

Laidlaw Undergraduate Research: Reflective Report

Co-Creating Research Priorities with Communities in Seacroft

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Research Report

1.1 Introduction and Aims

This ongoing project seeks to democratise decision making and question research norms by providing platforms and the opportunity for community members to undertake research themselves. Practices and conclusions

from individual research works will guide future funding directions in Seacroft and potentially become an example of the impact of community-led research for other areas. Seacroft is a generally working-class suburb of Leeds, home to numerous community ventures and spaces, making it fertile grounds for community-driven projects. It will also be receiving additional funding for the next decade under the government's Pride in Place scheme, so establishing a framework for the real representation of residents in decisions continues to be vital.

Research and knowledge production generally are critical to how our society operates. The ways in which we obtain knowledge and classify the world become incorporated into our institutions, our identities and our power structures (Turnhout et al. 2020). Yet research is never a neutral pursuit: institutions and our social systems themselves determine what counts as valid knowledge and what knowledge should be pursued (Jasanoff, 2004). In this way, social order and scientific knowledge are co-produced; inseparable and mutually constitutive, it is not the case that our society is a result of evidence-based principles or scientific reasoning. Instead, the systems that already exist permit and facilitate research that generate support for themselves, whilst conflicting research that questions existing systems struggles to take off.

This way, co-production reproduces existing power dynamics: research-agendas remain largely determined by academics and policy actors, which can marginalise local perspectives. Standard metrics – GDP, unemployment, crime rates and more – are easily measured and quantified, but overlook many dimensions of genuine change. This project seeks to re-evaluate what impact can be by understanding what truly matters to community members. We aimed to platform locals, equipping them with the capabilities for rigorous research and allowing them to create agendas and priorities as they see fit.

1.2 Methodology

The nature of the research meant our methods were qualitative and participatory. With guidance from the ‘Transformative Spaces’ framework by Pereira et al. (2020), the project was initially split into five phases: the problem definition, operationalisation, tactical, outcomes, and reflection phases. Through the LS14 Trust, individuals identified as community figureheads, such as employees of the community radio station or of local youth centres, were contacted to participate. They attended a workshop hosted on the university campus where they established their own research question, selected methods for data collection, and received guidance on ethical practices. Following this, the community researchers – primarily through interviews and surveys – returned with data about their selected topics, constituting the first three phases.

I joined the project whilst participants were investigating their questions, and so my role centred around analysis, reflection and paving the way for potential applications of findings. To familiarise myself with process, I conducted literature reviews on relational impact, transformative spaces and community-led research. I used online catalogues and indices such as JSTOR and OpenAlex for existing academic papers on the topics, which allowed me to better understand the reasoning behind, and ultimate goals of, the project. Whilst this exact structure of a community-led endeavour was entirely novel, I intended to use existing literature to find potentially useful methods that could be adapted to suit our needs in reflection and analysis. Starting with the core publications that the project leads used, I used backwards citation searches to find further relevant material over a two-week timeframe.

Dr. Nussey suggested we implement ‘Listening Rooms’ in the process: extended, anonymised and transcribed conversations between fellow participants that allowed for reflection of their experience (Heron, Parkin, 2023). Fundamentally, listening rooms involve no active engagement from the researcher.



Snapshot from listening room briefing presentation.

Prompts were designed to lead to dialogue about how the process was, and how being a community member changes outcomes, but also dialogue about Seacroft and individual research topics specifically. Although we ultimately wanted to know the impact of platforming community research, I recognised that our research as the institution was not the priority when making arrangements for the listening rooms and therefore avoided a more extractive situation. Online in pairs or trios, the researchers discussed what they heard whilst undertaking their research, what that told them about their area, what they felt differences were as community members compared to third parties and how they would allocate future funding based on their findings. This way, outcomes of the listening rooms could be helpful in the LS14 Trust's future endeavours and could be used as evidence beyond our project, and evaluation remained in community control.

Finally, I designed and facilitated a workshop on communication. The goal was to generate ideas on how the community may wish to disseminate their work. I gave guidance on the purpose of communicating and effective communication principles for the participants to take onboard. The workshop was designed for collaboration, with interactive activities rather than a typical presentation format, and dedicated time to share thoughts. My design aimed to keep decisions about how to communicate their findings in the participants' hands, while equipping them with the resources needed to make informed decisions about how best to present their research. I took notes and photos for thematic analysis throughout.

1.3 Findings

1.3.1 Literature Reviews

A key finding of my literature reviews was that there was little documented work of community-led research in practice. This meant the project drew from a variety of recommendations and informed suggestions rather than methods we could directly replicate. I comprehended the core transformative space model and the volatility of transitions of any form, with the future uncertain and unpredictable. Literature highlighted the importance of adaptation in transitions research; constant experimentation and feedback-response systems are necessary when multiple structures are interacting and coevolving with the potential to be highly disruptive to the regime (Loorbach, 2017). Whilst the project was not of the scale or magnitude to be revolutionary, I took onboard the sensitivities required when researching any transitions that look to shift norms and status quos.

1.3.2 Listening Rooms

I identified 9 topics through thematic analysis of listening rooms, 4 of which were prevalent in all the conversations hosted. Regarding the area, the researchers noted that interviewees felt pride - ‘everybody we spoke to was happy to be in Seacroft’ - yet did not shy away from discussing its issues. Talking points could ‘flip really easily’, suggesting that residents were knowledgeable, discerning and realistic. The researchers also found that accessibility was a primary factor in limiting uptake and widespread use of the various community assets and resources rather than a lack of resources available. Difficulty in travel within the area prevents people from using facilities that are meant for them but not within their immediate neighbourhood. This suggests that there is not a lack of community drive or ambition: numerous spaces, classes, activities and ventures exist, all backed and supported by passionate locals. Instead, it is a wider issue of transportation, logistics and urban infrastructure, which is the responsibility of local authority.

About Seacroft	About the Process
Sentiments of pride and belonging amongst residents	Trust and familiarity open the door to honest data
Difficulty in reaching people and accessing existing provisions	Insider research has drawbacks

Table 1. The most prevalent themes covered in the listening rooms.

One prompt was specifically designed to lead to dialogue about how the research process was. This led to the most prevalent and well-discussed theme of all: trust and familiarity leading to honest responses. The researchers all noted that their personal and intimate understanding of their community, and their well-established relationships with interviewees, helped immensely in breaking down barriers. Respondents understood ‘why [we] were asking the questions [we] were asking’, whereas outsiders may provoke people to ‘hesitate to say how they really think’. Further, local knowledge and humour meant researchers were able to pick up on context or tone that outsiders can miss. Previous instances had left poor perception of research work behind, with one researcher recalling data was collected and sent to central government, with no follow-up or explanation as to why. The researchers

unanimously felt they were able to have candid interviews as they approached the work from a place of existing mutual respect.

However, the researchers were also aware of the number of drawbacks to being an insider. Firstly, some noted that respondents did not consider the interaction serious or legitimate. Respondents, although more numerous and more willing to engage, may have given less thought to their responses than they would have to a 'more official' researcher, understandably perceiving a more casual dynamic.

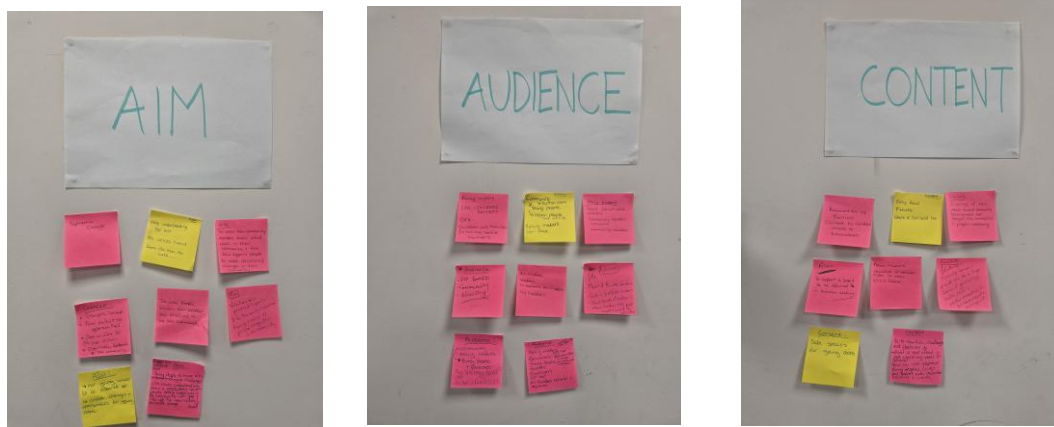
Second, there is certain emotional weight that the researchers took on. Having a personal connection to an individual who has revealed certain hardship through interviews is difficult to navigate. Researchers may feel far more obliged to act as insiders and are more emotionally invested in the work they do. This can make community-led research a tolling experience, and the team noted they weren't always prepared to hear about some of the harsh realities their peers had been facing. 'It hits us harder than somebody coming from the outside', so whilst more honesty emerged, the researchers' attachment to their community meant their work and their feelings become inseparable.

Finally, the researchers recognised they approached their data collection and topics with preconceptions and biases. Although inherent and potentially beneficial to the process, the researchers were conscious of how their beliefs affected their work. Community members 'wanted to go in as open-minded as [they] could', yet their knowledge and wisdom directed what their research work covered. This conflict suggests participants had fully understood ethical research practices, raising these concerns without any prompt, and were capable of scrutinising their own research through an academic lens.

1.3.3 Communication Workshop

The online presentation and following workshop found that the researchers will always prioritise disseminating their work back to their community. While I structured my advice around a form of community publication, the discussion confirmed this conclusion that, whichever way the team were to decide to communicate, the audience should first and foremost be Seacroft residents. However, the researchers were also aware of the need to highlight their work to policymakers: ultimately, a webpage showcasing their work was decided to be the best way forward. Further, a participatory and interactive exhibition will be curated. This method was chosen to differentiate Seacroft community research from other presentations that are typical of institutions and governing bodies, and to ensure the researchers did not feel obligated to speak publicly. Both ideas demonstrate how community members are acutely aware of what communication is meaningful and representative of their endeavour, and their existing knowledge translates in every stage of the process. The focus on accessibility for

presenters and the audience alike is a testament to the benefits of community-led research, when typical knowledge-producing systems often keep their knowledge inaccessible to the wider public.



Photos from the communication workshop. Participants added ideas about each theme.

1.4 Discussion and Conclusion

Our findings suggest that this process of community-led research was effective in allowing community members to set their own priorities and agendas. Our study also questions the belief that academics and current knowledge systems are superior in creating change. However, there is much refinement needed of our process before any rigorous conclusions can be made, and this study was only the first step in what I hope to be a fundamental shift in how policy is influenced in future.

Firstly, researchers became involved in this project with existing knowledge, and therefore deep preconceptions of their area. This knowledge can only be gained by locals, who have daily and vast experience of Seacroft. The project looked to harness this knowledge; with an intimate understanding of the area, community people can most efficiently address issues and topics they know to be of concern. An outsider in the same position will look to address typical metrics of quality of life or of prosperity, which often do not accurately portray reality. Communities are fundamentally social constructs, inexplicable by GDP or growth alone. Indeed, our participants selected research topics they understood to be important, and this understanding is based on years of experience living in Seacroft, superseding inconsistent and turbulent government lifespans. The highly specific research topics covered imply our project was successful in utilising local knowledge.

However, consequently data the researchers gathered reflects the values and beliefs the researchers held prior, and so surveys and interviews were tailored to fit their

agendas. There are obvious and prevalent biases in the methodology of the researchers, impacting findings. Outputs were predominantly qualitative and interpreted as the researchers saw fit. Crucially, this project was unique in utilising these biases, however. It is these very preconceptions that differentiate a community researcher from an outside researcher, and so the biases of participants are in fact a benefit rather than a concern.

A refinement necessary for more concrete conclusions would be a higher rate of participation. 10 community members were involved across 7 individual topics of research. This sample size limits the significance of any results, and whilst the researchers came from a variety of backgrounds and covered an expansive range of issues, a larger scale study would be needed to substantiate our findings.

In future, a better-defined timeframe prior to any study commencing would improve our study's effectiveness and scalability. As community members, individuals had other duties and responsibilities outside of the project. While this is inevitable, difficulty in arranging dates and organising workshops meant delays were frequent which could strain resources in other circumstances. This could be helped by preparing a full schedule that participants must be able to commit to before being involved. A knock-on consequence could be a reduction in participation; improved funding and reimbursement to incentivise involvement and allow community members to hold the project in greater priority amongst their other commitments would be beneficial.

This framework could potentially be incorporated in post-16 school curriculums, much like work experience. Community research could be presented as an extra-curricular opportunity; full-time students could become full-time researchers for a set duration, which could allow for easier structuring and planning. It could even be obligatory for adults, much like jury service. Whilst I am uncertain how this would function or be implemented, our project highlighted the need for greater engagement, and a way to enable participants to prioritise their research would significantly increase impact and reach.

Overall, our project was successful in platforming community members and their concerns. The entire process was community-led, from problem identification to dissemination. At no point would typical knowledge systems have gathered the same findings, drawn the same conclusions, or presented their research like the Seacroft researchers will. Regarding re-framing impact, this is still largely yet to be determined. Policy actors and decisionmakers will be involved in the next stages, from which we will determine how the project has influenced their perceptions. We are now beginning work on a Seacroft Community Research webpage, using ideas and anecdotes that emerged in the workshop and listening rooms. Further, we will be organising an active participation event to showcase individual research as well as the framework generally.

I would advocate for any future community-led research projects, and hope our study will shift how, and by who, policy is influenced moving forward.

Reflections

2.1 Personal Impact and Capacity Development

I was very keen to begin work on this project; I am a passionate advocate for the role of communities in our society, and the opportunity to understand and substantiate their importance was compelling. Further, I would be a part of research that looks to democratise decision-making, devolving power towards individuals most affected by change. This project felt like it had the potential to be seriously meaningful whilst also being aligned with my personal beliefs and values, and so I was eager and excited.

I quickly, however, found myself doubting my position and ability. As I had joined an ongoing project for its conclusion, I felt that I was relying on existing relationships, foundations and research. I had not been responsible in any part for where the project had got to, and yet any work I was to do was absolutely reliant on the hard work of so many. From the project leads who had orchestrated everything, to academics who had publicised and coined the frameworks we were using; from a previous scholar, to the many community members who were participating and actively engaged undertaking their own research; I definitely felt out of my depth and somewhat an imposter.

Although meeting my supervisors put me at ease, I could not help but question my place in such meetings, still knowing so little about what I was meant to be doing. My initial tasks to get me up to speed – comprehending literature of research frameworks the project is based on – were helpful, but also felt overwhelming, and at points exacerbated my feeling that I wasn't cut out to be working on the project.

It took time and a conscious effort to remind myself that I did in fact belong, and that I had earned the right to be part of the project. It is natural to feel an outsider or imposter whenever beginning something brand new, and this feeling should only be a signal that a huge opportunity to learn is on the horizon. As I began to find my feet and develop my workflow, getting a sense of the larger objectives and my role in achieving them, I became more comfortable in my new-found responsibility. This was a test of my willingness to embrace change: being able to think more objectively and critically to reshape fear and anxiety into clarity is a clear improvement in my performance capacities.

After some time working with literature, I was ready to begin work on the next phases of the project: outcomes and reflections. I would be applying the knowledge I had gathered and designing methods that would create tangible outputs. I would be engaging with the community researchers for the first time and so this felt like the crux of my involvement. However, it was at this stage I ran into the most challenge. Working with ordinary working people means our project was not their priority. They have livelihoods: hobbies, duties of care and employment all did and rightly should take first concern. This meant it was incredibly difficult to arrange dates for researchers to regroup and begin the next steps. Some individuals had not completed their research while others had. I also did not have direct contact with any of the participants, and Chris, who oversees the LS14 Trust, was often tangled up in a vast array of different tasks and schemes, so was difficult to reach.

It was an admittedly frustrating period of time. My fellow scholars were well into their research periods: some were nearing finishing their posters and reports, whilst I had little to show for my work. My preparation for workshops and listening rooms was entirely complete; I had understood literature and themes as extensively as I could; I had been as flexible and available for any in-person workshop dates as I possible, travelling to and from Leeds regularly because of the possibility an arrangement may be made that I required my attendance. Despite this, my research had hit a complete standstill. There was no progress in securing dates and no sign anything was to change.

At this point, I decided to take initiative and go to Seacroft. I did not have any particular intentions other than to understand the area more and hopefully talk to some locals. I was warmly welcomed by many, notably Anne, the vicar of St. Richard's Church. As my project had stopped, I began considering undertaking some parallel research. St. Richard's hosts a weekly 'larder', where donated food and purchased essentials are available for those in need, and so I considered creating weekly recipes utilising produce that was in stock that would be accessible online. My idea was to grow a shared enterprise, where community members could add to recipes and share their knowledge, which Anne was enthusiastic of. Unfortunately, I did not follow through with this as my project got back on track, but I was able to volunteer in the church for their weekly free-of-charge lunch club. In this way, the delay in the project led to an incredibly positive experience for me; I am grateful to the kind residents who made me feel at home, and intend on volunteering more in Seacroft now my project has come to an end.

In hindsight, my frustration in the delay was also misplaced. I was working with people who are parents, carers, are in full-time employment and have their own lives to live. It was selfish to feel hard-done-by or wronged regardless of the problems I was encountering. Once I was able to approach the situation with empathy and recognise my only solution was to adapt and remain flexible, more opportunities unfolded. This

was an immensely valuable challenge; my patience and resilience has grown as a result.

Meeting the community researchers for the first time was a personal highlight. I was stunned by their dedication, professionalism and personability. I always enjoy meeting new people, but getting to work together to a shared goal, where my skills were recognised, respected and useful, felt hugely rewarding. Major, a previous scholar working on a prequel study, had encountered some issues with being accepted by the community, which he was able to overcome through building trust and his clear passion. I thank Major for laying the foundations, as I was warmly welcomed by the group. Overall, I have found the experience full of challenges, learning curves and enjoyment. The project has therefore been invaluable to my personal development, and I have nothing but appreciation and gratitude for the opportunity.

2.2 Dissemination and Future Intentions

I have not yet had the chance for formal dissemination of my research. This is in part because our research is incomplete; we will gather more findings from building the webpage and hosting the event. My supervisors, however, intend to submit our work for publication, which I will support however I can. This prospect is exciting and a motivation to remain dedicated for the next stages. I am considering disseminating my research within my university at a faculty-wide event soon, with the hopes to inspire potential Laidlaw scholars or any eager student looking to carry out their own research.

I entered the project as an advocate for communities and an increase in their autonomy. Working on this study has reaffirmed this passion, and made me realise this working with communities could be a career I am interested in. At the least, I am now acutely aware I will pursue a career involving interacting and engaging with people. I will be continuing my research over the coming months and remain active in the Seacroft community.

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