, isn't it? The initial issue for me wasn't so much that we all had roles but that we didn't have a clear and consistent understanding between us about how they all fitted together to make up the project.

Our group sessions were all excellent, if hard going at times and definitely headache inducing. I left each one feeling like my brain was going to explode. But somehow we always got a set of concrete outcomes as well as discussing a wide range of issues in great details. A testament to your facilitation skills.

The discipline of reading in advance of our meetings gave us the time and direction to think about each subject, and that worked well. The expert listeners were all excellent too. That was a great idea – as well as giving us subject knowledge they also provided a much needed outside reflection on our discussions which was extremely helpful. Simply having guest speakers would not have worked anywhere near as well.

I think we fell down a little on our “between the sessions” work. We didn't all contribute with a uniform or consistent diligence. Perhaps (again with the benefit of hindsight) we should have been clearer as a group about our expectations of each other. We definitely didn't use Basecamp as well as we could have. I know that PC based approaches don't suit everyone, but we could have done better. There was a great deal of potential in it as a collaborative tool and we didn't make anywhere near best use of it, despite your prompting.

Working with the projects turned out pretty well for me in the end. The initial misunderstandings over expectations, over evaluation and time pressures made for a difficult start, but once good relationships were achieved I was given the access I needed. Seeing the projects in action was definitely an important factor for me in achieving understanding, and I learned much more as an observer than I would have from interviews and questionnaires alone. It was definitely a benefit to work with two projects. The ability to do compare and contrast thinking gave me a wider context that more than offset the additional work and time commitments involved.

So we're close to the end now and I'm really looking forward to seeing the final product that will bring all of our work together. I'm sure there are a great many interesting points and suggestions that will help future projects. And all based on our data, our experiences and our stories. The innovative approach we've taken is also something that will provide a lot of learning.

I think we've achieved a massive amount as a group. Your planning, facilitation, scribing, cajoling, support, hard work and consistent encouragement (and a hundred other things too) made that happen. You gave us the time, the space and the direction to work and to achieve. Going forward it will be much more difficult for us to do that without you.

I've enjoyed working with you both and with the other team members. It's been a rewarding, if at times challenging and exhausting, process. But we've all got a lot to be proud of.

Thanks again for everything"

"This is by way of a more reflective reply to your letter. Some of the points I want to make were also made yesterday during the morning evaluation session but are worth reiterating.

First, of all let me confirm that, at least from my point of view, you and Laetitia have indeed won a great deal of trust and respect from the group. I haven't heard a bad thing said by anyone about the fantastic way you have both facilitated the meetings, beyond the dicky start, which as you said yesterday, was more down to the way the project was set up than any decision you both made.

You provided a context for our discussions, a timeframe and long term goals, while leaving us free to approach the various topics in the way we wanted. The unfettered exchanges we made, at your gentle encouragement, were entirely in keeping with what I think true co-production should be and helped create a culture of creativity that we all want to sustain in the future plans we outlined at the end of the meeting.

The use of expert listeners was an inspired idea. It provided us with a lot of positive feedback, which I think we needed, and the sense that we were engaging in something truly original. My main disappointment has been not our discussions (truly inspirational!) but the limitations placed on my research role at Theatre Nemo.

I had envisaged, when I accepted the task, that I would be able to witness and observe the creative and co-productive exchanges Hugh, Gordon and Pete had with the prisoners and the prison officers at HMP Edinburgh. While I found the bond I formed with Hugh and Pete stimulating, the process of endlessly putting a dictaphone in front of them and asking the latest set of questions set by the group came to be a bit transactional and sterile. There was very little scope for other research methods and this might be something you could take into account when designing the next peer research programme.

My other gripe, again outside your control, was the knowledge that some of us were being paid to take part, while others weren't. This certainly made me feel awkward. When you both handed out vouchers to the voluntary members of the group, and Gordon and I were conspicuously not included, it made me feel very uncomfortable. I felt at once excluded and at the same time over-privileged.

Basecamp, as an engine for social and professional interaction, didn't work for me and I think this was also true for quite a few others in the group. Heidi and Gordon made good use of it but otherwise its main function seemed to be to enable you both to communicate important messages and disseminate typed-up notes from the meetings. I think this is because we are all a bit behind the times when it comes to online communication (I don't even like skype!) rather than because of the particular shortcomings of the software.

None of this is intended to be a reproach. I think your joint handling of the group proved a model of good facilitation and the one regret I (and I know others) have is that you won't be there to hold our hands and cheer us on when we operate as an independent entity.

Thank you so much for opening my eyes to the possibilities of peer working"

"I have found the experience of being included in this group empowering, inspiring, education and as a catalyst for change in my own work locally and more widely. I am proud that we had overcome out considerable challenges at inception - we had different skills and resources, but the rocky start really put me off entirely as there was such a sense of othering with different titles and roles, people paid, people not. etc. That said the humility and honesty shown by Rhiann and Laetitia in quickly responding to the needs of the group was excellent. They had much to overcome in their roles too, but they were so valuable in guiding and organising us. They inspired and administered with grace. THanks to them, both for such commitment to this process and to us as individuals- it is a credit to their careers and one I sincerely hope is rated by their teams and encouraged more widely. They modelled the change we want to inspire in Scotland.

The group members are an extraordinary group of diverse experience and incredible capacity for sharing learning and commitment to change in Scotland.

We have not always agreed, we have challenged each other appropriate (and in the main - and when not we had Rhiann and Laetitia to support reflection in this) This has led to growth and respect. In terms of this group going forward or other change groups, I feel a value based agreement is vital and would have helped us out in terms of initial challenges. Some times I felt like I was not getting feedback from other members on basecamp and email - personal responsibility and resource is key in this otherwise there can be disharmony and conflict. This group has sustained me as a peer leader when I have felt that the voice of experience was not respected in the community I try to empower and had lost energy and motivation. I have learned so very much. THANK YOU!"

"Dear both,

I seem to have missed the shaky start of the project by being late, although I have a vague idea of the discussions that took place. I'm glad I missed them. I was able to go into each discussion and take each person and their views at face value.

I have gained a lot of confidence from these discussions, and whilst still a quieter individual, I am now no longer shy to volunteer an opinion or insight when I feel like it is worth contributing. I think some individuals remained quiet throughout, however their individual contributions were always valid and offered a different perspective. Similarly, storytelling added a different dimension and managed to keep the project grounded in reality, despite exploring complicated and often theoretical issues. Furthermore, I find the discussions have helped to spur my own thinking on a lot of these issues, which has been helpful for work, and my internal life more generally.

When I first started the project, I had some free time during the week to work on this. However, as it progressed I was then working full-time with an additional part-time job, and other volunteer bits and pieces, without a laptop, which made getting assignments

done on time extremely challenging, as I had to work around the projects' availability as well.

Regardless, I'm glad to have been a part of the entire project/process, as it was a very interesting way of working, which is dissimilar to other things I have been involved in in the past, and is definitely something I would be interested in participating in in the future.

P.S. The keynote listeners were great and added a new dimension and fantastic facilitation by you both throughout, which was dynamic and adapted to the feedback that was received at the start of the process."