



Co-Design

WHAT IS CO-DESIGN IN A MĀORI SPACE? KOTAHITANGA IN ACTION

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Abstract

Co-design is a process of collaboration between groups of people for the purpose of gaining new insights into problems and creating solutions (NSW Council of Social Services, 2017). Māori have often been the subject of unilateral research carried out by Pākehā practitioners, the results of which ranges from minimal material impact on community wellbeing, to being actively detrimental (Cram, 2012; Dreise & Mazurski, 2018). Co-design offers the opportunity to synergise Western and Māori knowledge in approaching community engagement, being well aligned with kaupapa Māori research and with core Māori values, and enabling whānau to take an active role in research and community advancement.

Key words: co-design, kaupapa Māori, methodologies, social innovation

Introduction

At some point it became commonplace to flippantly espouse the mantra, “there has never been a better time to be alive than the present,” when one was confronted with questions about the state of modern society. This may in many respects be the case. It is undeniable that contemporary society boasts unprecedented wealth and technological advancement, and that people are living healthier, longer and overall more peaceful lives. However, it may be somewhat of an inconvenient truth to acknowledge the reality that these benefits are not equally shared or accessible to all, and that the very mechanisms responsible for the success of a comparative few are concurrently responsible for the subjugation of many. It is evident that we live in a dichotomous society marked by increasingly complex, and wide-ranging systemic issues.

Within the context of Aotearoa, it is Māori communities who continue to be disproportionately negatively impacted by these issues and subsequently continue to be overrepresented in poor social indicators such as incarceration rates, poverty, home ownership and health (Marriott & Sim, 2014). As the solving of these problems has become increasingly pertinent within our collective consciousness, there has been an increase in the number of organisations dedicated to social innovation, meaning the development of more effective and sustainable solutions for the most pressing challenges our society faces. In recent years it has been recognised that fomenting this type of large-scale social change in the face of such complex issues requires moving away from individualistic towards a collaborative approach, in order to elucidate unique perspectives on the systems in question (Yang & Sung, 2016). Co-design has emerged within this as a modality allowing for meaningful collaboration between organisations and communities.

What Is Co-Design?

Co-design as a concept and practice has been co-opted by practitioners of social innovation from its origins within consumer product design (Blomkamp, 2018). In reality it is a reasonably simple concept, fully encompassed by the name itself. Perhaps because of this the co-design title has often been misappropriated and operationalised in respect of any collaborative efforts undertaken by an organisation (Blomkamp, 2018). It is imperative to understand that while all co-design is collaborative design, not all collaborative design is co-design. Fundamentally, co-design is a process of collaboration between groups of people for the purpose of gaining new insights into problems and creating solutions (NSW Council of Social Services, 2017).

Co-design has evolved out from this to encompass what could be regarded as a more conscientious, democratic approach to the design process which challenges participants to eschew predetermined answers and embrace ambiguity (Blomkamp, 2018). Instead, a co-design space allows for a synthesis of eclectic insights, perspectives, and experiences to create new, shared understandings (Blomkamp, 2018). Thus, the crucial element of co-design that separates it from other forms of participatory design, is that it pertains to an in-depth collaborative design process which holds the central stakeholders – those whom the program is for – central to informing the design decisions, in order to garner understanding that guarantees that the results are tailor-made to meet their needs (Te Morenga et al., 2018; Dreise & Mazurski, 2018). Put simply, co-design is not merely emphasising the views or experiences of the people who are affected by the decisions, it requires them to be actively and equally involved in making them at all stages (Dreise & Mazurski, 2018; NCOSS, 2017).

This inverts the conventional approaches to problem solving in these spaces which have tended toward a top-down approach, whereby the ideas of traditionally defined experts are privileged over all other knowledge sources, which can not only create contention but also narrow the scope of vision (Blomkamp, 2018; Dreise & Mazurski, 2018). In a co-design process, people are not problems to be solved, rather the holders of lived experience which is repositioned as a form of expertise and thus held in equal regard with the other external experts (Blomkamp, 2018). This isn't to say that anecdotal lived experience supersedes scientific knowledge or professional expertise, rather they are regarded as complimentary, resulting in a holistic assessment of the issue at hand (Blomkamp, 2018). As such, co-design represents a movement away from these traditional research methodologies and the idea of designing for people, toward an even more egalitarian practice of designing with people.

Co-Design In A Māori Space

In the context of Aotearoa, collaborative methodologies present as an important opportunity to consider when thinking about methods for positive engagement with Māori communities to gain more holistic insights into social outcomes. It is necessary to reflect on the historic relationship that exists between Māori communities and research in order to understand why it is important to actively engage with more conscientious approaches. As is the case with many indigenous communities worldwide, Māori have often been the subject of unilateral research carried out by Pākehā practitioners, the results of which unfortunately too often ranges from minimal material impact on community wellbeing, to being actively detrimental (Cram, 2012; Dreise & Mazurski, 2018).

Exploitative Eurocentric research frames have been implicated as the source of racist, essentialist narratives which have come to dominate the public psyche and to this day contribute to harmful hegemonic discourse which have material consequences for Māori (Smith, 2012). That being said, in recent years there has been an acknowledgement of these entrenched problems, and whilst there is still ongoing progress to be made in repairing the cross-cultural research relationship, it is encouraging that there has been a steady increase in the number of indigenous researchers and the development of indigenous research methodologies such as kaupapa Māori, which has gone a long way toward rebuilding trust in the research process and renegotiating entrenched power structures (Cram, 2012). Committing to a design process which fundamentally restructures the way the research process is approached by making the voices of those whom are typically excluded the foundation, co-design in practice can be seen as both complimentary and contributory to progressing this relationship.

In principle, co-design occupies a unique nexus by offering the opportunity to synergise Western and Māori knowledge in respect of how to approach community engagement. In many ways, it could be said that though co-design is not fundamentally an indigenous epistemology, it can be seen to confer a Pākehā meaning to practices that are implicit within Māoritanga. There are distinctive harmonies in the values which underpin both which translate into the practical considerations in the application of co-design (Davis, 2017). Of prime importance is the principle of whakawhanaungatanga – relationship and trust building – in conjunction with manaakitanga – affirming and upholding the mana of the people present – which work with the concept of kotahitanga. As mentioned previously, research has often been a source of contention for Māori, employing these principles in the research process gives the opportunity for a safe space to be created which validates and empowers the participants who fully engage as equals rather than as subjects. The incorporation of these

principles makes co-design conducive with what is regarded as a whānau-centric approach by fostering an environment that allows for scheduling around whānau needs, giving them the right to decide the capacity in which they participate, enabling explicit decision-making power, and building the capacity of the whānau to move into positions of leadership in the co-design process in future. By ensuring that the community voices are privileged mitigates the fatigue that many communities experience as a result of consistent over-researching and under-delivering (Clark, 2008). In a Māori context it also realises rights enshrined within the Treaty of Waitangi, in relation to research involving Māori (Martel et al., 2019) as it fosters rangatiratanga by providing communities with the ability to turn self-determination into action.

Developing solutions for social issues is immensely complicated due to the multitude of entrenched, interrelated factors which contribute to them. However, views on how to approach these kinds of systemic issues and affect large scale social change have progressed immensely over the last few years with co-design in particular arising as a pre-eminent approach. As previously mentioned, the need for the implementation of methodologies such as co-design has arisen in the face of consistent failures by the government to create solutions and meet the needs of whānau within the confines of Eurocentric approaches.

This article aims to open the conversation around understanding co-design in respect of its potential within advancing Māori social innovation. It is clear that when implemented correctly co-design provides scope for subverting some of the major pitfalls which arise from conventional approaches to research and design which have tended to hinder their effectiveness in achieving the desired positive outcomes. Co-design in principle is well aligned with kaupapa Māori research and harmonises with core Māori values which creates a foundational space for re-establishing trust whilst also giving autonomy to communities by empowering whānau to take an active role in research and community advancement. Realising the power that is held within indigenous epistemology and creating the scope for reimagining culturally valid approaches to design is the essence of kotahitanga.

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