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# Researching with Communities: Towards a Leading Edge Theory and Practice for Community Engagement

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# Researching with Communities: Towards a Leading Edge Theory and Practice for Community Engagement

## **Abstract**

This project seeks to determine the extent to which complexity theory might offer the most effective means for understanding how communities can be successfully engaged in and with academic research. In the project, we adopted a case study approach, working with participants in a number of projects which had significant community engagement. These projects were all supported by the UK Beacons for Public Engagement, with which we also collaborated in our work. From the outset our research was informed by a Community Advisory Group, comprising community partners and engagement specialists.

The objective of our research was to identify the initial conditions that facilitated the creation of enabling environments for community engagement. A number of the research results challenged our theoretical assumptions. Revisiting these results, we were led to develop a new way of conceptualising community engagement, which we propose to call an „engagement cycle“. We suggest that this engagement cycle comprises a number of differential „phases“, each of which is constituted by its own characteristic processes.

This notion of an engagement cycle raises further research questions relating to the applicability of complexity theory to community engagement, as well as suggesting a number of issues that may inform the future development of the Connected Communities community engagement strategy.

## **Keywords**

practice, leading, engagement, community, theory, towards, communities, researching, edge

## **Disciplines**

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# Connected Communities

## Researching with Communities

Durie, R., Lundy, C., Wyatt, K.



# **Researching with Communities**

## ***Towards a Leading Edge Theory and Practice for Community Engagement***

**Durie, R., Lundy, C., Wyatt, K.**

### **Executive Summary**

This project seeks to determine the extent to which complexity theory might offer the most effective means for understanding how communities can be successfully engaged in and with academic research. In the project, we adopted a case study approach, working with participants in a number of projects which had significant community engagement. These projects were all supported by the UK Beacons for Public Engagement, with which we also collaborated in our work. From the outset our research was informed by a Community Advisory Group, comprising community partners and engagement specialists.

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This notion of an engagement cycle raises further research questions relating to the applicability of complexity theory to community engagement, as well as suggesting a number of issues that may inform the future development of the Connected Communities community engagement strategy.

### **Researchers and Project Partners**

Dr Robin Durie (University of Exeter), Dr Craig Lundy (University of Exeter), Dr Katrina Wyatt (Peninsula College of Medicine & Dentistry)

### **Key words**

Community engagement with research, complexity theory, engagement cycles

## **I. INTRODUCTION: AIMS & OBJECTIVES**

A number of participants working in the AHRC Connected Communities Research Programme have sought to utilise complexity theory as a means for conceptualising communities, the connectivity within and between communities, and the ways in which community resilience evolves. In our own research, we have advanced explanations informed by complexity theory of how community regeneration occurs. In this project, our aim was to determine the extent to which complexity theory might offer the most effective means for understanding how communities can be successfully engaged in and with academic research.

In order to respond to this aim, we sought to identify the initial conditions that facilitate the creation of enabling environments for successful community engagement with research. We adopted a case study approach, working with a series of engagement projects supported by the UK Beacons for Public Engagement.

The objectives of this briefing report are to provide an initial series of considerations for colleagues working within the Connected Communities Programme as to how meaningful community engagement with research might be achieved; to reflect on the robustness of complexity theory as a sense-making tool for community engagement with research; and to offer some initial suggestions regarding the implications of our research for the future development of the Programme's engagement strategy.

## **II. COMPLEXITY THEORY**

We have used complexity as the theoretical perspective for this project partly because complexity theory was identified as a potential means for conceptualising the changing nature of connectivity within and between communities in the 2010 Call for Scoping Studies, but also because, in our own research, we have advanced interpretations of creating community-led partnerships for regeneration processes that have been grounded in complexity (Durie, Wyatt 2007).

One of the values of using complexity theory is that it offers the potential for comparing such phenomena as networks, sustainability and resilience in biological systems with similar phenomena in social systems, and thereby opens the possibility of transferable co-learning about the causes of such phenomena. Typically, such systems will be open to their environment, rather than closed, and will, as a consequence, tend to co-evolve with, and co-adapt to, their environment. The interactions between the elements of such systems will tend to be non-linear rather than linear, and, as a consequence, the systems will tend to exhibit emergent behaviours – often as a result of self-organisation occurring when the system is configured at 'the edge of chaos'. At the edge of chaos, moreover, systems are able to explore 'adjacent possibles' (Kauffman, 1995) on the basis of which novel and creative systemic behaviours can emerge.

Our hypothesis at the outset of the project was that this concentration on open, fluid, non-linearly dynamic systems, exhibiting emergent behaviours, offered a rich potential for understanding how processes of community engagement with research tend to occur. For instance, recent research emphasises the extent to which successful engagement work requires flexible, adaptive, management structures and processes that are in direct contrast with the top-down, command and control, linear management processes that are the norm within Universities (since they have to deal with such central planning challenges timetabling, admissions, and so forth [Burns, Squires, 2011]).

### **III. METHODS**

Our research project used qualitative methods (interviews, focus groups, negotiated feedback sessions) to understand the nature of community engagement in research. At the outset, a Community Advisory Group was established, comprising seven community partners drawn from our previous work, two practitioners with expertise in engagement work, and members of the project team. The purpose of this Group was to inform the development and implementation of the project, and advise on the framing of interview and focus group questions, from a community perspective.

Following an initial literature review, a 'scoping tour' was conducted of the six Beacon sites ([www.publicengagement.ac.uk/about/beacons](http://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/about/beacons)), the National Coordinating Centre ([www.publicengagement.ac.uk/about/](http://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/about/)) and the Brighton Campus University Partnership Programme ([www.brighton.ac.uk/cupp/](http://www.brighton.ac.uk/cupp/)). 16 interviews and focus groups were conducted during these visits. The purpose of this 'scoping tour' was to gain an understanding of the different institutional contexts developed to support community engagement in research, and to identify, in collaboration with the Beacon Teams, engagement projects to serve as case studies for further in-depth research.

Seven such engagement projects were agreed upon, and a 22 further interviews and focus groups were conducted with participants in these projects. The purpose of these interviews was to gain an understanding of how the projects had been identified and established, how the community-academic partnerships worked, and what facilitators and inhibitors there were in each project to the engagement processes.

Transcripts of all of these interviews and focus groups were analysed, alongside supporting documentation, by all three project investigators, using standard qualitative research techniques. A number of cross-cutting themes were identified, and these were presented to two of the engagement project teams during 'negotiated feedback' sessions. The resulting discussions at these sessions fed back into the analysis of the data, and led to the refinement of the cross-cutting themes.

The concluding activity of the project was a symposium hosted at the University of Exeter to which all participants from the project were invited, including the Community Advisory Group and other relevant stakeholders. At the symposium we presented our research findings

([www.healthcomplexity.net/files/researching\\_with\\_communities\\_syposium.pdf](http://www.healthcomplexity.net/files/researching_with_communities_syposium.pdf)), and the ensuing discussions at the symposium further informed our research findings and interpretation of the data.

## **IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS**

A series of cross-cutting themes were identified during the data analysis. We have clustered these into six broad categories. The first three relate to the conditions that support and facilitate successful engagement of communities with research projects. The remaining themes comprise a series of findings which also relate to the conditions for successful engagement, but which challenged our initial assumptions about the appropriateness of complexity theory for conceptualising the conditions for community engagement with research.

### **A. Key findings for engaging communities in research**

#### *1. 'Time and Rhythm'*

- Successful engagement projects often require substantial and flexible amounts of time in order to develop relations and explore possibilities for collaboration.
- There is a need to acknowledge the importance of both the 'lead-in' and 'follow-on' periods of engagement projects, and to account for these in planning for engagement.
- The cycles of University work do not tend to map on to the rhythms of community life, and it is important to accommodate for this in the management of engaged research. This is particularly significant with respect to the alignment of academic funding cycles with the rhythms of community life.
- Before commencing engagement projects, it is important to consider with community partners whether 'now' is the right moment for the community to become involved with the proposed research, and whether there is a genuine desire within the community for participating in the research.

#### *2. 'Staying the Distance'*

- 'Hit and run' or 'smash and grab' research can cause harm to communities and community-academic relations, in cases where communities are used as a resource for the research rather than being partners in the work.
- By contrast, a commitment to 'staying the distance' with communities was deemed essential for building trust between communities and academics.

#### *3. 'Mutual benefit'*

- In order that engaged research projects be successful, the mutual benefit for both communities and academics should be identified in advance.

- The outcomes contributing to these mutual benefits need not be the same for communities and academics, and should be evaluated accordingly.

## **B. Key findings challenging appropriateness of complexity theory**

### *4. 'Systems and Structures'*

- Engagement projects often flourish on the basis of the implementation of pre-determined or fixed systems/structures.
- By contrast, structure-less spaces and non-systematicity can also allow for flourishing projects.
- Successful community engagement in research projects will often require initial and on-going negotiations between the different systems and structures found in different organisations.
- More specifically, many interviewees highlighted difficulties in negotiating and reconciling rigid HEI management structures with the need for flexible and responsive management processes to support engaged research.
  - These tensions are particularly manifest in financial issues, for example the ability of HEI finance systems to pay community participants for their work in an appropriate and timely manner.

### *5. 'Project Planning and Outcomes'*

- Meticulous pre-planning, with a clear articulation of project objectives and outcomes, can help ensure the success of projects.
- By contrast, open-planning and the lack of a driving agenda can also help facilitate emergent outcomes for projects.
- Evaluation is a critical part of project planning – both as a means of determining whether identified outcomes have been achieved, but also as a means of reflexive learning feeding back into the project, and altering or refining its development.

### *6. 'Roles (Functions) and Responsibilities'*

- The identification of fixed and clear roles and responsibilities for project members can help ensure their smooth running, whilst aiding the formation of communal partnerships and comradeship within engagement projects.
- Fixed and clear roles and responsibilities can, on the other hand, have a liberating effect on participants, allowing them to experiment within the project beyond the remit of their initially determined role or function.

## **V. DISCUSSION: THE APPROPRIATENESS OF COMPLEXITY THEORY**

This second set of themes challenged our thinking in two ways: first, the data-set appeared to contain a series of ostensibly contradictory results; second, these

contradictions seemed to call into question many of the fundamental premises of complexity theory. For instance, the emphasis on open, fluid, dynamic systems within complexity theory, does not accord with the data indicating that projects flourish on the basis of pre-determined, fixed structures being implemented within project systems. Similarly, while complexity theory would suggest that open planning and a lack of command and control management would tend to facilitate emergent outcomes, our data also indicated that not only does exhaustive pre-planning frequently lead to projects which are successful because they fulfil pre-determined outcomes, but that a clear knowledge amongst participants of their fixed roles and responsibilities within projects can actually liberate them to experiment with their actions, which in turn can lead to emergent outcomes. It seemed, in other words, that the privileging of non-linearity over linearity within complexity theory was not borne out by the results.

These challenges prompted us to examine the data more deeply, and led us to realize that we had been positing the relations between linearity and non-linearity, closed and open systems, and pre-determined and emergent outcomes, in a way that was not sufficiently nuanced. We had fallen into the trap of thinking that these relations consisted in more or less dialectical oppositions. As such, our own thinking had been too rigid, too static – whereas complexity theory should have encouraged us to think in more fluid, dynamic, terms. We therefore sought to reconsider the apparent contradictions contained within the second set of themes from the perspective of *processes*, and this led us to develop a new conceptual framework within which to interpret the data.

From this perspective, we suggest that the processes of community engagement with research could be usefully understood as *phases* within an *engagement cycle*, and that these phases have distinct characteristics.

Thus, we suggest that there is an 'engaging phase' within the cycle, comprising the processes of developing relations, and building trust, with communities – the so-called 'lead-in' phase. It is within this phase that what we have called the 'initial conditions' for community engagement are created. The processes characteristic of this phase of the engagement cycle tend to manifest the typical qualities of complex systems – they are open, fluid, dynamic, and lead to emergent outcomes. These emergent outcomes could be said to occur when this engaging phase reaches the 'edge of chaos', and starts to self-organise. Any evaluation during this phase of the engagement cycle should be concerned with reflecting on the processes that facilitate or inhibit engagement, rather than being directed towards outcomes. Moreover, such evaluation should feed back into these processes, allowing them to adapt and evolve, and thereby supporting both the creation of new relations, and the identification of possible mutual benefits for communities and academic partners.

These emergent outcomes may consist in what can be termed 'constraints', or 'parameters'. Such constraints tend to function within the context of projects, or pieces of work, based on community-academic partnerships that emerge from the engaging phase, and which can be interpreted as determining the form and structure of these projects. We may thus think of this as constituting an 'engaged' or 'project phase' in the

cycle. It can be postulated that such projects are the means by which the self-organised 'system' explores 'adjacent possibles'. The processes comprising this engaged phase frequently exhibit properties typically found in linear systems – for example, successful projects are often well planned, with outcomes identified in advance, on the basis of which impact evaluation can be carried out. Such properties are themselves manifestations of the emergent constraints that are determining of the projects.

During our Symposium, another phase of the engagement cycle was identified, a 'follow-on phase', akin to the period following the conclusion of a run of artistic performances, during which reflection can take place, and processes of planning for future work or building towards mutually acceptable closure can occur.

## **VI. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This notion of a multi-phased engagement cycle raises a number of intriguing questions pertaining to the adoption of complexity as a theoretical perspective from which to conceptualise community engagement with research:

1. How rigorously can the different 'phases' of the engagement cycle be distinguished, and what is the nature and extent of the continuities that persist between them? It is clear, for instance, that the processes and conversations that contribute towards the building of relations and development of trust between academics and community partners during the 'engaging phase' should continue during the 'project phase', if trust is not to be lost. On the other hand, it is equally clear that the dynamics of these processes in the different phases differ to greater or lesser extents.
2. If it is correct to introduce the notion of 'adjacent possibles' into our conception of an engagement cycle, should the location of this notion be limited to the 'project phase' of the cycle? Alternatively, could it also be claimed that the processes comprising the 'engaging cycle' themselves contribute to the creation of adjacent possibles?
3. It has often been claimed that complexity theory offers a potentially rich resource with which to explain processes contributing to sustainable communities. What impact does this notion of a cycle of engagement with differing phases have on how we conceive of such issues as the sustainability of community engagement, innovation and creativity within communities, or the emergence of conflict within and between communities? Does the notion of an engagement cycle transfer to intra-community processes?
4. Is it correct to interpret the operative constraints within the 'project phase' as emergent effects of the processes comprising the 'engaging phase' of the cycle?

In addition, the notion of a multi-phased engagement cycle raises some issues for the development of the community engagement strategy of the Connected Communities Research Programme:

1. Should there be a re-conceptualisation of the 'active' role that communities can play in the 'engaging phase' of the cycle?
2. What are the implications of this notion of a differentially phased engagement cycle for the patterns and systems of funding for research which seeks to engage communities? For instance, typically, research funding is focused on projects – should funding be made available for the 'engaging phase' of the cycle, and also for the 'follow-on phase'?
3. If the 'engaging phase' and 'follow-on phase' are recognised as legitimate recipients of research funding, consideration should be given to the most appropriate means of reporting and evaluation of work conducted in these phases.
4. Research funding councils should be supported in 'bearing witness' to the processes comprising the various phases of the engagement cycle, in addition to community partners being invited to summative programme meetings.
5. There should be consideration of how communities can play a role in future research commissioning and reviewing for the Programme.

## **VII. LINKS TO OTHER CONNECTED COMMUNITIES PROJECTS**

1. The complexity theory approach adopted for this project can be productively contrasted with the communities of practice approach adopted in Hart and Millican's (Brighton) project, particularly with respect to the differential roles and practices of project team members.
2. Moore's (Manchester) project provided one of our case studies, and Speed's (Edinburgh) project was part of our work with Edinburgh Beltane.
3. We have submitted a research project application with members of our Community Advisory Group in collaboration with Millican and Schaeffer (Exeter), whose projects informed our research design.

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## The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

*"to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities."*

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