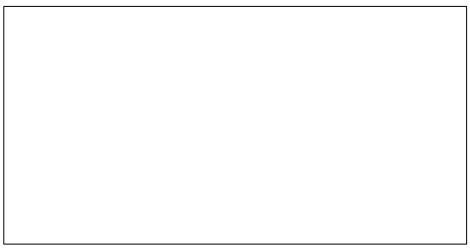

Facilitating knowledge democracy in a global North/South academic collaboration

Abstract

This article explains an action research response to the need for knowledge democracy in research projects between academics in global North and global South countries. It argues that if unspoken assumptions about knowledge creation are left unexamined, such collaborations can replicate forms of 'epistemic injustice' (Fricker 2007). The paper is premised on the belief that such collaborations should be based upon practical acknowledgement of plurality in the domain of knowledge and upon the right and responsibility of people to contribute to research conceptualisations and questions as equals. The article explores processes which can foster knowledge democracy in practice.

The article focuses on the facilitation processes applied during an initial, five-day strategic planning meeting for a three-year Erasmus Mundus research project, in which academics from universities in Spain, Portugal, Peru and the UK participated. In this meeting the conceptualisations and strategic direction of the project were established. The authors draw upon their experiences as co-designers and joint co-ordinators of the project.

We conclude that if international research projects are to promote knowledge democracy, processes need to be established in which relevant concepts and objectives can be articulated and the parameters and questions of the research can be established by all partners, in order to accommodate multiple perspectives. The insights offered also have relevance for collaborations between multiple stakeholders inside and outside of academia.

Keywords: Knowledge democracy; action research; Erasmus projects; North/South collaboration

Introduction

This paper has two aims. The first is to contribute to expanding the discussion which took place in the Educational Action Research Journal in 2019 (Volume 27, Issues 1 and 3), about knowledge democracy. The second aim is to consider specifically how such a discussion might contribute to critical understandings of theory and practices of international academic research collaborations if knowledge democracy and epistemic justice are desired aims of such collaborations. We do this by drawing on a three-year international project, co-designed with partners and co-ordinated by the authors, between universities and practitioners in the field in the so-called global North and global South. The article focuses specifically on the practical participatory processes in the initial five-day strategic planning meeting at the start of the project between academics who represented partner universities.

The article is based on the assumption that all participants in a research project are equals in their capacity to create knowledge, whether from contexts of academia or other professional/practical contexts, and can use such knowledge towards sustainable human and community development. This assumption should therefore be manifest in participants' power to influence decisions and processes within the research.

The article has the following structure: first, knowledge democracy is considered in relation to collaborations between academics in the global North and global South. The social economy project upon which this paper is based is then briefly explained. Third, a brief overview is given of the methodology used within the project and to develop this paper. Following this, the strategic planning meeting between academics at the beginning of the project is presented as the practical context in which we develop our contribution to knowledge democracy. We briefly consider evidence of a more lasting influence of the approach taken in the meeting on the wider project. To conclude

we draw out what we learnt from this context about fostering knowledge democracy in practice in international collaborative research projects.

Knowledge democracy and academia

Knowledge democracy is about intentionally linking values of justice, fairness and action to the process of creating and using knowledge (Hall and Tandon 2015, n.p.). It refers, in particular, to democratisation of the ownership of the production of knowledge, according to Rowell and Feldman (2019, p.1). They argue that the concept of knowledge democracy provides a lens to consider how knowledge is produced and disseminated. Characterising the implications of a lack of democracy in the domain of knowledge as 'intellectual colonialism' and 'epistemicide' (drawing on Fals Borda and Mora-Osejo 2003; and Santos 2007 respectively), they argue that such democratisation is 'for the good of each person and the good of humankind' (citing Kemmis 2010). It is a matter of justice towards people in their capacity as knowers, or epistemic justice (Fricker 2007).

This paper is written in the context of many examples of international collaborative research projects led by universities in recent years through funding such as that offered by Erasmus Plus and Research Council UK. If international collaborative projects between universities are to foster knowledge democracy, more deliberation is needed about whose knowledge is considered legitimate and who has, and feels able to exercise, the power to establish knowledge frameworks which inform international research,. Unexamined assumptions and norms about knowledge from the international partner located in a region of epistemic power, such as the global North, can close down the exploration of issues from other, and perhaps more locally appropriate, perspectives and imaginaries. Where assumptions about the universal relevance of Western, technical-rational knowledge, and the world view these are based upon, are not

scrutinised in international partnerships, the result is likely to be a consolidation of Western epistemologies and frameworks at the expense of other world views, other ways of knowing and other practices.

Drawing on plural sources of knowledge may offer 'new pathways for human development' according to Leask and de Wit (2016, n.p.) who argue that higher education, with its international reach, is well placed to forge such pathways. However, rather than fostering knowledge democracy, international research collaborations may unwittingly reinforce a kind of injustice in the domain of knowledge. Examples of practice which work towards knowledge democracy in specific contexts are needed to nourish deliberation and to move it into spheres of practical political agency and action.

Discourses in international collaboration are often based on assumptions that the global North needs to address supposed deficits in the global South. For example, such collaborations can be positioned as 'Capacity-building projects in the field of higher education [which] support the modernisation, accessibility and internationalisation of higher education in Partner Countries' (EACEA 2019) in which partner countries are specified ones outside of Europe. Discourses of empowerment can be conceptualised as a one-way flow, meaning that lack of capacity and powerlessness in global South institutions can remain unquestioned in practical collaborations, according to Djerasimovic (2014, p.207).

We believe that such collaboration should be based upon acknowledgement of plurality in the domain of knowledge: upon the reality of 'ecologies of knowledges' (Santos 2016), upon the importance of flows of knowledge in multiple directions and upon the justice of equality between people in their capacity as knowers. Within the paper we use the concept of 'Western' knowledge in contradistinction to 'local' knowledge (Djerasimovic 2014, p.204), and acknowledge that such Western knowledge

is different from the knowledges people develop in practices in everyday life even in contexts of so called ‘Western’ countries.

In the action research explicated in this paper, the post-colonial theory of ‘centre and periphery’ (see, for example, Santos 2016; Mignolo 2002) is a conceptual tool to understand some challenges in fostering relationships between people who come from backgrounds of ‘universal’ (read ‘dominant’) epistemology and people who inhabit ‘other’ places, and experience their own ways of knowing as of lesser legitimacy by traditional Western-influenced academia in the context of the current epistemic hegemony.

The concept of the ‘centre’ and the ‘periphery’ can be used to theorise the location and use of power. As well as existing in its hard form (financial, military, institutional, etc.), power is also imposed and embedded in its soft form within culture, rules and norms, values and epistemology (Mignolo 2002; Hayward 2010). In this conceptualisation, ways of explaining and making sense of the world, which drive and inform activities within it, are distributed from the hegemonic centre to regions in the periphery through a global network of institutions. These include universities, scientific organisations and publishers of academic journals (Connell 2007, p.xi). They also include international networks such as the World Economic Forum which draw upon knowledge ‘Augmented by machine analysis of more than 1,000 articles a day from carefully selected global think tanks, research institutes and publishers’. These comprise principally of top ranking universities in the UK and the US, development banks and trade institutes; that is, institutions in the epistemic ‘centre’, with the aim of ‘improving the state of the world’ (World Economic Forum 2020). Such ‘improvement’ could be based upon Western understandings and epistemologies without being questioned or

deconstructed and can lead to a loss, or 'dispossession' (Hall and Tandon 2015, n.p.) of epistemologies and practices rooted in local cultures.

Global North countries have provided paradigms for knowledge work in other regions (Connell et al. 2018, p.42) producing the theory that drives research questions and hypotheses through which data from those regions is interpreted. The use of theory in this way universalises the supposed relevance and value of what is, in fact, particular. Sun (2019, n.p.), for example, argues that researchers from 'developing nations' set out to test existing theories from the global North which do not fit their contexts and have 'little or no consideration for cultural or situational influences'. In this way, Western knowledge forms a 'centre' around which other knowledges are considered deficient. This is reminiscent of Said's 'Orientalism' (2003) in which the non-Western 'others' internalise a sense of inferiority about their own cultures and epistemologies in relation to dominant, Western ways of viewing the world and the framing of issues for concern within.

International collaborative projects which take the framework of knowledge of the lead university may reproduce existing paradigms of the dominance of Western knowledge, albeit unconsciously. Alternatively, they can promote spaces for many types of knowledge to be considered legitimate in the research endeavour. In what follows we aim to show how spaces and processes were created and facilitated in order to challenge the idea of a centre and a periphery in the domain of knowledge. We address in practice how academics from different cultural backgrounds and epistemic traditions worked as peers in research processes.

The social and solidarity economy project

We will now briefly explain the international project which forms the context of our action research. The project was co-ordinated by the two authors of this paper, one

British and based in a UK university, and the other Peruvian linked to higher education and the social economy in Spain and the UK. It forms the field of inquiry in which we investigate our practices as academics, and as project and partnership co-ordinators.

The project was called 'Enhancing the studies and practice of the social economy in higher education' which was funded by the EU programme called Erasmus Mundus, from 2012-2015. In the bid for funding we wrote:

> If higher education … is to remain relevant it needs to review its ethos, purpose and curricula which should consider other economic models and their philosophies from a human-centred approach.

The project was based on three premises:

- A people-centred approach to economic life and value generation should be present in universities' curricula.
- The role of the university is to provide education and training which serves the community, in which community has a voice, and where local values, knowledges and practices are considered part of the complex reality with which universities need to engage.
- The collaborative research processes themselves should provide examples and models of knowledge democracy towards epistemic justice.

With input from global South perspectives, it became known as the 'social *and solidarity* economy project'. The terms are used interchangeably in this paper, reflecting our position and the time of the events described, and later thinking.

We represented a university in the UK as the lead organisation in the project. Partner HE institutions were located in Spain, Peru and Portugal (a centre for African Studies) and the participating academics were from different disciplines, including

economics, anthropology, history, social psychology and business studies. Under the terms of the funding, only HE institutions could be formal (and remunerated) partners. For this reason, in this paper we focus on the collaboration between academics, although the project itself involved multiple stakeholders from academia and the social and solidarity economy field in the regions represented

During the course of the project, each academic from the universities, along with students, worked in their own region and developed their own collaborations with people committed to the local social economy. As a form of appreciative inquiry (Zandee and Cooperrider 2008), it went beyond critique. Its aim was to make visible the contribution of different – human centred – practices of the economy within the public sphere which had a positive influence in the social, economic and environmental sphere within their own communities.

The main output of the project was a 240-page handbook for teachers and practitioners (Meredith and Quiroz-Niño (Coords.), Arando, Coelho, Silva and Villafuerte Pezo 2015)., Partners agreed on the importance of using one's own language to contribute to fields of knowledge, and of challenging the generally accepted norm of academic English as a 'deterritorialised, culturally neutral language' in academia (Beck 2018, p.231). Therefore, as a practice of epistemic justice, the handbook was published in the three languages of the project: English, Spanish and Portuguese and made freely available online (https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/socialeconomy/handbook/). The project involved each institution taking the lead within its own region and having the autonomy to develop the research with the organisations it had links with and in ways that were locally appropriate.

Methodology

In this article we focus on how participatory processes enabled academics from global North and South to work together as epistemic equals. In the critical-emancipatory tradition of action research, investigations aim to find out 'how particular perspectives, arrangements and practices, can create unjust consequences and how to change such perspectives, arrangements and practices to become more just' (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon 2015, p.453). We aimed to challenge arrangements in which knowledge hierarchies can determine who sets the research parameters and questions, and to work towards justice as project co-ordinators in our inclusion of perspectives and practices to inform the design of the research.

Our commitment to this action research approach is summed up by Fals Borda (2015) when he asks 'How can we investigate reality in order to transform it?' The reality and transformation we consider in this paper are our practices as academics and project co-ordinators towards democratic knowledge creation through dialogic approaches between academics from global North and South. We analyse, discuss and reflect on the practices and processes undertaken in the initial five-day strategic planning meeting, also drawing on partners' evaluations of the meeting as well as subsequent reflections from project participants and the Erasmus officer of the project.

The strategic planning meeting

The episode described and explained in this paper is the collaborative five-day strategic planning of the project in which all partners participated together in a face-to-face meeting.

Background

During the writing of the bid for funding the project, we visited the team of prospective project partners in Cusco, Peru and we worked collaboratively on it with them. Significant differences came to light between the way in which we had conceptualised the social economy and the understandings put forward by the Peruvian academics. These differences were more marked than we had anticipated. The team also told us about the experiences of their university colleagues of European projects in which the academics from Cusco had no input on framing the issue for research, nor in analysing the data or developing theory. Their experiences seemed to be a denial of the possibility of knowledge democracy in that they had been positioned as users and implementers of knowledge, and as generators of data, but not as legitimate knowledge creators. In our first meetings with the team, this disquiet had been expressed very clearly and in a variety of ways. However, during the bid writing process, there was little time for in-depth exploration to discuss the different interpretations of conceptual issues. An issue creating additional time pressure was language. We both spoke English and Spanish, and the Cusco team mainly spoke Spanish and Quechua. The final bid document was written in English. Sections were shared out and we wrote in our chosen language. The contributions were either translated directly or merged and integrated into the final document. The emerging content was discussed and negotiated at length. We were aware that language gave a form of power, as well as the responsibility to bring the document to completion in a way that all could agree to. There was recognition by all of the need to invest time in articulating concepts if the bid were successful. During this time, meetings with partners from the other higher education institutions represented were held by videoconference. However, this was not sufficient to uncover and engage in in-depth exploration of potential differences in assumptions, conceptualisations and understandings. Therefore, the bid writing process was based on

a general consensus about the topic and the clear outcomes we were all interested in producing. Aspects of the bid document were deliberately left open-ended in a way which would enable such conceptual underpinnings to be developed within the project itself.

One aim of the strategic planning meeting would be to explore conceptual issues and develop ways of moving forward together in which the diverse understandings could be articulated and built into the project processes to inform the action plan for the three-year duration of the project. The differences in conceptualisations of the social economy meant that the idea of knowledge democracy was potentially problematic in terms of whose conceptualisations would prevail and whose might be marginalised, if we were to proceed together. Understandings needed to be created collectively to create a common vision and ownership of the project (Quiroz-Niño and Blanco-Encomienda 2019) and to set the participative ethos of the project. Only then would we have a chance of working towards knowledge democracy in the group and in the research processesundertaken.

Laying the foundations for democratic knowledge creation at the beginning of the project

The strategic planning meeting took place in October/November 2012, following the success of the bid for funding. Representatives from the partner institutions, ten of us in total: two from each of the UK, Spain and from a centre for African studies in Portugal, and four representatives from Peru, came to York in the UK to participate in the five-day strategic planning meeting for the three-year duration of the project. The meeting was held in Spanish – the common language of all partners.

The initial project meeting could have been a kind of logistics exercise to address the questions around *who? what? and when?* as a response to pre-set options

and already-established conceptualisations of the issue. However, if the issues had been pre-engineered by the lead institution, to be merely operationalised by partners, such meetings would be unlikely to foster a sense of ownership of key questions about research strategies and conceptualisations. They would therefore be unlikely to foster knowledge democracy. Such an approach could have been democratic, superficially at least, by giving people choices from given options in the tasks or areas they felt best able to work on, and by giving flexibility in the work plan itself according to personal and institutional working styles. In fact, two of the European partners commented that their experience of EU funded projects was this kind of practical planning and being instructed what to do. While such an approach can give the sense of democratic participation, it has already closed down discussion of the diverse understandings and approaches to the issue itself. In this way, it may actually reinforce a kind of knowledge autocracy or epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007) and can be against the enactment of knowledge democracy.

In our first encounters as a team it would be crucial to create spaces for plural perspectives to be accommodated in articulating our understandings of different lenses through which the social economy could be identified and coming to common understandings and agreements on how to proceed. We also needed to foster a sense of common ownership around the aims of the project and handbook chapter content through ongoing collective decision making creating space for the expression of different contexts and knowledge traditions.

In what follows, we explain how with project partners we aimed to enable the articulation of difference. We also aimed to move beyond a response which would take us on separate and parallel paths, fragmented from each other and with the whole adding little to the sum of its parts. We explain how, as project co-ordinators, we

adopted a dialogic approach (Bakhtin 1981) in which all partners, and ultimately all participants, in the project were equally different.

A dialogic approach views plural truth – truths – rather than the singular truth pursued in dialectics. Dialogism implies an ongoing process of communication rather than a once-and-for-all conclusion. The dialogic approach does not seek to overcome difference and suppress it in order to reach an answer and a consensus; rather, it finds meaning within the difference or the 'dialogic gap between voices in dialogue' (Wegerif et al. 2019, p.81). It focuses on the new understandings and new insights which are possible when there is mutually responsive engagement between people. We therefore judged it to be well suited to our context, in which knowledge democracy was sought, and where there was no 'right answer' but rather the complexity of many epistemologies, values and approaches. This approach meant addressing the issues of perceptions of power, of our assumptions and of collaboration within difference.

We will now explain how we aimed to create spaces and processes in which each partner could have a voice and influence outcomes if they wished.

Democratic practices towards knowledge democracy

The strategic planning meeting design outline was agreed with all partners prior to the event. In the meeting, four stages were envisaged or evolved with processes which were designed to facilitate the expression of difference whilst generating common understandings that we could move forward with together.

First, and given the expressions of different understandings which emerged to a certain extent during the bid writing process, and particularly once the project was approved, it was agreed by partners that each national team would present their understandings, conceptualisations and practical experiences in the social economy. This activity had required prior preparation by each team and enabled each group to

explain current thinking and practices from their context. Each presentation was followed by the opportunity for questions in which key assumptions arose and were discussed.

During the meeting partners expressed differing understandings of the responsibility of the state and the expediency of 'the market', as well as cultural understandings of the role of community. There was also a difference in understandings of the purpose of the social economy: some saw it as a way of challenging capitalism, while for others, ideas of the 'market' was a useful way of people moving beyond struggling at subsistence level and could therefore potentially act as a force for good. There was extensive debate and not insignificant disagreement about the nature and characteristics of social and solidarity economy organisations between partners, as alluded to above. This debate was based on political and cultural aspects, and on personal values and outlooks.

An important outcome of this debate was to acknowledge the diverse and complex nature of experiences within the field. The differences in the understandings of the social economy in the experiences of partners, as well as in the literatures, meant that it would have potentially been an unending and divisive task to attempt to create a definition of the sector to inform which organisations we would approach to work with as part of the project. Crucially, it would have been against the interests of knowledge democracy. The articulation and clarification of concepts and understandings at this stage enabled us to proceed to the next phase.

Second, we needed to define and set common criteria to select organisations to work with which all partners from different backgrounds could identify with. For this, we invited partners to work in two groups of approximately equal numbers, one group broadly representing global South and the other global North, with the intention of

enabling difference to be expressed, acknowledged and accepted between the groups. In these smaller groups we discussed and wrote on a flip chart what we considered to be the key characteristics of organisations in the social economy within our own countries and contexts. This process involved clarification of ideas and concepts to other members of the small group and some questioning and inquiry about the practices.

Table 1 shows the diverse set of elements of key characteristics of organisations within the social economy field, which was the outcome of this process.

Partners representing Latin American and African countries	Partners representing European countries
Independent groups structured around collective enterprises and focused on meeting common objectives	Prioritising work over capital (as a means not an end)
Collective property of the active members of the enterprise	Democratic governance (participation in: management, outcomes, capital)
Approach based on human capital and generating self-employment	Creation and protection of employment
Respects private property	Sharing of limited profits
Based on democratic and participatory principles	Sense of belonging and solidarity among members
Equitable distribution of the enterprise's output	Managerial autonomy
Groups regulated by common and statutory law, based on the establishment of rules, values, solidarity, reciprocity and respect for traditional knowledges, and human and ecological diversity	Social transformation
	Intelligent, sustainable growth

Table 1: Criteria developed by project partners (translated from Spanish)

Given the differences of experiences of partners and the diversity in the field, developing criteria in this way seemed to be a more inclusive and achievable approach than generating a definition. Organisations in the social economy would potentially have strengths in different criteria to a different extent, and so partners would have the flexibility to approach organisations with social and environmental aims which may not have strictly met the inflexibility of a given definition. The approach would offer a spectrum of different dimensions rather than a hard and fast 'included' or 'excluded' definition. In order to integrate the two lists, the two groups came back together and questioned each other about the understandings and experiences leading to the identification of their criteria. As part of this dialogue, the criteria in Table 1 were woven together by the whole group and, as can be seen on the project website, (https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/socialeconomy/what-is-the-social-economy/) they encompass the ideas expressed by both groups.

In order to proceed as one project, the criteria generated by partners and given above in Table 1 needed to be built into a common framework for the project handbook. The aim of the activity described below was to work towards agreement of the chapter names and content for the handbook. The funding bid for the project had included provisional titles as a starting point for the handbook chapters. These were based on previous engagement with the literature by Catalina and her reflections on experience of working in the social economy field. The provisional chapters were open for suggestion and comment by partners during the project bidding stage. No suggestions were received at this stage.

So, the third main process in the strategic planning meeting was to work collectively on these provisional chapter titles. These were placed upon a 'sticky wall' (ripstop nylon with spray glue), on which papers were positioned, peeled off and then

repositioned. This enabled a visual representation of the collective, provisional organisation of ideas and the fluidity of the discussions as group members developed and reconsidered their ideas.

Project partners were invited to gather as one large group to use these criteria as starting points for the content of the handbook. The flip chart papers containing the criteria generated by partners had been cut up so that each piece of paper contained one criterion. As one group of partners we deliberated upon each of the criteria generated one by one. Papers were debated and eventually placed into different chapters as a thematic fit was agreed upon. At times, previous decisions about the placing of a paper were re-examined, re-discussed at length and, when the whole group agreed, the original decision was changed. Some members of the group suggested that two chapters should be merged because they were seen to be dealing with a similar, bigger theme. Following discussion this was agreed by the group or a counter suggestion was put forward. Some chapters were renamed to better reflect the themes emerging from the criteria generated by the partners. In this way, ten chapters became eight. Every criterion was located in a chapter, meaning that every partner could see their inputs and priorities reflected in the outline of the handbook. The outcome of this process is shown in Table 2, in which preliminary content and chapter order were agreed by partners and some additional criteria were added by the group.

I. SOCIAL ECONOMY EPISTEMOLOGY AND VALUES	II. IDENTITY AND PROFILE OF SE BUSINESSES / COMMUNITIES	III. WAYS OF WORKING Facilitative leadership and participatory approach	IV. PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCES Continuous innovation and training	V. ICT AND EFFECTIVE PRACTICE (note: these criteria were added later, during the 4th process below)	VI. SOCIAL CAPITAL	VII. TRANSFORMATION AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY	VIII. PEDAGOGY AND CURRICULUM DESIGN
See work on social economy done by partners on Moodle	Independent groups structured around collective enterprises and focused on meeting common objectives Voluntary membership	Equitable distribution of the enterprise's output	Personal and work-related competences	Speed	Groups regulated by common and statutory law	Responds to needs of the community: employment, education, training, social cohesion, environment, economic inclusion, gender equality, housing.	Current curriculum on social economy, social capital in Europe, America, Africa and Asia.
	Sense of belonging and solidarity among members	Sharing of limited profits	Questions for professionals	Lowering costs	Voluntary membership	Intelligent and sustainable growth	Teaching methodology and process
	Collective property of the active members of the enterprise	Creation, quality and protection of employment	Questions for directors/coordinators	Greater visibility		Long-term sustainability	Content informed by results of multidisciplinary study
	Respects private property and the freedom of the individual	Administrative/accounting management		Communication networks between organisation and market			
	Groups regulated by common and statutory law, based on rules, values, solidarity, reciprocity and respect for traditional knowledges, and human and ecological diversity	Based on democratic and participatory principles		Wider range of sources of information		Social transformation	
	Prioritises work over capital (as a means and NOT AN END). Approach based on human capital and the creation of self-employment.	Managerial autonomy		Simultaneous communication			

Table 2: Handbook chapters with chapter order and preliminary outlined content agreed by partners

There was a high level of engagement in the process and a sense of elation in the group as the final paper was discussed and placed. In the evaluations following the strategic planning meeting, all partners identified a highlight as 'The methodology and dynamics of the process' experienced and how this allowed an 'engaged participation'.

In relation to the knowledge organisation across the strategic planning meeting, the discussion allowed the group to flesh out the concepts in a series of chapters which visibly included everyone's contribution. Partners expressed this in two main ways in their evaluations: one which highlighted the 'systematisation of the information' generated among partners; and the other valued the development of intellectual capital in the project based on a 'deep understanding of the objectives, methodologies and activities'. Each partner could claim, and have the corresponding responsibility for, some ownership and input into the whole and see their contribution to setting the conceptual framework.

We now had chapter titles which reflected the diverse conceptualisations of partners. We had outline areas of focus for the handbook chapters based on the criteria generated by partners on key subjects and dimensions which they considered relevant for those interested in teaching and learning about the social and solidarity economy.

Significantly, we agreed that the first chapter would be called Ways of Knowing (Epistemology) and Values. Exploring these issues enabled perhaps previously unarticulated assumptions to be brought to the surface. Different epistemologies could become manifest. This opportunity could have been lost if the chapter sequence had started with, for example, considerations of practices – what the organisations do that marks them out, or geographical location – where they are.

Another aspect of knowledge democracy, we believe, is to set the questions one considers important to address and to follow lines of inquiry one is interested in or

concerned about. In research projects, precise questions are often established prior to participation, limiting the scope of people to investigate issues which are of genuine concern to them. An action research and dialogic approach, we believe, needs to encompass collaborative ways of setting the key questions and objectives that underpin the research.

So as our fourth process, partners were invited to take the lead on particular chapters which were of interest to them. Each of global North and South were represented in small groups where team members worked on raising questions that they considered relevant to develop as part of the research for each of the particular chapters of interest. First each member was asked to write down their own questions, then to share them with other team members and decide which questions should be the key ones to work upon. The only requirement we made as project co-ordinators was that each chapter needed a leading representative from both global North and global South. In doing this we aimed to promote a diversity of approaches and understandings in each chapter as far as possible. The aim was also to promote dialogue and the checking of each of our assumptions in the process of creating the chapters. In this way, the conceptual bases of our study were built up together. Each chapter content was based on key questions that were expressed, explained and framed by each small group. In relation to the interaction between partners during the strategic planning meeting, one stated 'It's a matter of building from diversity (which is not easy but foundation stones were laid)'.

Having articulated concepts which underpinned the study, collaborated on the outline content of the handbook and generated questions that would inform it, we could now work together on an action plan based on the collectively developed framework, and on administrative matters for running the project. The processes explained above

made it possible to go forward in the project as peers rather than partners from one tradition dominating and potentially diminishing the contributions of those from different traditions. It also enabled partners to have a sense of ownership of the project ethos and concepts leading to the creation of the handbook from the outset. Taking a lead in a chapter represented an opportunity for each to influence and steer its content and to make a unique contribution in this way. In relation to this, one partner commented 'I think that as partners we complement each other perfectly. Each is an expert in their own field'.

Our focus was on enabling the expression of difference whilst moving forward in ways everyone could accommodate.

Partners' evaluations of the strategic planning processes

In evaluating the content, development and results of the planning meeting, partners expressed satisfaction with the process, outputs and outcomes. Some comments are highlighted in the previous section. Others included '… the main objectives were achieved with in depth debates which were necessary', 'The techniques and methodologies are very good. … the [outcomes] that we achieved were very positive and more than seemed possible' and 'I think it has been a fruitful week … to start to set concepts to … start to move the project' and 'Excellent, because … we have achieved consensus about criteria'. Partners also expressed their sense of ownership and contribution to the whole: 'Very good. It gave me clarity about the project and I committed myself to it' and 'I am very happy to have known and participated in the process and contributed to the results'.

In the end-of-project meeting with the project assessor representing Erasmus, project partner Ana María Villafuerte representing a university in Cusco in Peru reflected:

> What generally happens is that when projects come from Europe to my university, we are merely the collectors of data. The research questions, the theoretical framework and the analysis of the data - those happen in Europe. But here we have been partners, we have constructed together, and I want to make this very clear (meeting with EU assessor 3.9.2015 recorded, transcribed and translated from Spanish).

In these previous projects, the Peruvian researchers had participated but were not included in setting the knowledge frameworks which informed the study, nor in the interpretations derived from the data they themselves had gathered.

In his final evaluation of the three-year project and following meetings with partners, the EU officer highlighted the 'strong personal commitment from the participating institutions' and commented that the 'participatory approach is clearly visible' (email correspondence 15.9.2015).

Longer term evidence of the benefits of the participative processes towards knowledge democracy

Earlier in this article, we referred to the critical-emancipatory tradition of action research, which aims to find out 'how to change [unjust] perspectives, arrangements and practices to become more just' (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon 2015, p.453). We believe that the participatory values and approaches underpinning the project were influential in changes to our own and other participants' thinking about the nature of legitimate knowledge and of democratising knowledge creation and articulation in practice, and we will now explain this.

Partners worked with people within social and solidarity economy organisations within their broad geographical regions, to develop explanatory accounts of their practice in which the epistemologies and values of the organisation were discussed. They also explicatedthe practices which differentiated them from other organisations in

the sector in which they operated and offered evidence for the way in which their work benefitted, and sometimes transformed, their local communities. In addition, partners organised and facilitated dialogical focus groups comprising academics and representatives from social economy organisations. Organisation representatives gave their feedback on the chapter titles, the developing content and what should be included from their perspectives. In these ways, the organisations from Africa, Europe and Latin America contributed to the content of the project handbook as peers and co-creators.

The resulting handbook (Meredith and Quiroz-Niño (Coords.), et al. 2015) included literature review sections from each of the geographical regions represented, promoting awareness of the body of theoretical knowledge of each region; and practical cases developed with those in the field from 17 countries. The handbook also contained dialogical sections in which local explanatory theoretical and practical frameworks were articulated towards some common understandings of the field. Sections of the handbook were written in English, Portuguese or Spanish, depending on the preference of the author of the section, and translated into both other languages.

In reflective dialogues following completion of the project, participants explained changes in their thinking to concepts of knowledge creation and the legitimacy of different knowledges. For example, a Colombian academic, who became a collaborator in the project, integrated some of the participative approach into a module at her university. Following research between herself, her students and social and solidarity organisations, she reflected,

> The learning that has stayed with me is that it is possible to build bridges between academia and social practices with ethical considerations around who ends up with that knowledge and what that knowledge is for … [The research] opened a panorama of reflection from within [the organisations] – "hey we're important – how can we organise things better?" … they did reflect on what they were doing … I think in that sense the collective construction of knowledge is what motivated me

> most of all (Melba Quijano, Transcript of audio recording 2.5.2016, translated from Spanish).

In the Peruvian partner university, interdisciplinary workshops were held in which students and tutors from the departments of economics and anthropology worked together for the first time to explore perspectives about conceptualisations and practices within the local economy. Following this, students paired up with local organisations in the social and solidarity economy to carry out some of the work of the project. It

> changed [the students'] lives because they realised that it was necessary to go out of the classroom and see other realities (Ana María Villafuerte, Transcript of meeting with EU project assessor 3.9.2015)

The contribution from students in Peru enabled the project to include contributions from people working in cooperatives and associations in remote parts of the Andes. Some students based their own undergraduate and masters research on the work initiated by the project. Ana María later reflected in an email exchange about our learning from participating in the project:

> I learnt that a dialogue of knowledges between different latitudes is possible, I learnt that no knowledge is better than another, they are simply different and therefore it is necessary to seek complementarities (Email communication, 2.10.2016. Translated from Spanish).

Given the nature of the funding, which meant that only higher education institutions could be formal partners, these social and solidarity economy organisations could not participate in the strategic planning meeting, and we see this as a structural limiting factor... In future projects we would aim to have the representation of non-university voices in the initial meeting. However, as explained above, academics and

people working in the organisations were present in the handbook and their own words and explanatory frameworks are an intrinsic part of it.

Conclusion

We will now summarise our reflections about knowledge democracy and international research collaborations from the experiences articulated above.

International collaborations need to enable participative spaces and facilitative processes

The focus of the project was an issue of common concern which could draw upon a variety of experiences, knowledges, values and professional practices in response to different local and political contexts. It did not start with theorisation from the global North, as critiqued by, for example, Connell et al. (2018). Our collaboration challenged the idea of a centre and a periphery in knowers and in knowledge creation and in this way, we believe, challenged epistemic injustice.

It was based on the premise that current mainstream conceptualisations of the economy and applications of theory to practice were diminishing ethical standards and impoverishing community life, that higher education needed to find ways of responding to issues of concern to the public and their own communities and that there is a need to draw upon different knowledges from different places. This was a proposition to which many people could have practical, theoretical and values-driven responses. In this way, it was an inclusive proposition.

Within the strategic planning meeting, the theme was such that people and groups could express their differences while at the same time operating with other participants within the overarching project. The theme and dialogic approach also gave space for the evolution of the ideas of participants working in collaboration.

Processes of knowledge democracy need time

Market-based practices in higher education currently dominant in the UK and elsewhere incentivise forms and focuses of research which can be completed and made public within compressed time scales. They prioritise issues for investigations based upon what is known to be do-able and publishable in a short timescale (Noroozi 2016). This works against taking care and time over democratic and dialogic processes, but we believe that they do so at the cost of impoverishing knowledge creation in the public domain around issues of concern. Research which aims for paradigm change and to challenge existing power dynamics on an epistemic level requires deliberation between participants and attention to processes which challenge assumptions about knowledge, understandings and power. The practices explained in this paper highlight an approach followed throughout the three years of the project in which the process was as important as the product.

One of the challenges in the strategic planning meeting, and in the project more generally, was around seeking enough consensus within the group to proceed together on the one hand, and acknowledging difference and having space for disagreement on the other. Both of these approaches can encompass notions of solidarity. Sennett (2013) identifies two approaches to solidarity: a 'participative' one with its impetus in the 'grass-roots'; and an approach which is top-down and aims for unity and which, ultimately, can be deeply exclusionary in the overriding aim of presenting an appearance of consensus (p.39). In Sennett's terms, the approach we took in the project aimed to be participative.

This approach took time, and it meant withstanding some pressures prevalent in higher education to get quick publishable outputs. We believe that quicker results can be achieved by taking the latter approach identified by Sennett. But the cost may be

reduced participation in knowledge creation and exclusion of those who do not identify with the ‘party line’.

Creating criteria rather than fixed definitions

Definitions tend to be binary and therefore exclusionary: you fall within or outside of a definition. In action research, in which knowledge is generated in practice, using inflexible definitions could limit the scope of the learning and its explanatory frameworks. Set definitions are therefore not necessarily conducive to knowledge democracy.

In collaboratively developing criteria for the organisations partners would approach, rather than a definition of the social economy, we believe we created a situation in which the partners could work with an element of ambiguity. This gave space for fairly diverse understandings of the theme, kept the dialogue open and maintained space for a variety of organisations to participate. In international collaborations we advocate an approach which remains inclusive and does not divide through inflexible parameters.

The democratic value of raising questions

A fundamental aspect of research collaborations is the questions which are raised and considered relevant to investigate. A dilemma can lie in the need to set these at the bidding stage, in collaboration with partners, and the need to explore together in more depth the issues which give rise to the questions. In creating a draft outline for the handbook which set out broad themes such as epistemology and values, space was created for partners, and later, other collaborators in the field, to articulate themes of relevance.

Exploring values and articulating knowledges together, and creating knowledge dialogically

We believe that an important aspect of knowledge creation and of research are the values that underpin it. In the project, exemplified by the processes explained above, we aimed to provide opportunities for all to meaningfully articulate values and knowledge commitments which drove the research. Knowledge democracy requires the recognition of the importance of spaces apart from others, or in groups in which issues can be explored in culturally appropriate ways and which affirm a sense of difference. The strategic planning meeting facilitated dialogical relationships and laid the foundations for teams to work in their own ways in their own contexts.

Spaces for knowledge democracy need facilitative processes

As project co-ordinators, we increasingly saw our role as facilitators, creating spaces, and designing processes with the aim of enabling equitable participation towards knowledge democracy. Berry draws attention to 'regarding structure as closure' or on the other hand 'as enabling, as an opening' (1985, cited in Sidorkin 1999, pp.15-16). We believe we achieved the latter of Berry's alternatives. In the strategic planning meeting the processes of working individually, in small groups and in larger groups provide an example of organised structures which are planned to aim to be open for a variety of responses and, we argue, enable rather than limit participation and promote rather than stifle knowledge democracy.

Declaration of interest
None

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