CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT

Bring learning into action

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Abstract

Context: This critical reflection is about the positive effects for educational and research settings of participation in a two-day programme entitled 'Using participatory action research and appreciative inquiry to research healthcare practice'.

Aims: To reflect on the journey of positive developments in research and education that started with participation in this programme. Using Caring Conversations (Dewar, 2011) as a reflective framework of questions, this article discusses the journey in order to encourage others to consider the approach of appreciative inquiry to bring to life the concept of co-creation in research and education.

Conclusions and implications for practice: Participation in this programme has led to the implementation of a variety of actions in educational and research settings. Central to all these actions is an appreciative approach to co-creation as a counterpart to today's prevailing problem-based viewpoint. A possible factor behind these developments was the power of vulnerability experienced during the programme, a shared process of transformational learning.

Implications for practice:

This critical reflection:

- Provides an invitation to shift from a problem-based focus to a positive revolution
- Provides an appreciative reflective story about the power of vulnerability as an inspiration for others to move out of their comfort zone and seek to discover their own exceptionality
- Supports a shift from a facilitator-led to a co-creation approach in doing research and teaching with older adults

Keywords: Emotional touchpoints, appreciative inquiry, Caring Conversations, practice development, co-creation, transformational learning theory

Introduction

This reflective article is about the journey to bring learning into action.

> *'Learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action'* (Mezirow, 1996, p 162).

To support the reader to consider participation on such a journey, I will start with an introduction to myself. In 2011, I became a lecturer on a new educational programme, applied gerontology, at a university of applied sciences in the Netherlands. This programme started in 2010 to facilitate future professionals to co-create age-friendly services with older adults. In 2013, I also joined the research group Innovating with Older Adults.

At the end of the 2015 academic year my work had three strands:
- To develop the pilot 'Living Lab Assendorp' – a powerful learning environment to serve as a context for developing competencies in co-creation (Assendorp is a district in the city of Zwolle). Second-year undergraduate applied gerontology students, lecturers and older adults work together in the development of this learning environment
- To facilitate a research programme focusing on interprofessional collaboration in neighbourhoods. The reason for this focus was a shift in government regulation in the Netherlands, which increased the need for locally organised community teams in which interprofessional collaboration takes place (Hofhuis et al., 2015)
- To consider a proposal for a PhD dissertation: co-creation in research and education with older adults

The common thread for the three strands was the concept of co-creation. Based on conceptual work on the subject (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004, p 8) and the work of the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education in Washington DC (2014) a working definition of co-creation in the context of professionals and older adults is:

> *'Professional interactions between a gerontologist and older adults, groups, organisations, businesses and governmental agencies in order to enable older consumers to co-create definitions of needs and choices as well as design and implement innovative opportunities, products, resources and services for the growing older adult community'* (Jukema et al., 2017, p 4).

Unfortunately this working definition was not co-created with older adults; to be consistent with the concept of co-creation the viewpoint of older adults must be taken into account. Furthermore, the above definition is not clear about how co-creation can be operationalised.

Practice development methodology lends itself to the concept of co-creation. According to Manley et al., (2011, p 5) it achieves a shared purpose and outcome through collaboration, inclusion, participation and decision making with those involved.

For this reason, I wanted to develop skills in practice development; my knowledge on the subject came from literature alone. In order to be a practice development facilitator in the second phase of the research programme, I felt the need to gain experience in the practical aspects of this approach. The research group attended a two-day programme of study entitled 'Using participatory action research and appreciative inquiry to research healthcare practice' at a UK university.

In this article I will use Caring Conversations (Dewar, 2011) as a reflective framework through which I will reflect on my journey, exploring the concept of co-creation, during and following the programme. Roddy and Dewar (2016) advocate the use of a framework of questions to enhance reflexivity in practice development and research.

The Caring Conversations domains are:
- Connecting emotionally
- Considering other perspectives
- Being curious
- Collaborating
- Compromising
- Being courageous
- Celebrating

Connecting emotionally: how do I feel about co-creation?

My interest in the concept of co-creation was born out of frustration at the lack of participation of older adults in research in which I was involved. In my experience, co-creation is also difficult to achieve. The expectations of research participants, as well as of practice and educational settings, are not always compatible with the concept of co-creation. Participants commonly assume that researchers will come up with answers and do investigations, rather than working together. Professionals of all types are used to being 'the expert' and answering people's questions instead of working together with people as mutual partners. Besides expectations, vulnerability may play a role in achieving co-creation. Vulnerability is inherent to new ways of collaboration where former expectations do not fit. Brown (2012, p 33) defines vulnerability as 'uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure', while Taylor (2007, p 187) says some discomfort and instability is necessary to change insights.

The following three components of the programme resonated with me and helped me to see co-creation in a different way:
- Appreciative inquiry as a method to enhance co-creation
- Emotional touchpoints as a tool to open up dialogue and appreciate other perspectives in a deep and meaningful way
- The provocative nature of creativity, which can stimulate learning

I felt hopeful that these new approaches might shift the rhetoric of co-creation towards reality, given that a central tenet across all of them is opening up meaningful dialogue (Dewar and Sharp, 2013).

Considering others' perspectives: what other perspectives are there about the concept of co-creation?

Appreciative inquiry was a new perspective for me. Cooperrider (2001, p 12) defines this as a method that:

'...deliberately seeks to discover people's exceptionality – their unique gifts, strengths and qualities. It actively searches and recognizes people for their specialties – their essential contributions and achievements. And it is based on principles of equality of voice – everyone is asked to speak about their vision of the true, the good and the possible. Appreciative inquiry builds momentum and success because it believes in people. It really is an invitation to a positive revolution. Its goal is to discover in all human beings the exceptional and the essential. Its goal is to create organizations that are in full voice.'

This approach spoke to me. I wanted to be part of this positive movement as it has a revolutionary way of facing the world (Dhiman, 2017). It altered my perspective about co-creation. Today's research, practice and education focus heavily on errors and defects. For example, our powerful learning environment is characterised by a problem-based focus (van Merriënboer and Paas, 2003; Könings et al., 2005). Appreciative inquiry makes me question our culture of approaching reality in a negative way, and has given me an opportunity to see co-creation through a new lens that emphasises possibility and positivity.

Being curious: what questions might I ask of myself and others (including the literature) that might help inform my understanding of co-creation?
A curious question I had was: is there an appreciative way of looking at the concept of co-creation and, if so, how can this be applied to co-creating with older adults in our research and education setting?

During the programme, a workshop using the emotional touchpoints method struck me as most able to address my curious question. This method (Bate and Glenn, 2006) was derived from an experience-based design perspective of users as co-designers. The method uses positive and negative words to tap into experiences (touchpoints) of people by asking what they felt at the time and why (Adamson et al., 2011, p 72). It helps to provide greater focus to an interview. The chosen emotional words, both positive and negative, are placed on touchpoint cards (Figure 1) – a visual cue that gives researcher and respondent a shared understanding of the direction of the interview. (Dewar et al., 2009).

Figure 1: Self-made book with a set of 40 emotional words
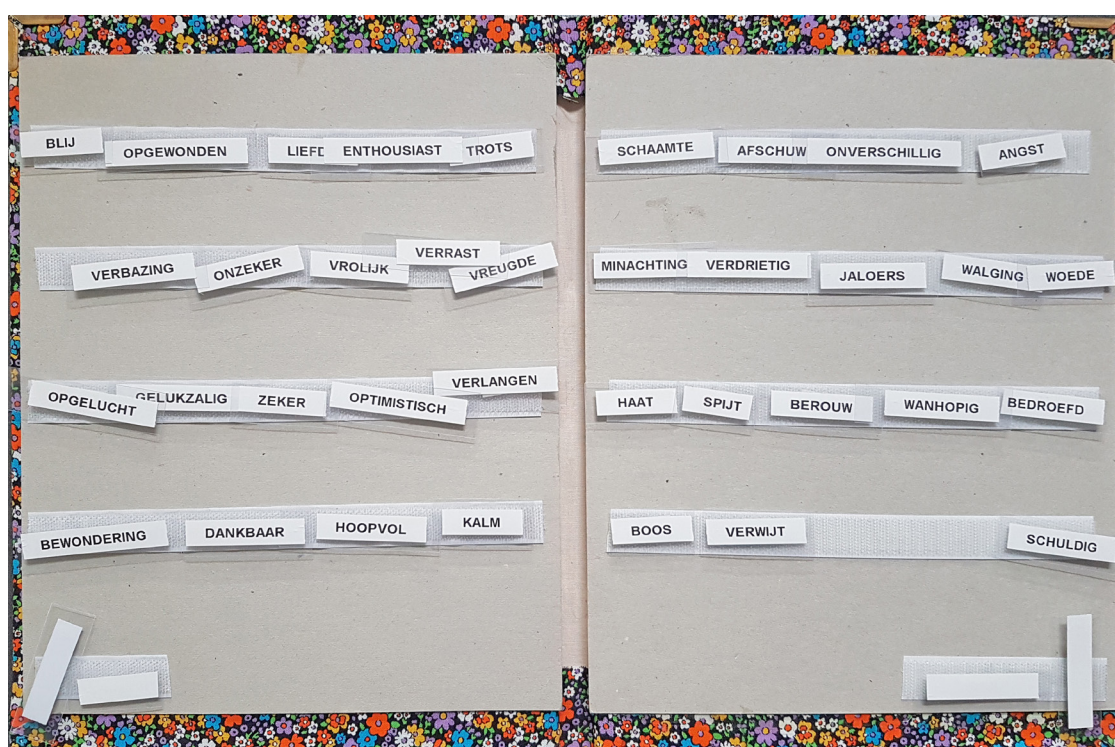
I was curious – could this method be used by students and older adults in our living lab pilot to co-create experiences in an appreciative way?

The emotional touchpoint method relates to appreciative inquiry because it helps to open up dialogue and to appreciate another perspective in a deep and meaningful way. For our pilot we were looking for a method that:
- Focused on the experience of living in a certain neighbourhood
- Encouraged reflection and sharing of emotion between students and older adults
- Was suitable for use with students and older adults who had little experience in research
- Promoted confidence in students using a co-creation method in their practice with older adults

According to Dewar et al. (2009, p 34) this method helps people to get in touch with their own experience and become involved in shaping and improving a situation. The method also challenges assumptions about what feels important for other people, and enables development of relationships.

We learned about the practical aspects of emotional touchpoints during the workshop. This corresponds with the theory that both communicative and instrumental methods are needed to foster transformational learning (Taylor, 2017). Its ease of use means it can help to provide focus for less experienced interviewers, and to redress the power imbalance between interviewer and the person who is interviewed.

So the method of emotional touchpoints matched our criteria for the living lab pilot. I wrote a message to myself on a postcard that was to be sent to me by the facilitators six months after completion of the programme. My message and questions was: Can we use this method as a way to teach students to co-create with older adults in the living lab pilot?

Figure 2: Postcard with a message to myself
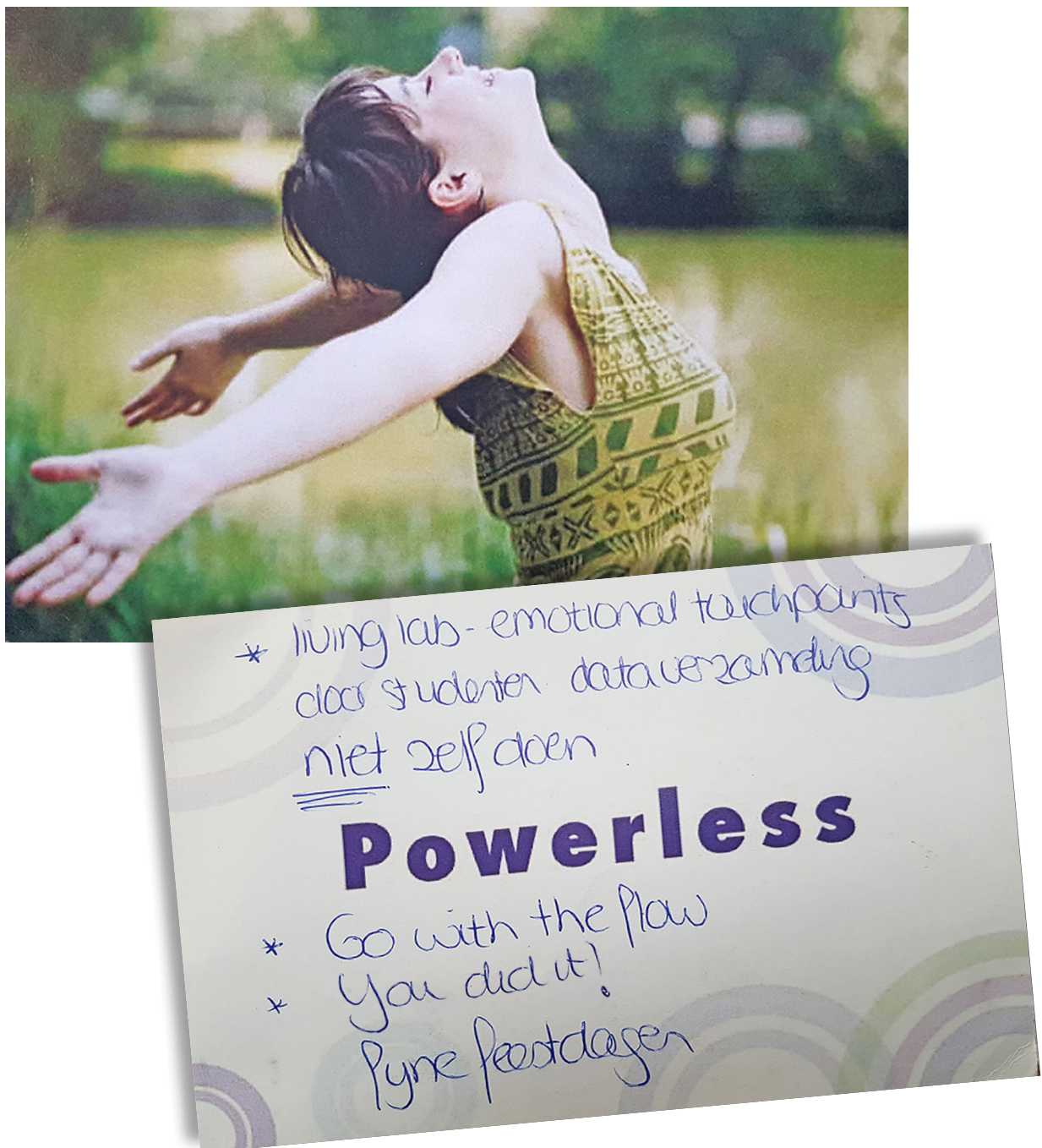
Other questions I asked myself were: what would be the benefits of introducing creativity during the process of co-creation? How might we do this? Is everyone creative? How might people feel?

Creativity was a thread running through the two-day programme. We were able to try out new creative methods, such as photovoice and collage work, and also to hear firsthand from the facilitators about the outcome of using creative methods in their research. Taylor (2007, p 182) identified use of diverse tools as an important factor in fostering transformational learning. It felt liberating and hopeful to me that research could be so energising and fun for all participants. According to Titchen (2015, p 13), the transformational worldview is concerned with enabling creativity and human flourishing, in addition to seeking new understanding and being democratising, empowering and liberating.

Creativity can also minimise power differentials between participants. This is essential for interactions between a gerontologist and older adults, groups, organisations, businesses, and governmental agencies to enable older consumers to co-create. This was my experience during the use of the photovoice method in the programme. This exercise was participatory, in that each participant's camera acted as the tool of reflection. We as participants had the power to decide what was important and how we would like to present that to the other participants (Yankeelov et al., 2015). We represented our lessons learned from the programme by photographing a number of scenes. One was a scene at a fire station that highlighted our key learning points. This image represented for us feeling safe, courageous and ignited. Photography and video are increasingly being used within the field of transformative learning to help stimulate reflection through a mutual visual context (Taylor, 2007, p 188).

Figure 3: Creative sessions during the programme

Creativity, in my opinion, is the ability to transcend the traditional and to (co-) create something new. The link between creativity and co-creation is that the former helps participants let go of traditions (such as a negative view of reality mentioned above) and unlock what is inside them (the unconscious). Therefore we adapted photovoice for our living lab pilot in the Netherlands as a working method for students and older adults to co-create together.

Collaborating: who could help to achieve an appreciative approach to co-creation in research and educational settings?
On returning home after the two inspiring days on the programme, I immediately contacted my colleagues in the education department to explain the method of appreciative inquiry and emotional touchpoints and their potential for our pilot. This corresponds with the transformational learning theory that it is important to act immediately on the lessons learned (Taylor, 2007). I invited them to explore the benefits of appreciative inquiry with the use of the emotional touchpoints method. Not all colleagues picked positive words, so the challenge was to ask questions about what they wished for – what would make them more positive about the situation. In this way the negative words can be the transformational portal to a more positive perspective. This connects with transformational learning theory because some discomfort and instability are part of the process (Taylor, 2007). Together we have searched for more literature about appreciative inquiry and worked on a study guide for the living lab pilot, incorporating appreciative inquiry and emotional touchpoints. During the first lessons of each course the students made their own emotional touchpoints packs in a workshop.

Compromising: which ideas has it been helpful to let go of?
I remember exploring our research worldviews as part of the programme. It became obvious we were stuck in our traditional frames as part of the technical view where empiricism and rationalism rule, but the transformational worldview had attracted our attention. This view acknowledges the complexity of whole persons and communities (Titchen, 2015), and so felt more fitting with our work in the Netherlands, with its focus on co-creation between students and older adults in communities.

Celebrating: what aspects of my experiences would I like to celebrate?
To conclude this article, I will used the method of emotional touchpoints to celebrate aspects of my experiences during the programme.

The programme itself was one big flow of inspiration for me. I have experienced different factors that shape the transformative experience, as Taylor mentions (2007, p 185). The programme leaders invited rather than instructed us what to do, and there was a lot of space to reflect and change the programme, which was appreciated. Thus co-creation and flexibility were being modelled from day one. The programme itself was creative and therefore liberating for us. Both instrumental and communicative learning were used to let us act on our new understandings. We had not been used to working in a creative way. We were invited to improvise rather than implement the lessons learned. As described by the transformational learning theory (Taylor, 2007), my journey did not end with the programme; my learning process went further and involved actions in different aspects of my life back home.

Being courageous: what helps in being courageous?
As a research team of five members we were out of our comfort zone. Being in a different country, the foreign language and the novel approach made us feel vulnerable, and we knew that we would not be able to be perfect. However, the shared feeling of vulnerability brought us closer together and made us feel more confident. Taylor (2007, p 185) mentions the importance of relationships that boost self-confidence in shaping transformational learning. The power of vulnerability is also mentioned in a book I read after my participation in the programme (Brown, 2012). Brown starts with a passage from a speech by Theodore Roosevelt in Paris. Roosevelt explained:

> *'The credit belongs to the man… who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat'* (Brown, 2012, p 11).

During the programme I felt like the man in the arena – conscious of my mistakes, but also of my possibilities. Since then I have experienced a link between transformational learning and the practice of co-creation. Co-creation is also a process of courage and vulnerability, shaped by action, relationships, context and critical reflection (Taylor, 2017). At first it's not clear what the outcomes will be and that's a risk in itself – a risk I'm willing to take to achieve meaningful co-creation in research and education.

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