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Idea development, decision-making and power imbalances in the co-creation process of two platforms for building Caring Communities

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Abstract. In our contribution we reflect on the participatory development of two platforms. The beginning of both platforms lies in the context of Caring Communities and our cooperation with the CareComLabs project, which pursued a Participatory Action Research approach (PAR) and wanted to research and develop social activities together with citizens. We, on the other hand, focused on the possibilities of socio-technical activities, which led us to suggest two platform ideas, which was initially unsuccessful in Switzerland and which we are developing further in Germany in a new Participatory Design (PD) context with other co-researchers. We critically reflect on our role as researchers who bring their own ideas into the user-centered research process and sometimes hold on to them. We discuss the question of whether and how it is justified or useful to influence and convince co-researchers.

Introduction

The 'Caring Community Living Labs' project (March 2019 – August 2022), funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF), was launched by researchers from Bern University of Applied Sciences, the Health Research Institute Careum University of Applied Sciences, Zurich, and the University of Siegen, Germany. Together with representatives of five municipalities in German-speaking Switzerland and representatives of local organisations and civil society, opportunities and challenges for building local Caring Communities were jointly explored and activities to promote such developed and implemented. The overall goal of these four Caring Communities was to build new local and sustainable solutions for the support, care and health of people at home and in their everyday environment. In practice, this means a distribution of day-to-day (domestic) care work across several shoulders in order to relieve the burden on family carers, e.g. through neighbourly networks, new support services and good networking with professional service providers and existing services. In the following, we would like to take a closer look at two labs and one such activity from each of these. In both cases community platforms have been developed to address specific results from previous internal studies. In the further course, we will deepen the transfer of these activities to German communities and reflect on our role as researchers within the PD process that is called to “democratise innovation” (Tomasini Giannini & Mulder, 2022) and to empower participants “as a means to give the conditions for all involved to decide and act during the process and influence the design outcome in a way that it represents their needs and values” (Tomasini Giannini & Mulder, 2022), situating them “as co-creator and collaborative partner” and “to play an active role in the design process and the ways problems are defined” (Harrington et al., 2019).

The DigiCoach platform: When co-creation fails

In the first lab near Zurich, the decision was made to link the development of a Caring Community to the teaching of digital skills, as these skills are central to social participation in today's society. Several digital cafés were set up in cooperation with the association for neighbourhood help and the church community. The Digital Cafés are primarily aimed at older adults aged 60 and over, but younger people are also welcome. At the Digital Cafés, people can bring their own device, e.g. smartphone or laptop, and receive personalised advice and problem-solving from a Digi Coach. It's also a place for networking, preventing loneliness and isolation and brings therefore health benefits. Although the first Digi Coaches work on a voluntary basis, they are highly educated people. While some of them also have very good technical knowledge, a few of them are, however,

technical laymen. In a joint workshop with the Digi Coaches, we, the academic researchers, therefore suggested the idea of developing a platform that contains learning materials and courses on technical and didactic topics and a forum for the exchange of knowledge between the Digi Coaches themselves. The idea was enthusiastically accepted and further developed by the Digi Coaches, i.e. the co-researchers.

However, after developing the whole platform in participatory manner the co-researchers surprised us by telling us that they wanted to end the entire platform project because the platform would be of no use to them.

But we didn't want to give up the idea of the platform and when two initiatives in Germany wanted to set up a new Digital Café in two smaller cities and asked us about cooperation, we took the opportunity and suggested that they use our platform and work with us to develop it further. These co-researchers also started with great enthusiasm but soon lost interest in the platform. It gradually became clear that the co-researchers wanted something different from us, e.g. help with the development and organization of on-site workshops for visitors of the Digital Cafés. We are therefore once again at an impasse at this point.

The 'Hilfeschichten' platform: Co-creation in progress

In the second lab, located in a rural area not far from Zurich, we (researchers and co-researchers/community members/55+) conducted a qualitative interview study (20 interviews, including one focus group) within the community and needs of older persons were revealed. One of the key findings was the barriers to asking for, accepting and giving help. To overcome these barriers and additionally counteract the stereotypical attribution of need for help and contribute to collective destigmatisation, the idea of a storytelling-based helping platform to support community health and self-care was developed by us researchers and suggested to the co-researchers/community members.

The platform idea remained theoretical during the CareComLabs project as other activities were preferred but it was taken up again by us in Germany within an urban community. As a project integrated into the university teaching context, it is currently being developed in participatory manner with different target groups (older people/63+, international students/25+). Eight semi-structured interviews were carried out so far (4 per target group) and three PD workshops, developing the 'Hilfeschichten' platform from paper prototype to the first version of a live website.

Although the idea was not developed by the community itself, people responded positively to it and consider it promising. However, it became clear over the course of the process that the understanding of a 'helping stories' platform on which

citizens can share their stories about asking for, accepting and giving help to show in total that everyone needs help from time to time did not correspond to the meaning given by the researchers. Sharing such stories must also be accompanied by the real possibility of getting help to unfold the platforms potential for community health, participants and students request. Here we are, at a sudden crossroad of a path that has so far been gently led along a research gap, questioning the role we want to and must take as researchers.

Reflection: Handover of further development and possible fusion of the platforms to the participants

Reflecting on our previous roles in the joint participatory research process within both labs, we have now decided to leave the original paths and let the community define the problem (Harrington et al., 2019) and decide instead of trying to convince. In response to the demand for a channel to get help immediately, we are considering the possible fusion of Digi Coach and Hilfestgeschichten, expanding the thematic focus of the former. With this in mind, we will work with the target groups of older people and international students in further joint PD workshops to identify needs and requirements relating to the topic of help. To this end, we will increase the number of participants. We will also acquire a third target group that reflects the diversity of the urban community, as the platform will ultimately be developed for the entire city, all generations, genders, nationalities and cultures. In the event of a fusion, the Digi Coaches would become Social scouts, another idea from the first workshops in Hilfestgeschichten that came from an older participant, which could gain a foothold not only within the online platform but also in real-life setting. This would increase inclusivity and the ‘Everyone needs help from time to time’ campaign and its desired destigmatising effect would gain more reach. Social scouts (similar to boy scouts) would be volunteers who are easily recognizable in the city by means of certain symbols, e.g. buttons, and to whom people who need (ad hoc) help can safely turn.

The use cases (Aal et al., 2023; Rüller et al., 2022) described show us how important it is to constantly reflect on our own role as researchers within PD processes to ensure just design. Within these, we are part of the collaborative development process of solutions for real-world problems, with our own expertise that we can legitimately contribute. However, there is a fine line between PD and its mimicry. Previous studies criticize the negotiation and execution of appropriate design practice within PD in terms of politics and power dynamics (Tomasini Giannini & Mulder, 2022) and somewhere along our PD processes around the Digi Coach platform, the design of our own research corresponded to such a misinterpretation and led to failure due to the lack of collective knowledge, as described by Birhane et al. (2022). Against this background, many questions arise

about the boundaries of roles, their perception and protection, about what is important from a research perspective and what for the people on the ground or what counts more: PD in its execution or the research gap identified. However, these questions should not be answered without the joint exploration by academic researchers and co-researchers/participants, for whose negotiation “building trust, finding voice, sharing perspectives and creating a common vision for change” (Moll et al., 2020) are indispensable.

Conclusion

Participatory research and design approaches serve, among other things, to balance power asymmetries by valuing different types of expertise and joint decision-making. It requires a socially well-balanced eye level on which academic researchers and co-researchers or participants meet and negotiate together. Both sides fulfill different roles that need to be continuously coordinated and reflected upon. Defining the boundaries within this complex and recognizing their dynamics within the joint creation process is fundamental in order to neither overchallenge nor underchallenge, to encourage and maintain motivation for participation. In front of this conglomerate, the task of us researchers lies in the moderation and provision of methods to ensure this. We provide help for self-help, which determines the content and design.

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