

Co-Creation: The Source of all Wisdom – or the Blind leading the Blind?

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INTRODUCTION

This paper grew out of mild irritation at the faddish and ubiquitous use of the term *co-creation* applied to any activity labelled 'research' which involves a group of people, either face to face or as part of an online community, *doing* something – often *experiencing* something – together. Meanwhile, traditional research techniques, such as focus groups or depth interviews, steered by a professional researcher and involving thorough analysis and interpretation are, in some quarters, being dismissed as dated and irrelevant.

Co-Creation as a Research Panacea

There is something evangelical about co-creation which can seem rather disturbing. The titles of three recent papers give a flavour of this: 'The co-creation revolution', 'Co-creation rules...', 'The power of co-creation'. The contents of these papers have a similar religious ring; 'It's time to comprehend that the co-creation of value with consumers implies re-innovating innovation itself' (Gehling, 2008). 'When you set up co-creative relationships the most exciting thing that happens is not that your product or service gets more famous. The most exciting thing is that you are changed by the experience' (Cherkoff & Moore, 2007). '(Empowered consumers) demand more creative involvement; and co-creation can give this to them (Medeiros & Needham, 2008).

The belief that seems to have developed, in some quarters, is that co-creation is the *only* way for researchers to work with consumers nowadays. Alongside the unquestioned adoption of co-creation, there is often the belief that *direct experience* with consumers – often unmediated by a researcher – is superior to traditional research methods.

What is Meant by Co-Creation?

Co-creation is a slippery term. It has been used so widely and so loosely that it has virtually lost all meaning.

A group of clients sits behind a one way mirror. They are intermittently on mobiles, laptops, observing the group, talking to one another. Halfway through the session, they decide.

"The third advertising route is right. We'll go with that."

Is this co-creation? We'd probably all agree that it is not.

What about a team of clients convened, along with a selection of hand-picked research participants, for a day long workshop? A facilitator team runs the day. There are a variety of exercises and conversations to explore the research issues and define routes forward, including breakout sessions of participants and clients to discuss different issues and then report back to the whole group. At the end of the day, the client team feel confident that they know how to take the project forward. The follow on stages of expert analysis and sense-making, interpretation and structuring which the research team traditionally bring to the 'data' is omitted. Is this co-creation? Probably we would agree that it is.

However, perhaps more relevant than the name we give to this activity are the following questions:

'What, if anything, could the research team add to the understanding by engaging in classic analysis and interpretation of the data after the event?'

'Is it possible for this same level of analysis and interpretation to be *embedded within the workshop process itself*?'

'If the appropriate level of analysis and interpretation can be integral to the fieldwork, what does this mean for the skill set, expertise and style of interaction of *all* the research participants (clients, consumers, researchers, others)?'

We will return to these questions later. Meanwhile, as Wikipedia is, arguably, one of the most successful co-creation projects of our times, it seems appropriate to consult it for a definition of co-creation. It describes it as 'the practice of product or service development that is collaboratively executed by developers and stakeholders together'. Interestingly this sounds to me just like most qualitative research projects.

Turning to C.K. Prahalad, who has been hailed as the champion of co-creation, we find a more specific definition. 'What is fundamentally new here...is that the traditional dividing line between the roles of the consumer and of the company, i.e. that of consumption and that of production, is becoming blurred. There is a convergence of these previously distinct roles, enabling consumers to be involved not only in consuming but in the creation of value in the products and services... there is continuous dialogue with the customer and he or she is involved from the earliest stages of co-creation, this involvement reduces the risk that the customer will reject the end product. (Prahalad, 2004)'.

This explanation is more precise in terms of what co-creation means, but it leaves the field open in terms of how it might be put into research practice. This is, perhaps, why there are many different interpretations of the term and a corresponding sense of woolliness and insubstantiality about it.

Conflicting Perspectives

There appear to be two assumptions that are often used to support co-creation in research:

- 'The group' is more creative than 'the individual'
- Direct experience/interaction by clients with their target audience is equal to or better than research mediated, analysed and interpreted by a professional researcher.

The demotion of the individual and expertise

For decades, we have revered the individual *thinker*, the genius, whose shoulders we can stand on. Now, it seems, *individual* knowledge and individual creativity are being displaced by group knowledge and co-creation. Alongside the demotion of the individual is the demotion of *the expert*, expertise and, arguably, thinking (Keen, 2008).

Andrew Keen, in 'The Cult of the Amateur' describes the Web 2.0 revolution as 'decimating the ranks of our cultural gatekeepers, as professional critics, journalists, editors, musicians, moviemakers and other purveyors of expert information are being replaced' by the 'cult of the amateur'. Technology has allowed us all to have our say; citizen journalists report from the scene before professional reporters arrive, musicians post their music on YouTube, blogs enable us to self-publish. We might perhaps add market researchers to this list, as clients form direct relationships with consumers through online communities and 'customer immersions'. This phenomenon has a rather inelegant name – disintermediation – which means that the expert is bypassed and the consumer interacts directly with the client. Keen argues that this is an attempt to undermine 'the dictatorship of experts' on the road to universal democratisation of knowledge or – as Keen would interpret it – the rocky road to 'the dictatorship of idiots'.

The ascendancy of co-creation and the democratisation of research

Meanwhile, co-creation and *customer immersion* (i.e. disintermediation) are in the ascendancy within a research context. This may mean that the direct *experience/interaction* of clients with their target audience in its natural habitat – a sort of 'co-creating through customer immersion' is often considered more authentic, more valid, than considered and thoughtful analysis by experienced researchers. Experience becomes equated with *knowledge*.

An article in In Brief, the AQR newsletter (Sayers, 2008), discusses the changing role of video and film in research. Sayers describes the move: 'We have seen the medium grow from being a research companion to a parallel deliverable. We frequently produce multimedia-style films with graphics and voiceovers that tell the entire story, *almost without the researcher being present*' (my italics).

Equally, in an excellent piece by Stuart Knapman in Research magazine, there was one paragraph that had me squirming:

Customer immersion programmes can deliver extraordinary moments of appraisal and re-evaluation. *The weakness of traditional research is the inevitable interpretation of findings by researchers and their internal clients, using their own frames of references.* (Knapman, 2008)

The implication seems to be that if customer immersion programmes achieve 'extraordinary moments', *then by definition* 'traditional research' cannot. I would argue that, the 'weakness' of traditional research – the interpretation by professional researchers, using their experience, impartiality, analytical skills and interpretation, is also its greatest strength.

Does this apparent move towards 'disintermediation' mean that traditional skills of analysis and interpretation are now redundant? Does the data become the research? Or, more interestingly, do we need to re-think our research model? Do we, for instance, need to employ the skills of analysis and interpretation *throughout the research process* rather than as a follow on to the fieldwork stages?

Either-or...or Both-and

We do seem to be hardwired to think in terms of either-or; 'traditional research' or 'co-creation', 'intermediated or disintermediated', analysis after or during fieldwork. In my view, customer immersion programmes, co-creation and traditional research (which in practice can be different labels for similar activities – or at least activities with similar ends) can each provide valid – although different – perspectives on the same phenomena. This way of viewing research involves 'both-and' rather than 'either-or' thinking. Regardless of the methodology, however, the elements that I believe are not negotiable are thorough, disciplined, rigorous and creative research. Without these, research becomes just another spectator sport.

Equally, co-creation may be good for particular types of study, but less good for others; in general, it is less relevant for evaluative projects than for exploratory or development projects. Co-creation (as a specific methodology rather than the process of creating understanding) is just one approach to be considered in relation to the needs of specific research issues.

Key Points

Within this paper I will suggest that:

- Although there are clear benefits in co-creation when appropriately planned and managed, there is strong evidence to suggest that it can lead to poor client decision making, if inexpertly handled.

- Individual creativity, at best, is sublime. Where would be without the likes of Picasso or Freud or Tolstoy? It is not an either-or scenario. Individual creativity can be nurtured in conjunction with co-creation.
- We abandon traditional analysis and interpretation – effectively research thinking – in favour of direct experience, at our peril.
- Co-creation is not an easy option. It requires skill, structure and discipline – although this may come from within the co-creation team, rather than being imposed upon it.

I should stress that I am not arguing against co-creation. Far from it. I am a strong advocate of research as an emergent and creative process (Keegan, 2006, 2008, 2009). However, I do believe that co-creation, as a *research activity*, must incorporate analysis and interpretation. These are the skills on which professional research is built.

This can happen in one of two ways. It may involve the traditional analysis and interpretation stage after the fieldwork has been completed. Alternatively, it could mean that we need to develop appropriate analysis and interpretation skills *that are incorporated within each stage of the research process*, rather than 'saving' analysis and interpretation until after the fieldwork. To a significant extent, this practice has already evolved in qualitative practice carried out by experienced researchers, in order to meet fast client turn-around. However, formalising and specifying this integral and ongoing process of analysis and interpretation encourages their transmission to new researchers through the teaching of specific skills of reflection-in-action (discussed later).

In practice this might mean that, ideally, each member of the co-creation team would possess the skills of self awareness, reflection, active listening, the ability to develop relevant hypotheses, constructs and so on – in fact, the skills of analysis and interpretation that experienced qualitative researchers already possess. On other occasions – and perhaps more realistically – the co-creation team would be guided by careful and skilled leadership from the researcher/facilitator.

My contention is, that when co-creation involves the input of individuals who bring diverse perspectives, who are independent in their thinking, who are aware and sensitive to the views of others and can each contribute from their own experience and knowledge – and have appropriate leadership – then co-creation can become more than the sum of its parts. However, if the opposite factors are in play, then co-creation can lead to the classic 'committee' syndrome of lack of creativity and co-dependency.

WHERE HAS THIS INTEREST IN CO-CREATION COME FROM?

Why have we become interested in co-creation and why now? Interest seems to have emerged simultaneously from a number of directions.

The New Sciences

Quantum physics, the complexity sciences (Stacey, 2003) and social constructionism (Shotter 2003) are challenging our ways of understanding the world and, in particular, our thinking about how society functions and how knowledge is created. Instead of thinking of society and culture as a collection of *things*, i.e. people, organisations, job roles, information, the emphasis is placed on the relationship between things. For example, this perspective views culture as a living evolving process, rather than something static and constant. Culture is understood as 'not so much imposed on people from outside, as exposed from within' (Seel, 2000).

Culture is therefore being created by all of us, all the time; it is fluid and ever changing. It follows that we create culture *between ourselves* through our moment by moment interactions (Shaw, 2002). From this perspective, co-creation is our normal method of communication as we each 'follow on' from the other person, developing the thread of conversation, which *emerges*. This way of thinking has permeated many areas of life including business (Wheatley, 1999), the media and market research.

Emergence – the ways in which larger patterns arise from local-level interactions – is an important strand within the complexity sciences (Stacey, 1996). The familiar example of emergence is that of the butterfly flapping its wings in the UK resulting, through unexpected chains of reactions, in a tornado in Florida. In relation to human beings, emergent behaviour, fostered by the internet, can lead to unpredictable and surprising outcomes. By their nature, online communications can cut across traditional 'control and command' ways of operating, leading to very fast and unpredictable outcomes. As Anthony Tasgal so nicely puts it, 'Systems are doing it themselves'. (Tasgal, 2003).

The Rise of 'Digital Natives'

Digital natives; broadly those of us who are under 25 – as opposed to the rest of us who are, at best, digital immigrants – have grown up in an environment of instant mass communications. The internet has become a medium for emergence so that movements can spring up and spread like wildfire, undermining and overwhelming traditional structures and ways of communicating. Co-creation is becoming the norm in some areas. "In the industrial age, we treated customers as individuals; they were independent and very passive. Today in the networked age they are highly collective, highly interdependent and very active" (Venkatraman, 2008).

An article by Tom Whipple in The Times illustrates this phenomenon. A loosely associated group of middle class teenagers, connected only by the internet, formed a group, called it Anonymous, and decided to target Scientology, with the aim of revoking the group's tax status (although this linear description completely belies the random way in which the movement emerged). They launched Operation Sea Arrrgh; simultaneously and apparently without warning, in London, Toronto, Sydney, New York and other cities worldwide, young men and women began protesting en masse.

People began acting as one and the idea went viral. "We are the hive mind, the anger that leaked from the computer screen", explained a long-haired twentysomething... "the cult (Scientology) failed to understand how things arise out of mass consciousness... What you are seeing here is the emergence of a new kind of democracy". The internet is the one element that has dictated the nature of Anonymous, allowing informal membership, and a leaderless organisation structure barely recognisable from the protest movement of old. (Whipple, 2008)

This is just one of many examples of its kind, in which the net facilitated co-creation between geographically disparate groups with a common purpose.

The New Egalitarianism

This spirit of empowerment has engendered a new egalitarianism. In this post-modern world, 'experts' appears to be a dying breed; everyone's contribution is equal, and consumers are no longer content to play second fiddle to corporations. (Gehling, 2008; Cherkoff & Moore, 2007). In particular, social networks are distinctive in that the users create and spread the content – their voice can be heard directly and immediately (Vogt & Knapman, 2008). The internet has shifted power to customers by redressing the imbalance of information between them and suppliers, as well as giving them the means to voice their dissatisfaction when they receive poor quality goods (Bollen, 2008). According to Vogt & Knapman (2008), in the future it will become commonplace to recruit consumer advocates whose role is to seed ideas within their respective networks.

The Growth of Fluid, Interactive Research Methodologies

Traditional research methodologies have been criticised for their *linear approach*. Focus groups, in particular, are sometimes dismissed as *authoritarian* structures, in which the moderator (as expert) talks with the respondents (as data source) out of the context of their *real lives*. By contrast, ethnographic approaches, gathering 'naturally occurring data' and online communities are often regarded as more conducive to co-creation, because researchers and clients interface with research participants in their own environments and/or through their own mediums, so they are deemed to be more *authentic*.

[Ironically, the reality is that *emergence*, is intrinsic to well moderated focus groups, which explore ongoing relationships between individuals, brands, services, their environment and the wider cultural context. The study of relationships is at the heart of qualitative research and co-creation is a given.]

Client Participation

Clients increasingly want to have *direct experience* of their target audiences. This trend started with viewing facilities, but increasingly clients are keen to be actively involved in the research process, not simply viewing the action through a one way mirror (Vogt & Knapman, 2008). Customer immersion is one expression of this need. Consumer panels and online communities, in which clients participate as members, are also on the increase (Comley, 2008). At its best, active co-creation by researchers and clients; the ongoing development of ideas, conducting/watching research sessions, discussing and analysing outcomes and feeding back into further fieldwork as an iterative process, can be an intense, but very productive method of working (Campbell, 2009, personal communication).

It is likely that this development will continue. Vogt & Knapman (2008) believe there will need to be a shift towards 'conversational marketing', in which consumers will increasingly be seen (and treated) as 'friends of' rather than 'consumers of' a brand.

ROUTES TO CO-CREATION

All of these factors have come together to foster an intense interest in co-creation, as discussed earlier, although the lack of methodological focus to the term has meant that it can be applied to a range of disparate research activities. However, co-creation tends to cluster within two, fairly distinct arenas:

- co-creation within online communities
- co-creation as a collaborative, iterative process of learning

Online Communities as Creative Hubs

Online communities have been described as like a 'bazaar', which grows from the free flow of ideas, as suppliers seek to meet the changing needs of their customers. It is a 'bottom up' community. By contrast, traditional research methods are compared to a cathedral, with strict central command structures (Raymond, 2001). The nature of this free flowing, 'bottom up' community means that the participants can follow their own interests, decide what they want to work on and respond if they feel so inclined. It becomes a journey of discovery. As Cooke & Buckley (2008) put it, 'It offers market researchers opportunities, as yet untapped, to co-create goods and services with our respondents and to have them react to our concepts in an increasingly less directed way.' Some researchers (Robarts, 2008) advocate the creation of short-term online communities, in which researchers can obtain continual feedback from participants, liaise with clients and put ideas back into live research, online.

The development of online communities which are not overtly research-led, and client initiatives which talk directly to their customers, does raise a number of questions. Can these developments really be called research – at least as we know it? It also opens up the debate about the role of researchers – what purpose do they serve, if customers can interact directly with client companies? Last but not least, it sidesteps the possibility that consumers may be on a different journey than clients and resent interference; client and customer agendas may well be different.

Client companies are doing it for themselves

Direct interaction and collaboration between customers and client companies has already happened in many areas. For example, Del Monte decided to create a new breakfast food for dogs. It recruited a private community of customers called, 'I love my dog', who quickly reached a consensus that Del Monte would never have considered: the dog food should be bacon-and-egg flavoured. In 2007 Del Monte created Sausages Breakfast Bites (Phillips, 2008).

Hallmark cards set up a group around humour, in which customers shared their views of what was 'funny'. This provided Hallmark with clear guidance on changing tastes in different customer segments. (Phillips, 2008). Coca-Cola has launched a site aimed at opening dialogue with consumers (<http://www.letsgettogether.co.uk/home>) and Canon, the camera manufacturer, has created a Windows Live Space to

form a community where people interested in photography can showcase photos – and learn more about new Canon products (Vogt & Knapman, 2008).

Cooke and Buckley (2008) describe the Lego website, which has turned its army of online users into a massive design team by simply allowing them to build models from over 500 Lego pieces. Meanwhile, Dell is using Second Life to allow people to build their own computer and even to buy the finished product if they wish. In 2007, Dell created "IdeaStorm" – a concept that has been widely imitated – in which customers were asked to suggest improvements they would make to Dell's products. Other visitors to IdeaStorm could promote or demote the ideas they saw, depending on how important they were considered to be (Phillips, 2008).

These initiatives are challenging the traditional boundaries between consumers, clients and researchers. It is not yet clear where this trend will lead or, indeed, the role that researchers will come to play in these scenarios.

Co-creation as a Collaborative, Iterative Process of Learning

The area that I particularly want to focus on is co-creation as a face to face activity involving diverse groups of individuals (research participants, clients, researchers and others) working collaboratively to generate and develop new ideas. This can take many forms, for example:

- *Creative forums*, comprising hand picked individuals (sometimes organisational teams) that are convened and work together to generate new thinking around a particular area. These forums are set up and managed by qualitative research teams. The sessions can last for a half day, a full day or longer – and may be reconvened. They may comprise half a dozen individuals or they may comprise hundreds. There are particular issues related to large groups which are outside the scope of this paper (See Langmaid & Andrews (2003) for a detailed discussion).
- *Developing consumer panels*: Participants are selected, trained and given the tools to help develop, create and innovate with and for clients. The purpose is to facilitate collaborative relationships between participants and clients in order to develop effective working teams (Pakel-Dunlop, 2007). Whilst creative panels involving especially chosen and trained participants are not new (Holmes & Keegan, 1983), they have seen a revival with the current interest in co-creation.
- *Co-creation as a way of working: an iterative process of learning* In this way of working clients, researchers, research participants and others may work together, in various combinations, on research issues, which may be very broadly defined. The objectives, research methodologies and hypotheses evolve as the project progresses and new understanding develops.

To give an example of this third form of co-creation: CKL worked with a client team to develop a strategy for the future development of a popular brand of after dinner mints. The process took place in an hotel, over an intensive three-day period. It included client-viewed group discussions with consumers, followed by immediate feedback, initially from the researcher team, then from the client team who had been observing. Ideas generated were fed back into subsequent consumer groups. There was a presentation on consumer trends, to provide context and spark off ideas. Clients joined some consumer groups. The researchers joined as participants in sessions convened by an external facilitator. At the end of three 16-hour days, a client strategy was jointly put together. This type of research process requires a different set of skills to traditional research or, more accurately, the existing skills need to be employed in a different way. It is a different model of research; essentially it is an emergent research process.

Moving through the three forms of collaborative research, outlined above (and I am not suggesting that these are the only co-creation models that exist), from *creative forums* through to *co-creation as iterative learning*, we move further away from the external structures and protocols that traditionally contain and control market research. We are entering less defined territory in which internalised skills, experience and judgement are prioritised. Although many researchers have already evolved into this emergent way of working, there is little formal theory to fall back on. What are the ground rules of co-creation in this situation that enable it to be productive and useful? What personal skills do participants need? We hear talk about research becoming more fluid, interactional, less constricted by the disciplines of 'traditional research'. But with few external constraints, could this just be an excuse for sloppy, ill thought out research in which 'anything goes'? If we abandon traditional research protocols which, although they might be limiting, provide rigour and discipline in our practice and thinking, what are we going to put in their place?

THE ASSUMPTIONS UNDERPINNING CO-CREATION

Reading academic research papers on co-creation, it is easy to come away with the one-dimensional view that co-creation is *better* than traditional methods of research. Sometimes this is simply stated with little explicit examination of the underpinning assumptions that are being made. There is just acceptance that *individual is bad and together is good*. What evidence do we have for this?

There seem to be four assumptions some or all of which are usually implicit in the notion of co-creation:

1. *We do it better together*
2. *The team will work 'as one'*
3. *The responsibility is shared (No-one is in control)*
4. *We work on issues that interest us*

Let us explore these assumptions:

1. Do We Do it Better Together?

What about 'Me'?

There is currently a belief – voiced loudly in popular culture; counselling, media, gender debates etc – that *relationships* and *communication* are the primary routes to creativity, change and human happiness; relationships with *significant others* are the pinnacle of human endeavour and we should all aspire to healthy and fulfilling personal relationships. Less than this is considered a sign of inadequacy, even mental dysfunction (Bowlby, 1980)

However, as psychiatrist Dr Anthony Storr (1997) points out, many of the world's greatest thinkers have been solitary; they have not reared families or formed close personal ties. This was true of Descartes, Newton, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein. None of them married and most live alone for the greater part of their lives. Storr offers an alternative perspective to this view that we are *incomplete* and *less* creative on our own:

It seems to me that what goes on in the human being when he is by himself is as important as what happens in his interactions with other people....The creative person is constantly seeking to discover himself, to remodel his own identity, and to find meaning in the universe through what he creates. He finds this a valuable integrating process which, like meditation or prayer, has little to do with other people, but which has its own separate validity. His most significant moments are those in which he attains some new insight, or makes some new discovery; and these moments are chiefly, if not invariably, those in which he is alone.
(Storr 1997)

It is indisputably true that many significant moments of insight occur when alone and 'silent conversation' (Mead, 1934) e.g. in which we internally weigh up the pros and cons of situations or consider different perspectives, can be just as important as interaction with others. Perhaps more so for some people.

A silent conversation might go something like:

"I'll have that last cream cake."

"No, you don't need it"

"If I eat it now, it will be gone and I won't be distracted by it"

"But you're trying to lose weight to get into those jeans"

"Stuff the jeans, here I go"

Or perhaps your conversation would be more metaphysical...

George Herbert Mead, an influential American social psychologist, talks about the 'parliament of selves' in which our identity is constructed in the process of interaction between different aspects of our self as well as through interaction with others (Mead, 1934). Effectively, our mind 'talks to itself' and, in parallel, we talk with other people, but we do not depend on others in order to be creative.

The pitfalls of groups

Groups of people, in certain circumstances, fall into a style of thinking – *groupthink* – in which the maintenance of the group's cohesion and togetherness becomes all-important. This can result in bad decision-making. Irving Janis (1972), who invented the term, defined it as "a way of deliberating that group members use when their desire for unanimity overrides their motivation to assess all available plans of action". He lists the eight primary symptoms of groupthink as:

- Having illusions of invulnerability
- Rationalising poor decisions
- Believing in the group's morality
- Sharing stereotypes which guide the decision
- Exercising direct pressure on others
- Pressure to conform
- Maintaining an illusion of unanimity (everyone agrees with everyone else)
- Using 'mind-guards' (who control information flow) to protect the group from negative information

Famous examples of Groupthink (Griffin, 2009) are:

- The presidential advisory group who almost led Kennedy into invading Cuba and potential nuclear war in the Bay of Pigs affair
- The Challenger disaster, where NASA officials disregarded engineers' concerns and decided to launch the shuttle.

James Surowiecki (2004) in 'The Wisdom of Crowds' describes how the Challenger team succumbed to 'confirmation bias', which caused

decision makers to unconsciously seek those bits of information that confirmed their underlying intuitions. As a result, they made the wrong decision, with disastrous consequences.

Groupthink can happen in religious cults; members are prevented from having contact with opposing views, there is a strong pressure to conform and 'mind-guards' may be used to ensure conformity.

On a more mundane level, we have probably all experienced some form of groupthink as members of a committee, in which there are overt and covert pressures to 'toe the line' and it is sometimes easier to acquiesce than to challenge. The next time, in a similar situation, it is harder to challenge and so it goes on, down the slippery slope. One of the particular dangers of small groups is that they can emphasise consensus over dissent and can exacerbate our tendency to 'prefer the illusion of certainty to the reality of doubt' (Surowiecki, 2004)

Group polarisation is related to groupthink in that it skews decision making. For example, Moscovici and Zavalloni (1969) found that a group's decisions are riskier than the average of the individual decisions of members before the group met. (Group polarisation was formally known as 'risky shift phenomenon' before it was discovered that the shift could be in either direction; groups composed of people who were risk averse were likely to become more risk averse, whereas groups composed of more risk taking individuals became riskier as a group).

Interestingly for market researchers, group polarization has been found to occur with online discussions. In particular, group discussions conducted when participants cannot see or identify one another can lead to even higher levels of group polarisation compared with traditional meetings (Sia et al, 2002).

There are many other ways in which groups can cause distortion, for example, Surowiecki (2004) highlights the following possible distortions:

- Early comments in a group are more influential in that they shape the framework within which the discussion occurs
- Status tends to shape speaking patterns, with higher-status people talking more than lower-status people
- People at the centre of the group (opinion leaders, those who are more vociferous) tend to become more important over the course of the discussion
- Perhaps most importantly, there is no clear correlation between talkativeness and expertise

It is interesting that, within traditional market research methodologies, there are *external* constraints which work against this distortion; the impartiality of the moderator who actively works to ensure that everyone has their say and who tries to encourage diversity in the views expressed, respondents who are unknown to one another and who are, more or less, of equal status, analysis and interpretation carried out after the discussions are completed. In addition, there are internal constraints embodied within the researcher's continual reflection-in-action (Schon, 1982).

However, with *co-creation as an iterative process*, as described above, there are fewer external constraints to help neutralise the danger that these biasing factors will influence decision making in unpredictable ways – *because there is little theory in commercial qualitative research which directly addresses this type of co-creation*.

In summary, the evidence suggests that:

- *Individual* creativity should not be neglected; to do so diminishes creative potential. There is no reason why individual and group creativity cannot be harnessed and fuel each other.
- *Co-creation* is not *always* better. Groups can make poor decisions, under some circumstances. This means that we need to be aware of, and structure co-creation teams in ways that will maximise the usefulness of their output.

2. Will the Team Work as One?

Management guru, Peter Senge (1990) describes how, in most teams, the energies of individual members work at cross purposes; there are different degrees of personal power and different agendas. The fundamental characteristic of the relatively unaligned team is wasted energy. Individuals may work extraordinarily hard, but their efforts do not translate into team effort. By contrast, when a team becomes more aligned, a commonality of direction emerges, and individuals' energies harmonize. There is less wasted energy.

In fact, a resonance or synergy develops, like the "coherent" light of a laser rather than the incoherent and scattered light of a light bulb. There is a commonality of purpose, a shared vision, and understanding of how to complement one another's efforts. Individuals do not sacrifice their personal interests to the larger team vision; rather the shared vision becomes an extension of their personal visions. (Senge, 1990)

Empowering the individual within a group when there is a relatively low level of alignment, he suggests, *worsens the chaos and makes managing the team even more difficult*. Team learning, says Senge, remains poorly understood. Until we have some theory of what happens when teams learn (as opposed to individuals in teams learning), Senge believes that we will be unable to distinguish group intelligence from "groupthink".

As discussed earlier, the well established techniques within traditional qualitative research methodologies – in particular the involvement of an experienced group moderator – help ensure that focus group participants are aligned and work productively on pre-defined research issues. With *co-creation as an iterative process* the rules are less clear. Co-creation does not just 'happen'. The conditions under which co-creation produces *alignment* need to be clearly defined and implemented if the process is to be successful in terms of generating useful

ideas and strategies.

3. Is the Responsibility Shared?

The ideal of co-creation is often expressed in terms of having no 'command and control' structure. It is assumed, or hoped, that ideas will emerge spontaneously through the interaction of the participants. For example, there are many examples offered of the way in which online communities 'do it for themselves' – some of which have been outlined earlier. However, it is equally true that it has proved difficult to build and sustain online research communities, and take-up rates are often lower than expected. There are also issues about recruitment and retention. Some researchers question whether online communities are, by their nature, transient. Indeed, given high levels of passivity in some communities, it is difficult to know whether some participants are dormant or defunct (Comley, 2008).

Similarly, with face-to-face co-creation teams, if there is little or no external structure or leadership, the motivation to sustain the process of co-creation must come from within the team itself. However, it is unrealistic to expect that teams, composed of diverse groups of consumers, researchers and clients, with disparate agendas and limited availability or interest to engage, will manage to be self sustaining. Lack of leadership is likely to lead to chaos rather than creativity. At the same time, leadership in a co-creation team must, of necessity, fit the nature of the co-creation task.

Peter Senge, in describing 'the learning organisation,' views leadership as centring on subtle but important tasks; the leader is responsible for *building organisations* in which people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision, and improve shared mental models – that is, leaders are *responsible for learning* (Senge, 1990). Equally, he suggests, the leader needs to be primarily the designer of the process, the invisible support, rather than the figurehead. This also seems to be an appropriate leadership role in co-creation as iterative learning.

4. Can the Team Work on Issues that Interest Them?

Many of the examples of on-line co-creation between customers and clients involve areas in which customers are either already expert and/or areas they are very interested in, so that they are strongly motivated to become involved. Consumers who become involved are self-selecting. They may not represent the mainstream of consumers of that particular product or service. Equally, some product categories are intrinsically more interesting than others. For example, there is likely to be more interest expressed in co-creation in the area of new generation mobile phones than for new improved widgets or soap powder – although I could be wrong.

There is an underlying tension here. Most organisations need to develop commercially successful products and services in order to be viable. Consumers will freely engage in co-creating products or services which interest them. These two needs do not necessarily match. If it does not happen naturally, then at some point, companies will need to steer consumers onto ground that potentially offers fertile pickings for commercial development. Will consumers go along with this? Is it really feasible for consumers to set the agenda; to be co-creating with clients in areas that consumers themselves define? And will they expect clients to invest the same time and commitment to the process as they do themselves? Or will there be some form of fake democracy going on, in which consumers are lured into co-creation processes on the promise of developing their own ideas whereas, at the end of the day, the client needs to develop products which will improve its bottom line?

These are important issues to address at this early stage. Given the sophisticated mechanisms available for consumer feedback and negative publicity that can be sent forth – at the speed of twitter – companies need to be clear about their agendas.

ENHANCING RESEARCH SKILLS FOR 'CO-CREATION AS 'ITERATIVE LEARNING'

Perhaps we need to start with a new research model, which acknowledges co-creation (indeed, most research) as a process of iterative learning and differentiates it from a classical research model. Whilst in practice these two modes of working will inevitably overlap, the models below attempt to illustrate the differences.



The classical research model



Ongoing thoughts, feelings, emotions (experience) – and also Evaluation – shaping and being shaped by others and the environment Knowledge and understanding evolving over time

The emergent model

In the emergent model, all the processes of inquiry, evaluation, development – testing of hypotheses and formulation of ideas and concepts – happen *at the same time*, as an ongoing process. This differs from the classical research model in which the research stages are more clearly defined and require a different skill set. As qualitative researchers are well aware, this is a question of emphasis. Inevitably both modes operate concurrently. Given that guidelines for carrying out research projects using the classical model are well documented, how can we develop guidelines which prioritise the emergent model?

Developing the emergent model

In developing guidelines for *co-creation as iterative learning* there are a number of useful sources, outlined below. These are not

exhaustive:

- *Action research* (Lewin, 1973) was originally developed by social scientists as a collaborative process, in which research participants work as co-researchers on areas that are important to them. The research process is iterative. Knowledge is created through cycles of reflection upon practice, experimentation, further reflection, sharing reflections, further experimentation, and so forth (Maklen, Knox and Ryals, 2008). Researchers engage in ever-expanding cycles of action-reflection-theorising (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).
- *Reflection-in-action*: Social scientist, Donald Schon (1982), closely studied what practitioners do, starting with the assumption that competent practitioners know more than they can articulate and exhibit a kind of knowing-in-practice, which is mostly tacit. He postulates that practitioners develop *reflection-in-action*, a process by which they use past knowledge and expertise to inform the unique present situation. Effectively, this is a process of reflection in practice, experimentation, further reflection, sharing reflections etc, which is very close to the processes within Action Research, discussed above.
- *Team learning*: Peter Senge discusses the 'discipline of team learning', which involves mastering the practices of dialogue and discussion. He describes these as the two distinct ways in which teams converse. In dialogue, there is the free and creative exploration of complex and subtle issues, a deep 'listening' to one another and suspending of one's own views. By contrast, in discussion, different views are presented and defended and there is a search for the best view to support decisions that must be made at the time. According to Senge, dialogue and discussion are potentially complementary, but most teams lack the ability to distinguish between the two and to move consciously between them. They are also unable to deal with 'the powerful forces opposing productive dialogue and discussion' in working teams. Finally, Senge stresses that the discipline of team learning requires practice (Senge, 1990).
- *Process Consulting* (Schein, 1990) developed as an approach to organisational development, emphasising 'the helping relationship'. In particular, it highlights the importance of the supplier (or researcher) becoming actively involved in problem diagnosis and generating possible solutions. By its nature this is a more collaborative model; more akin to a coaching than a traditional research model.
- *Creative thinking*: There is a long tradition, going back at least to the 1950s of exploring creativity and the ways in which creativity can be enhanced (Guilford, 1967). In the same year, Sidney J. Parnes, a Professor of Creative Studies at New York College, developed a number of practical guidelines to encourage creative thinking, both on an individual and a group level (some of these guidelines are discussed below).
- *Leadership style*: Douglas Griffin in 'The Emergence of Leadership' talks about the importance of *leadership* as opposed to *leaders*. Whereas a leader is in a fixed role, leadership can be assumed by any person in the group, at the appropriate time, with the implicit or explicit agreement of group participants. This enables all the diverse knowledge and skills of participants to be harnessed and increases potential group learning.

Each of these areas can usefully contribute to the development of theory and practical application in co-creation. Co-creation as iterative learning is not an easy option because the discipline and control comes, not so much from external constraints, but from personal and shared awareness, qualities, skills and the diverse experiences of individual participants and the way in which they interact with one another and form a team. At best what they become as a team is more than the sum of the individual participants – at worst the team can sink to the lowest common denominator – co-dependency, in which consensus and complacency reign.

Developing Guidelines For Co-Creation

Cherry picking from the broad areas outlined above, a number of themes which seem to have particular relevance to the development of co-creation as iterative learning are: the principles of creative thinking – and preventing *groupthink* (Parnes, 1967; Guilford, 1969, Surowiecki, 2004), creating alignment (Senge, 1990), reflection-in-action (Schon, 1982) and appropriate leadership style (Griffin, 2002).

1. Promoting creative thinking

Sidney J. Parnes (1967), in his wonderful 'Creative Behaviour Guidebook', stresses the importance of structure in creating an appropriate environment for creativity to flourish. In contemporary language, it is the 'edge of chaos'; the place between over-stability, which encourages stagnation, and excessive change, which triggers chaos (Stacey, 1996). Parnes's guidelines for inducing creative thinking in groups include:

- *psychological safety*; creativity, exposing our ideas to others and evaluation can be high risk. Emphasis needs to be placed on building on the ideas of others, not undermining them. This is often translated into simple rules for building on other people's ideas even when they seem untenable
- *psychological freedom*; stepping outside social and cultural norms, breaking down hierarchies, encouraging questioning of pre-conceptions e.g. 'forced coupling' in which disconnected ideas are 'married'
- *problem re-definition*; changing the frame of reference for the problem – which may help to highlight possible solutions
- *incubating ideas*; the unconscious process of mulling over a problem or situation whilst engaged in quite different activities
- *generating as many ideas as possible* as, the more ideas that are generated, the greater the chances of finding a significant or useful idea (Guilford, 1970).

These principles are already widely used in many structured forms of co-creation, such as creative workshops and creative panels.

2. Discouraging negative group effects

From the other side of the fence, ensuring that negative group effects are diminished as far as possible is just as important. There is considerable evidence that *diversity of views* and a *variety of life experiences*, combined with *independence of thought* – the permission and ability to disagree with the rest of the group – helps insure against the *groupthink* effect.

Diversity and independence are important because the best collective decisions are the product of disagreement and context, not consensus or compromise.
(Surowiecki, 2004)

This has implications for the mix of individuals in the group and the way in which the group is managed. Independence of thought and expression require equality in status and equal ability to voice an opinion. A junior staff member may well feel inhibited from expressing honest views if his or her line manager or other senior manager is present. Researchers may be less forthright in the presence of their clients. A traditional client-supplier relationship does not foster equality. A model which involves participants as co-researchers is more appropriate.

3. Creating alignment

It is clear from Peter Senge's emphasis on the importance of alignment, that this is a core need for the development of productive *co-creation as iterative learning*. Ideally, fostering *alignment* requires experience/training for all the participants; researchers, clients, research participants. Senge would suggest appropriate training in dialogue and discussion and in self awareness to enable participants to recognise and resist 'defensive routines' (i.e. protecting their own ideas and rejecting those of others) (Argyris, 1985). These skills require practice and this suggests that some co-creation teams need time to develop into a successfully working group. Alignment does not mean homogeneity.

4. Reflection-in-action

The skills of reflection, experimentation, shared reflections etc, are second nature to experienced qualitative researchers, but may need to be taught to clients and research participants who have no previous experience of them, before engaging in the co-creation process.

Both reflection-in-action and creative thinking provide structure (both external and internal) for *co-creation*. In addition, they can help neutralise the effects of groupthink and risky shift because they both individual and group processes are in operation at the same time.

5. Leadership

Co-creation – at least when its aim is to foster commercial activity – is unlikely to be productive without effective leadership. The style of the leadership, however, is crucial. As both Douglas Griffin (2002) and Lao-tzu suggest, effective leadership needs to support and provide the space for creativity, rather than dictate direction in the group.

Lao-tzu's, 'invisible hand' seems to be an excellent job spec for the leader of a team which is engaged in *co-creation as iterative learning*; enabling a high degree of autonomy in the group, combined with sufficient structure to ensure continuity.

IN CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have delved into a number of diverse areas in an attempt to explore the strengths and weaknesses of co-creation as a research approach and also to highlight theory and practice which support this way of working. I have come up with a number of tentative conclusions which, hopefully, will provide food for thought in terms of developing more concrete theory and guidelines in this area.

1. We need to move away from viewing research approaches as if they are fashion accessories; as one comes into favour, so another is ousted. Any commercial research approach that has stood the test of time has done so because it has proved useful to client decision making.
2. In a sense, all research (and especially qualitative research) is co-created. Co-creation – *as a research approach* – is one option, not the unitary 'answer'. Greater integration of different research methodologies, including co-creation, can provide multiple perspectives. Different methodologies are appropriate for different tasks at different times with different people. The skill is in selecting the right tool or tools for the task in question.
3. Individuals can be just as important a source of creativity as groups. Indeed, in some circumstances, groups can inhibit rather than foster creativity. Cultivating a *both-and* rather than an *either-or* mentality would be more productive.
4. Analysis and interpretation are the most skilled – even if largely invisible – elements of a qualitative research project. Performed well, they transform 'data' into relevant, imaginative and cohesive client strategy. Our obsession with co-creation – or the democratisation of research in which research professionalism is negated – runs the risk of diminishing or underutilising research skills. Clients who observe focus groups and make decisions based solely on their observations, miss out on the researcher's skills and expertise, which they have paid for and, more importantly, which can make a significant contribution to client decision making.
5. *Co-creation as iterative learning* requires a different approach to research. Analysis and interpretation are integral to each stage of the research process. This requires a different research model and expanded research skills. For effective co-creation as iterative learning, there is a need to focus on:
 - *Structure*: creating an appropriate environment and atmosphere in which creativity can flourish, e.g. psychological safety and psychological freedom
 - Fostering *diversity* and *independence of thought*, to reduce the effects of groupthink

- *Reflection-in-action*: using past knowledge and expertise, experimentation, reflection, theorising, hypothesis generation in the current situation
- *Effective leadership*: in which the 'leader' acts as designer of the creative process e.g. introducing creative tasks, working on problem definition, fostering incubation of ideas.

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