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## <1>Chapter 2

### <1>Co-production as Experimentation: The Research Forum as Method

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#### Experiment

NOUN

1. A scientific procedure undertaken to make a discovery, test a hypothesis, or demonstrate a known fact.
  - 1.1. A course of action tentatively adopted without being sure of the outcome.

*Oxford English Dictionary*

The experimental approach to research is characterised by an interest in learning rather than judging. To treat something as a social experiment is to [be] open to what it has to teach us, very different from the critical task of assessing the ways in which it is good or bad, strong or weak, mainstream or alternative. It recognises that what we are looking at is on its way to being something else and strategises about how to participate in that process of becoming.

(Gibson-Graham, 2008, 16)

## <2>Introduction

In the previous chapter, we described the problem with regulatory systems that self-referentially exclude 'ordinary' citizens from processes of decision-making. We suggested that regulatory systems needed to find ways to bring in 'experts-by-experience' to work alongside technocratic expertise. To produce regulatory systems that are human-centred,

we need to find new ways to incorporate the expertise of citizens who experience being regulated on a daily basis. That is, we must work towards the codesign of such systems.

In this chapter, we discuss our experiments in shifting understandings of expertise and in co-producing research that formed the basis of the Productive Margins programme. Those experiments were structured as the Productive Margins Research Forum, a series of gatherings that included all active co-researchers and occurred every three to six months over the lifetime of the Productive Margins programme. Before we discuss this experimental method, we need to ask: who is the 'we' in this chapter? Co-production as a specific set of approaches to collaborative research involves diverse voices. In this chapter, we bring together the Productive Margins Principle Investigator, Community Lead, Arts & Humanities Lead, and one of the Co-Investigators who worked as a link between two projects and the core Management Group. We have different research interests, forms of expertise, values and standpoints on collaborative working in communities. An example of how these differences can play out was manifested in our development of this chapter, which raised subtle differences in how each of us has been engaging with 'co-production', 'regulation', 'research', and 'experimentation'. Where some of us writing have come to conclude that 'co-production' has quickly been recuperated by the techno-bureaucratic operations of the academy and we therefore return to older notions of 'collaboration', others writing this chapter argue that it is precisely the technicity of 'co-production' that catalyses new ways of working with other-than-academic publics. Where some define 'regulation' precisely in terms of structural mechanisms tied to policy objects, others invoke Michel Foucault's understanding of regulation as government, which is developed in his work on biopolitics and governmentality:

‘Government’ did not refer only to political structures or to the management of states; rather, it designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed – the government of children, of souls, of communities, of the sick. It covered not only the legitimately constituted forms of political or economic subjection but also modes of action, more or less considered and calculated, that were destined to act upon the possibilities of action of other people. To govern, in this sense, is to control the possible field of action of others (2000, 341).

Modes of communication, values, aesthetics and the celebration of co-production itself are clearly regulatory forces in their own right and usefully evidence the importance of affect and emotion in activism and community collaboration (Anderson and Smith, 2001; Hochschild, 1979).

A deep mapping of the myriad definitions and uses of co-production, regulation and research is beyond the scope of this chapter, although these definitions are in evidence throughout this book. We would, however, like to ‘stay with the trouble’ (Haraway, 2016) that the word ‘experiment’ suggests. Rather than attempt to settle definitions, this chapter aims to keep those differences live and active in our discussion and, as such, to echo the Forum processes here, in textual form. The contradiction inherent in definitions of ‘experiment’ are perhaps useful. It would be reasonable to suggest that an experiment must *either* be a controlled and replicable test that aims to demonstrate a known truth *or* that it is a course of action undertaken when the outcome is unknown. However, experimentation within the Research Forum both replicated methods and encounters and took courses of

action where the outcomes were unknown. The remainder of this chapter discusses this in practice.

## <2>The Productive Margins Research Forum

Research Forum experimentation involved co-producing research questions, methods and outputs with communities at the margins. As a community, the Forum was made up of academics, community organisation workers and the research programme administrators. As a site of experimentation, it was where we collectively identified research projects that could develop regulatory regimes that would engage communities. It was where, in Foucault's terms, fields of action were governed. The Forums were a repeated structure and yet each meeting was unique, with an unknown outcome. The projects that emerged from them arose out of everyday lives rather than from the bureaucratic needs of mainstream institutions. Our methodology of co-production started from two principles: firstly that academics and community organisations should be partners not only in the delivery of the research programme, but also its design; and secondly that new understandings arise when we reflect what we think we know against others who bring to the field different perspectives. The Research Forum was the primary instrument through and with which we looked at the work of the programme 'on its way to being something else and strategises about how to participate in that process of becoming' (Gibson-Graham, 2008, 16).

The Forum first emerged on paper, before it was realised in practice. Central to the original research funding application was the idea of a collective space for generating and honing research questions. Somewhat unusually for a research application, we did not begin by

defining precisely the sites of investigation nor all of the research questions. Instead, there was an intentional space for openness and a process for identifying together what were the important questions to ask. Regular Forum meetings were planned for those conversations amongst all the members of the project team to take place. The Forum would drive the research agenda and oversee and reflect upon that research. It was much more than an 'advisory group' in that the Forum was intended to comprise all programme participants as an attempt to create greater equality of partnership.

Over the course of the research, the Forum passed through three broad stages. The first phase was dominated by a year of introductions: of ourselves and the organisations we are a part of; the range of disciplines and practices across the Forum membership; the aims and core programme research focus on regulating for engagement. We adopted a range of methods for this first year. At the opening Forum, we invited members to bring along objects and photographs that were meaningful to them. People brought a wide range of objects, including a model motorbike, a pamphlet celebrating Welsh rugby, a community action plan for Brislington, a photograph from the University of Local Knowledge project in Knowle West, and a map of all of the accessible toilets in Bedminster. These performed as 'boundary objects' (Star, 1988; 2010) or, in other words, as objects with interpretative flexibility, material-structural organising qualities and specific scales. Boundary objects are things that we act with in groups to identify and negotiate our similarities and differences. The objects that we brought with us to the first Forum meeting were used to elicit key themes and concerns held by members and provided entry points for co-investigators to interpret the complex critical-theoretical terrain of regulation at a range of scales.

We intentionally rotated venues around the ‘homes’ of the different project partners who would host the Forum so as to offer an insight into their worlds. Over the course of the first three Forums, we moved from a large meeting space with views across the city in the University of Bristol, to office and community space in the Gurnos housing estate on the edge of Merthyr Tydfil which is home to the 3Gs Development Trust, to the farm and kitchens established by Knowle West Media Centre on the urban-rural fringes of south Bristol. As well as getting to know where – quite literally – we were coming from, the Forum meetings in the first year played a key role in finding a common language for the research as the diverse members of the project team came to know - and trust - each other. Key here was identifying a common understanding of co-production. As we discovered, we had different starting premises and assumptions about what it meant. For some, co-production followed Elinor Ostrom’s sense that ‘co-production is a process through which inputs from individuals who are not “in” the same organization are transformed into goods and services’ (1996, 1073). Others understood co-production in terms of community-university collaboration (Facer and Enright, 2016), as participatory action research (Brydon-Miller and Coghlan, 2014), and as community-based participatory research (see Hall, Tandon and Tremblay, 2015). Although we entered into working together with some understanding of the diverse ways in which all co-investigators understood co-production, these differences shaped - indeed regulated - the ways in which we understood what it meant for academics and other-than-academics to work together.

This early stage of the Research Forum was challenging for many, both academics and community partners. Many were itching to get started on the actual work of research, and so were keen to settle on precise projects and directing financial resource into on-the-

ground working. However, the academic research context had a regulatory force on our working as we needed to use the Forum to develop projects that were guided by robust research questions and methods. In order to get to that stage, emergent groups needed some funding to support meetings and scoping work. Yet, for some this entailed a certain amount of professional jostling to ensure that their individual and organisations' interests were served and to ensure that they could see some return on their investment of time and energy in the process. For other Forum members, there was frustration at the apparent blockage to proceeding to the research project stage, fuelled by an anxiety about timescales and outputs.

A second phase of the Forum began to emerge after a year of meeting together. It was at this point that the Forum moved from being a space for introducing the programme, each other, the places we come from, and the shared language of co-produced research alongside exploring the research themes of common interest. Now we began to collectively and actively shape the research agenda. Focusing on the original Productive Margins subthemes of 'harnessing digital spaces', 'mobilising neighbourhoods' and 'spaces for dissent', the second phase of the Forum saw the emergence of clustered interests around poverty, food, resilience, and loneliness and isolation. Academic leads for each working group were initially identified, although these changed significantly between this Forum and the eventual confirmation of the projects by the seventh Forum hosted by Coexist, at Hamilton House. Over the spring and summer of 2014, the possible working group that focused on resilience fell away and we were left with Food, Poverty and Loneliness and Isolation. At this point, we can say the Forum moved into a third phase.



What is striking is that during the third phase of the Forum, the working groups became the central focus and energy in the programme. Forum meetings became an opportunity to work productively together in smaller groups but within the shared - and enabling - structural space of the larger group that the Forum represented. It offered a chance for rapid feedback on ideas and the chance to sense-check with the wider group. Moving from the second to third phase, the locus of power shifted from the Forum having a perceived centralised 'parental' role distributing money to worthy projects, towards a more distributed structure in which the working groups held the power to direct research and, indeed, to direct the overall direction of the Productive Margins programme.

### **<2>Forum methods: conflict and rough consensus**

From the outset, Productive Margins sought to embed co-production as both a method of programme management and as research design. To that end, the Management Team invited the different academic and community partners to organise Forums and to use their own facilitation methods to structure the gatherings. The aim was to create a sense of collective ownership and responsibility in order to foster co-production rather than simple engagement, involvement, or consultation. It was also to foreground the way in which all attempts at government, even those that are co-produced, involve some form of directing the conduct of individuals or of groups (Foucault, 2000, 341). Over the nearly 20 Forums that took place between 2013 and 2018, we used a range of methods, including object-based elicitation, mapping, arts-based methods spanning drama workshops to computational art, small group discussions, field trips, collective food making and sharing, fishbowl exercises, presentations, and discussion (see Text Box).

Overtly arts-based methods and discussion of artistic practice-as-research generated the most conflict within Forums (see also Douglas, 2018; Pool, 2018). The October 2013 (Knowle West Media Centre, Bristol), March 2014 (Butetown Community Centre, Cardiff), July 2014 (Coexist, Bristol) and January 2015 (Cardiff University) Forums used creative practices as facilitation methods and as subjects for discussion. Productive Margins was committed to the knowledge-producing potential of arts and humanities disciplines and practices alongside the social sciences, and so at the third Forum, we worked with computational artist Matt Olden to experiment with subjecting the regulatory frameworks of the PM programme itself - its minutes, its policies, the transcripts of its meetings - to the algorithmic processes of various software packages. For example, earlier Forum transcripts were transformed through automated processes into surrealist poetry. A different approach to creative practice was taken by the Coexist Forum in July 2014, which used crafting (of our own name badges) and drama workshop techniques such as 'flocking', 'follow the leader' and 'mirroring' as ways to build group dynamic. In other words, in the former event, art itself produced new knowledge about co-production while at the latter event art was a method used to facilitate co-production.

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## **FORUM METHODS**

In addition to our regular methods of small-group discussion, brainstorming and reflective reporting via flipchart paper and sticky notes, we used a range of qualitative and arts-based methods to facilitate collaboration.

**VALUES EXERCISE:** Use structured ethical reflection, based on Brydon-Miller et al (2010). Identify stages of the project (eg seeking funding, planning activities, communicating) and individuals write up on sticky notes the values they think are most important (eg, autonomy, transparency, collective responsibility) to the activity. This exercise helps to manifest commonalities and differences across the group before they become a problem and allows the

group to reflect on strategies for managing difference. This is best used at the very start of a project.

**OBJECT ELICITATION:** People are asked to bring an object (thing, photograph, text, map, etc) with them to the meeting or workshop that in some way responds to the agenda for the day or expresses their relationship with the group. Using objects can deflect interpersonal issues and can provide a way in to challenging conversations about group dynamics and can effectively express an individual's values, ethics or interests (Willig, 2016)

**FIELD TRIPS & RESIDENTIAL WORKING:** Taking people out of their everyday working conditions enabled us to focus collectively on sites and experiences in ways that mediated clashes of expertise. Two-day residential periods gave the group time-limited spaces in which to focus on writing tasks. While this form of working requires budget, it is a cost-effective way to generate a large number of outputs in a concentrated period.

**COLLECTIVE MAKING:** From name badges to lunches to schematic models of regulation made out of wood and wire, collective making is an established method of facilitating collaborative problem solving. Embodied, material practices with objects, textiles, and food present clear examples of pleasurable, radical transformation. If a group can make a salad together, then they can address issues around community food security together.

**FISHBOWL EXERCISE:** The group that has a problem to refine or resolve forms the inner circle. The remaining people form an outer circle, listens and records the discussions of the first group. The rule is that those in the outer circle can only listen and cannot contribute to the discussion in the inner circle. The inner circle may choose to leave one chair empty so that a person from the outer circle may occupy the chair to contribute a pressing thought. However, this is not necessary. Once the inner circle finishes its discussion (10-30min), the outer circle feeds back to the inner what they heard – both content and styles of delivery. This is a useful way to identify problems with group dynamics as well as refining the core questions that need addressing. The rule is that those in the inner circle can only listen to and not rebut the outer circle's feedback. (Eitington, 1996)

**DRAMA EXERCISES:** Eg, flocking, follow the leader, mirroring. These are all exercises that emphasise group working through elements of echoing movement. There are myriad books with theatre games and drama exercises + online resources, such as [http://dbp.theatredance.utexas.edu/teaching\\_strategies](http://dbp.theatredance.utexas.edu/teaching_strategies)

In other Forums, presentations and discussions about the differences between the role of art in social research to engage, repair, and communicate and the role of art as knowledge producing in itself, raised challenging issues for participants with professional track records in working alongside the arts. Attempts to discuss the differences between uses of art-as-method in the social sciences and art-as-knowledge-producing in the arts and humanities – that is, between art as supplementary to the academic paper as research object and art as

the research object in itself – were not entirely unsuccessful. University of Bristol Benjamin Meaker Visiting Fellow, Sharon Irish, an art historian from University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign brought external expertise in socially engaged art practice to the 2014 Forum in Cardiff, yet the Forum questioned what was seen as a polarisation between art that is with and for community wellbeing and art that is both socially engaged and has value as art, within an art discourse. Later, a presentation by artists Close and Remote at the November 2016 Cardiff University Forum, on their initial work for the Regulation project, generated a significant amount of negative response as they attempted to use critical theory as artistic source material rather than following academic conventions of argumentation.

Another site of conflict emerged in those Forums deliberately focused on conflict resolution. Based on the mixed responses of Forum participants to the methods used in the first two Forums in the programme, we decided to work with an external facilitator for the December 2013 workshop at Single Parent Action Network (SPAN). She used a range of methods to generate productive group discussion, and yet the post-Forum feedback from participants was mixed and while some felt the Forum began positively, most agreed that it ended negatively and the Forum was somewhat derailed. As the primary objective of the Forums was the co-generation and co-design of individual research projects, it was imperative that the Forum membership address its differences and find ways to move forward in the spirit of ‘rough consensus’, a term coined in the late 1990s by the Internet Engineering Task Force to enable collaborative, yet pragmatic, decision-making (IETF, 1998).

At the May 2014 Southville Centre Forum, we used a ‘fishbowl’ approach to support the emerging working group projects to identify the areas of their proposed work that needed

development and the aspects of their individual and group approaches to collaboration that might impact on their progress. The fishbowl method is used extensively in teaching, management, and NGO conflict resolution (for a history of this method, see Eittington, 1996). Each working group took it in turns to sit in a circle in the centre of the room, in an open fishbowl – that is, with an additional empty chair. The rest of the Forum sat in an outer circle and engaged in 20 minutes of active listening while the inner circle discussed their projects. If a member in the outer circle wished to contribute, they would enter the centre and sit on the empty chair and then exit once they had contributed. At the end of the 20 minutes, the outer circle then fed back on what they heard and how they heard it in order to develop both the research focus itself and the methods of engagement the group was using. Critical to this process is the need for the inner circle to listen to the outer without speaking back, justifying action and so on. While challenging, fishbowls are successful in other settings. Here, the fishbowl appeared to anger some co-investigators who wished to have the opportunity to argue their cases rather than take on board critique.

In short, despite the wide range of methods used, settings and opportunities for different participants to hold and move the agendas forward, the Forums could become mired in the significant differences in values that individuals and organisations held. The tendencies of governmentality could shift the spirit of experimentation away from an open unknowingness towards the illusion of control offered by clear, repeatable structures and situations. Forum participants were, in the main, powerful agents. Some represented communities in their roles as community development workers; there were many organisation directors and former directors in the room, all of whom have a reasonable

stake in the distinct ethos of their organisations. There was a not insignificant element of competition for resource between organisations.

However, even Forums marked by conflict could be productive. The March 2014 Butetown Community Centre Forum was hosted by Nathan Evans and Allan Herbert of South Riverside Community Development Centre (SRCDC). While that Forum was marked by difficult conversations about the role of art in the programme, the Forum also generated the first iteration of the working group projects. The method by which we began to generate the working group projects was a very simple keyword exercise that asked us to brainstorm possible projects from the themes that had emerged so far in the previous Forums. Top-level themes were, space, representation, food, isolation, poverty, language, resilience and enterprise. We then added sticky notes to those large themes to explore which could emerge as research projects. By the end of the Forum, the detail of our additional notes pointed towards food, isolation, and poverty as the clearest opportunities for co-produced research framed by specific, answerable questions. While some participants were unhappy about the loss of, in particular, space as a focus, it was not possible to frame a specific, achievable research project around that theme, which ended up cross-cutting a number of different projects that we explore in the following chapters.

A year later, we invited Tom Sperlinger (English, Bristol University) and University of Bristol Benjamin Meaker Visiting Fellow, Cheryl Siemers (English, University of Alaska Anchorage), to lead the Forum. Tom's background in community-engaged learning and in working in Palestine complemented Cheryl's expertise in indigenous ways of knowing and her work on community-engaged learning in Alaska. Tom and Cheryl had clear expertise in co-production

and in working effectively with diverse communities. Their Forum held in the University of Bristol in March 2015 revisited all the previous events to try to help the group move forward. We told the person beside us in the circle the story of how we became involved in Productive Margins. A Passions, Skills, Connections exercise then enabled us to map what each of us brought into the programme. The results were as diverse as our understandings of co-production and regulation. Our passions spanned politics, histories of place, equality, grassroots transformative learning, legal processes, food and health, play and families. Our skills included social interaction, quantitative research, action research, administration, community development, and digital media. Our connections spanned artists, computer scientists, activists, higher education institutes, community organisations, ethnic communities, and local government. The next exercise invited participants to move around the room to read and add comments to the posters that the management team had made that summarised the Forums so far, using the Forum reports, photographs and other materials. The two exercises together usefully contextualised the challenges that we experienced in trying to reach even rough consensus on research questions that would frame our individual projects. The Forum summaries and additions by participants at this event also highlighted how very differently people experienced the same events (as well as providing the basis for some of our writing in this chapter).

As we moved into the third phase outlined above, methodological innovation gave way to more of a reporting structure as individual working group projects became more developed. The Forum meetings had served their purpose, which was to co-develop specific, achievable projects in the context of exposure to a wide range of research methods. In the next section, we turn to discuss the role that emotions, values, taste and standpoint played in the Forums

and the challenges that we all faced in embodying the theories that inform our work, from Paolo Freire's notion of 'restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful, critical inquiry' (2008) to John Law's advocacy of mess in social science research (2004).

## **<2>Values, emotions, embodiedness, standpoints**

The initial concept of the Forums recognised that decisions would be informed by opening up challenges rather than closing them down. Challenges often circulated around the strong values, emotions, embodiedness and standpoints that participants brought with them into the Forum setting. Despite the diverse collaborative methods that we employed and attempts to reflect productively on our diversity, it is difficult to identify what we might we have done differently. We were clear from the outset that the Forums were going to be messy. Perhaps we needed to identify and acknowledge more directly from the outset the emotions that were both expressed in the room and simmered below the surface? Perhaps we needed to find more effective methods to manifest the Forums as a process of becoming rather than of knowing and to argue for why this was important?

In the first Forum we were transparent about our ambitions from an emotions- and values-focused position. In an early planning meeting, we agreed to a process that would:

- Model a welcoming, relaxing and non-intimidating environment
- Model both the need for structure and the organic nature of the journey ahead
- Model participatory group involvement and individual 'creative' dialogues
- Further empowerment particularly for those voices that are less likely to be heard/given space, addressing barriers to participation



- Further emotional and intellectual knowledge and awareness of the challenges of group dynamics
- Consider mixed-mode models of communication, co-production of knowledge, use of space including institutional spaces

To return to Foucault's sense of government, these ambitions aimed towards a different sense of ordering people's behaviour, according to self-described positive values. Here we imagined was a space to co-create regulation *for* engagement rather than *for* control. To address those points, we agreed to run the first Forum in a university space in Bristol that was felt to be calm and welcoming, which would be followed by the second Forum in a community space in Wales that exemplified long-standing community-university collaboration and drew on an established infrastructure for the involvement of diverse community members.

The second Forum at Gurnos, Merthyr Tydfil expressed what sociologist John Law describes, in his 'post structuralist detour', as the need to not repress mess in the quest for total, orderly representation (2003, 3). Although in both his article on mess (2003) and book *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (2005), John Law is arguing for the need to embrace and account for messiness in our research practices, we argue that the Forums nicely express the irrepressible and uncontainable mess of all encounters. Mess comes from our diverse emotions, values, experiences, and standpoints. By the end of the second Forum, the messiness of community tensions came to the surface. We had intended to focus on the role of personal narrative and how that might mirror a theme for the day, the politics of data. Although we had agreed that the day would be hosted, curated and

facilitated in a site-specific manner – in other words, that the hosting organisation would take ownership for both the form and content of the day by using their specific community development toolkits with the Productive Margins group – we did not anticipate the emotional journey that this might entail or the specific political contexts being experienced at that time in the community around the organisation and operation of Communities First. From the very outset, the physical journey from Cardiff to Gurnos, through the ex-mining communities of the Rhonda Valley, Abercynon, Merthyr Tydfil meant that we re-visited the loss of the miners' strike on the Valley communities. We then stopped at Aberfan to visit the graves of the 116 children killed by the coal tip that had buried their school in the 1966 disaster.

The collective mapping exercise we had planned was both dialogic and emotional. We began by critiquing the politics of cartography and data and then set to remapping south Wales and the south west of England, using a range of hard copy maps, cutting them up and re-mixing them to create narrative spaces that spoke to our individual and collective embodied experiences of place. Participants spoke of their personal stories relating to the maps, about their family heritage, displacement, love and loss. This evoked for us Sue Cohen's observation: 'I thought as I have in the past how spatially there can appear to be unity, in that space can fix us, but by opening up the fluid boundaries of space we begin to explore more dangerous, unsettling territory' (1998, 372). At the end of the exercise, and with Aberfan still in our minds, we felt unsettled by the politics and ethics of reworking space and place.

After the mapping exercise we were introduced to a musical developed by Gurnos children, which responded to the politics of iron and steel in the Valleys. The undercurrent of loss that began for us at Aberfan and was extended in the mapping exercise, was echoed here and, later, in a discussion of how ghost stories hold the pain of bereavement. In a subsequent Forum we discussed the impact of the miners' strike on present-day communities and considered how grief and 'failed' dissent do not go away but remain beneath the surface, occasionally manifested. While the literature on the relationships between nostalgia, heritage and place is extensive and beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth noting that our experiences of this Forum echo Svetlana Boym's important work on nostalgia and place (2001), which she highlights as an historical emotion tied explicitly to modern notions of the local and universal. That sense of nostalgia relies on narrative strategies such as story-telling, drama, and the tales that guides tell us as they show us places. Geographer Mitch Rose has written specifically about the role of these kinds of performance narratives in the sense-making of place (2008), arguing that those narratives are not separate from or imposed upon place but are, instead, co-constitutive of place.

Tensions arose through a change of mood. Moving from the earlier part of the day's focus on loss, Bristol's Knowle West Media Centre presented *Whose Data?*, a promotional film about the work of five artists who were commissioned in 2011 to work with live, local data and how it can be used to resist and subvert the powers of the State

(<http://whosedata.net/>). Lead artist, Dane Watkins, and commissioned artists Paul Hurley, Richard Layzell, Julie Myers and Susanne Stahl, experimented with comparative weather data, data from the till receipts of local shops, energy consumption, fruit tree locations and ideas of surveillance. The stark differences between the aesthetic values and emotional

registers of the children's musical and *Whose Data?* produced tensions in the room, which we filled with assumptions about how others made sense of the different works. However, those emotions were never surfaced explicitly in the Forum and we were left in the heaviness of polite silence. Certainly, there was a tangible restlessness amongst some of the community members by this stage.

Forum participants then raised the matter of funding and voiced frustration that it had not been addressed earlier. How were they expected to sustain their involvement in the programme without funding beyond support for time spent in meetings? People were tired as they had had to get up early to make the journey. There was friction and a splitting between community organisers and academics. The sum of £500 for seedcorn funding for the initial community participation in developing research ideas was not felt to be adequate to achieve anything meaningful, despite the fact that community participants were remunerated for time spent on the Productive Margins programme. However, adding to the reception of the seedcorn funding as too meagre, was a negative reaction to the idea that the Forum would then collectively decide which research ideas should go forward.

Although the rationale was to generate a pool of project ideas from which the strongest could be taken further, this approach to democratic decision-making was seen to run the risk of cutting organisations adrift were their projects not chosen. There was a sense that Productive Margins might go the way of many research projects: utilising community knowledge whilst leaving community organisations to flounder in the hostile environment of austerity. Moreover, in the context of politically motivated austerity, how were pressured partners to be expected to retain the staff and volunteers to deliver their part of this slow-

moving programme? 'What do we get out of this'? 'What are your motives'? 'Just give us the money and let us get on with it'. The emotional responses of research partners evoked the complex workings of governmentality that constrained ambitions to experimentation.

The Forums might be described as having played out the 'forming, storming, norming, performing' patterns of group dynamics, with the second Forum resonating with the tensions of the 'storming' stage, when differences in power, status, working methods etc. start to surface (Tuckman, 1965). However, the lived experience of the Forums was messier than Tuckman's managerial model. John Law (2003) argues that social science methods tend not to lean towards different and inconsistent realities but look instead for clarity and precision, which represses the uncontainable of all social encounters. The idea that things in the world might be fluid, elusive, ambiguous, multiple or unthinkable is not given credence. Although our ambitions for the Forum were well formulated, our methods could not resolve a desire to remain open and experimental with a desire for smooth, unconflicted collaboration. Law suggests that rather than everything being considered to be present and known, researchers must ask what is being repressed. But how were we to regulate the Forums more knowingly in order to make emotions, values and standpoints manifest productively? Whereas the funding body gave Productive Margins the rare opportunity to make manifest how regulation might be perceived on the margins with some licence to be 'messy', most funding is founded on repressing the mess: 'grant giving bodies all tend to buy into the full package of common sense realism. They don't much care for the vague, the imprecise, the multiple (Law, 2003, 9). Law argues for new disciplines of research that acknowledge 'that our methods are always more or less unruly assemblages' (Law, 2003, 11).

In the Third Forum, Tehseen Noorani presented findings from his initial scoping studies (2013 and 2014) and spoke to the question of unruliness. He asked us to anticipate and make use of serendipity – of not knowing what will emerge, that the journey will be a combination of luck and sagacity, receptively working together whilst leaving loose ends. It was at this Forum that the seed for the Alonely project emerged out of what was initially a small desultory group meeting at the end of the day, to discuss possible research themes. And while some co-investigators at the fourth Forum in Cardiff questioned the assumed need to involve artists in all projects (they were assured that they did not need to), Southville Community Development Association (SCDA) enthusiastically enmeshed theatre in the Alonely research project, which was pivotal to its ensuing success.

Indeed, not all co-investigators were negatively affected by the tensions in the Forum. Rather than feeling alienated by the messiness of the Forum, some people, especially those from the South Riverside Community Development Centre (SRCDC) in Cardiff, understood and embraced its ambitions. For some, the experimental nature of the Forum was one of the most inspiring aspects of Productive Margins. As Nathan Evans commented at the time:

The Forum creates a natural organic open space, a petri dish – it's a laboratory for experimentation – multi-disciplinary academics, community activists – inspirational – that space allowed for us to come together to start conversations – about children, families and poverty. An incubation space.

The experimental nature of the Forums emerged through its repeated format of encouraging hosts to structure and facilitate the days using their own organisational methods balanced against an open approach to encourage unexpected outcomes. While high-risk and highly emotional, the Forums demonstrated that frictions, discomfort and challenging critique can lead to productive work.

We return to Gibson-Graham's argument that opens this chapter: to adopt an experimental approach in research is to commit to learning rather than judging and to remain open and alert to the possibilities of what we may learn in new and emergent situations (2008, 16). That openness extends to our own understandings of ourselves in the experimental space. We are all hybrids, with multiple identities and interests, and some of us have both research and activist backgrounds (Cohen, S. et al, 2017). We frame things differently depending on the contexts from which we emerge and in which we act. Our hybrid roles, disciplines, standpoints, values, emotions and experiences all came together in the Forums as forms of praxis, in the sense that Nik Theodore invoked praxis in his 2015 University of Bristol seminar on the ethics of co-producing urban research: as collective reflection and analysis, which collapses the distance between the 'other' and reimagines the space that divide us in order to suspend hierarchies in the process. On the crucial question of standpoint, which owes a debt to the feminist standpoint theory of scholars such as Sandra Harding (1992) and Nancy Hartsock (2004 [1983]), Theodore argued that we have to stretch and democratise methods by recognising that forgotten places and spaces are also forgotten sites of knowledge. Research ethics demand acknowledging both the value of disruption and *dissensus* while also recognising the ethical responsibilities and values embodied in other-than-academic standpoints (Klassen, 2016; Ranciere, 2006; Reed, 2012).

## <2>Conclusion

In this chapter, we have described sites and moments of intensity: fishbowl exercises, cultural appropriations in workshop settings, self-regulating eyebrows, concealed frustrations with the ways that other people work and the values they hold. These were also sites and moments of intense productivity, where new collaborative relationships emerged and stuckness shifted to produce the startlingly new. Over the course of the programme, the Forum changed and shifted. In part the changes were the inevitable result of changes in personnel over the course of a five-year programme. People and organisations drifted in and out. But the changes that took place were more than simply the result of the changes in who was present at any one given meeting. Changes emerged from an organic entity, a constant becoming, in the way that Gibson-Graham describe it at the start of this chapter. Most marked was the emergence of three core projects that were birthed out of the Forum, grew up within it and then assumed a dynamism of their own that re-energised the Forum as a site of experimentation with both co-production and regulation.

The Forum was not, however, a centre: it was a middle, a place in which to begin to act. Important questions around forms of expertise and the role of the academic have been raised and debated at the heart of our meetings and, crucially, in hushed tones and snatched chats in the corridors. We worked hard at working through what research is and might look and feel like in a context of universities and communities working together. We explored what was happening at the margins of power and at the margins of the Forum. The Forum was an assembling of actors, processes, emotions and messy non-human elements that, to return to Foucault's sense of governmentality, designate 'the way in which the



conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed' and which control the possible fields of action of others (2000, 341). But that is perhaps to impose an overly specific academic language on the Forum that its diverse participants would not recognise. Part of the challenge of reflecting on the praxis of the Forum is to do so in ways that speak to the lived experiences of its constituents. Perhaps one way of describing the Forum is suggested in Marisol de la Cadena's work in the Peruvian Andes: 'our conversation became the *shared* site where our worlds also *diverged* as they emerged in/with their constitutive difference. A partial connection par excellence, "our conversation" was the complex site from where [we] felt and thought with [our] friends, even when [we were] doing it alone' (2017, 2).

Our embrace of experimentation has entailed remaining open to learning, to possibility, to the unknown and to the challenging. The Forum was a site in which we struggled to come together to create a coherent approach to co-production. At the same time, the Forum powerfully reminded all of us that the urgency in our task was to work through questions of regulation collectively, in new ways – ways that could hold differences without the need to represent or resolve. Informing our understanding has been a commitment to the value of interdisciplinary praxis, where praxis has been understood and mobilised differently by all of us in the diverse contexts of Hannah Arendt's theory of action (1998), a Gramscian sense of embodied, practised theory (2005), and Paolo Freire's sense, outlined in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2001). Praxis involves all the things that we bring with us into the room – our concepts, standpoints, values, emotions and our own embodiedness that regulate our co-production and produce the limits of our experimentation. Where collaboration can be messy and anti-hierarchical, as Jo Freeman has argued in her pioneering essay 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness' (1970), unless individuals and groups within collaborative settings seek

to make visible the power structures – their privilege that they bring into the room with them – then claims to democracy are naive at best. Making transparent the means by which collective responsibility can enable the productive exploration of differences is, therefore, necessary.

Yet, as public administration scholars Ann Marie Thomson and James L. Perry discuss (2006), those processes of collaboration can be a Latourian ‘black box’. When sociologist Bruno Latour writes, in *Science in Action* (1987) and *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (1999), of the black box, he is referring to the ways in which work is made invisible through its performance. When collaboration and co-production are seen as inherently positive, democratic methods, without close description of the means by which they are undertaken, co-production becomes a black box and can mask the power structures that Freeman raises (1970). Thomson and Perry draw on Donna Wood and Barbara Gray’s synthesis (1991) of multidisciplinary approaches to collaboration in order to highlight the antecedents, processes and outcomes of successful collaboration. They agree that there remains a significant gap in understanding the interactive processes of collaboration (Wood and Gray, 1991, 21). The antecedents, processes and outcomes that they schematise nicely echo our experiences in the Forums discussed in this chapter.

<Insert Figure 2.1 here>

Figure 2.1: *The Antecedent-Process-Outcome Framework* (Thomson and Perry, 2006, 21)

What would we do differently if we were to do all of this again? How might our findings be used to model a future project? There is no single answer to this, although we might suggest

that co-production projects spend more, rather than less, time at the beginning to keep the spaces open for the different ways in which language is mobilised by individuals and organisations. Projects need to embed practical reflexive processes such as journaling that are shared back to the group. Collaborators need to build in strategies for holding difference without rushing towards mediation or amelioration. We also strongly suggest that first meetings involve values-mapping exercises so that a group understands what motivates its individuals to take part. Moreover, projects need courage to not shy away from open discussions about money and power. Who holds the budgets? What are the regulatory constraints and why? It is vital to not pretend to have a flat, structureless project when the budget-holding institutions are themselves hierarchical. The Forum process we have discussed in this chapter highlights the considerable challenges of co-production. The power and politics at play in meeting spaces manifested the agency that community organisations always-already possess and which is an important corrective to notions of 'giving voice' to communities. While the Forum showed that agency is distributed in complex ways, it raised important questions about whose voices are really heard and listened to. In the chapters that follow in this volume, readers can begin to trace the diverse journeys that projects took and consider how these might be mapped back to the ways in which the Forum operated as a space of government, a site of experimentation and a shared space in which worlds diverged as they emerged in the collective work of difference.