

Generativity and Inclusivity through Engaged Scholarship – Insights from EGOS Subtheme 32

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What happens when a wild bunch of scholars from a variety of different intellectual traditions meet in an online **EGOS sub-theme to discuss generativity and inclusivity**? A lot! The positive feeling of not being alone – with respect to our goal of broader engagement than the dominant productivist attitude – was accompanied by fruitful disagreements on the meaning of generativity, scholarly identity, the normative underpinnings of our profession and navigating the politics involved in these processes. In this piece, we offer a brief account and reflection on the key points of discussion that emerged during the two days we spent together as a way to continue the conversation. Since commoning and participation were two central themes in the sub-theme, we collaboratively crafted these notes in an online document.

Generative spaces and experimental collaboration

We had a fascinating set of papers that explored the role of spaces in addressing grand challenges in an inclusive and dynamic mode of action. These raised questions about the role of universities and researchers in creating, mobilising, sustaining and interpreting such spaces. Some of the questions explored were: How can we manage the tensions between developing scientific knowledge and having impact? What are the implications for the role and identity of our universities and our scholarly community? How can impact be assessed systematically and continuously to anticipate unintended consequences? Some other papers outlined the scaffolding needed to enable generativity in ‘experimental’ spaces and the work that needs to get done to avoid regressing to old norms, values and practices. There was agreement among participants that actively intervening in spaces also comes with new risks and responsibilities for researchers.

Acknowledging the loud criticisms to business schools in recent years, participants of the sub-theme recognised that they saw some unique openings to conduct ‘relevant’ research and engage in non-traditional research activities such as volunteering for non-profit organizations and other grassroots initiatives. Various papers in the sub-theme showcased examples of successful but often serendipitous collaboration between academics and other organizations, but also experiences from participating in interdisciplinary research teams. The session highlighted untapped opportunities for potentially fruitful collaboration between organizational theorists and empirical social scientists, for example, when the case of a local community in Bristol, UK was discussed, which is pursuing a ‘just transition’ by engaging in community-asset ownership model of renewable energy projects. Here, opportunities to consider community engagement as a way of working through tensions between purposing, commoning and democratising became evident.

An intriguing attempt of venturing into new forms of action research harnessing digital technologies to create a space for a community of organisational learners to emerge we discussed is **Pivot ([gopivot.org](#))** from McGill’s Sustainability Initiative. While there is no shortage of such storytelling platforms, it was the theorising of this engagement through the lens of action research that helped to bring out the potential for transforming collective organising capacity that such a platform potentially offers in helping businesses work towards more sustainable operations.

Imagination and normativity

During the workshop it became clear that our discipline should rediscover an orientation towards the future instead of simply describing or explaining the past. This does not mean abandoning theory development in favor of an uncritical engagement with praxis, but rather instrumentalizing theory towards solving the grand challenges that we face today and will increasingly face in the future. The long-term orientation of challenges like climate change only amplifies their complexity and uncertainty and therefore calls for future-thinking methods. Thus, we also need to help in solving the crisis of imagination that our societies confront when thinking about alternatives to suboptimal or pernicious organizational forms, institutions and habits. We were delighted to see that first attempts were made in this

direction using concepts and practices such as foresight, target knowledge and purpose. They will assist in further defining the delicate balance between explaining current states of affairs and shaping them in a constructive way of theorizing as envisioned by an engaged scholarship perspective. Foresight, for instance, allows “to see far and wide” in order to improve decision making. While foresight has been extended to “open foresight” methods in recent years (Heger and Boman, 2015; Rohrbeck, Battistella, and Huizingh, 2015; Wiener, Gattringer, and Strehl, 2020) to achieve future thinking in a collaborative process involving various stakeholders, questions remain on how to involve *all* participants, including the civil society and marginal actors.

This future problem-solving orientation also made clear the need to let the normative basis of our theories emerge from the clouds of purported “value-neutrality”. What are our value commitments? Should we make them explicit or hide them to strategically preserve our role in society as independent and objective observers? What if non-progressive future-oriented targets become envisioned and enacted? And what about the normative basis of dominant economic theories, which have already been performative (cf. Ferraro, Pfeffer, and Sutton, 2005; Ghoshal, 2005) for decades? Existing normative frameworks that could potentially provide orientation such as the concept of sustainable development or a “socio-economic mind set” were vividly discussed in our sub-theme.

Alternative identities and identity threats

Imagination for a better life and normativity are naturally linked and cannot be thought of independently from each other. But what became evident in our sub-theme is that turning from a detached descriptive, explanatory or even critical intellectual posture towards engaging for positive change in society also affects who we are as scholars. We could envisage the scylla and charybdis of the scholar on the ivory tower and of the scholar activist going native and losing him/herself in the process. As soon as we abandon the comforting pedestal of superior knowledge claims we get in the mess of praxis and risk losing our identity as scholars: a clear example of identity threat. So questions emerged in the sub-theme about what threats our identity is exposed to when we engage in engaged research. Is the traditional researcher identity as an impediment to engaged research? When and why does identity change during engaged scholarship? Can a paradox occur regarding (research and organizational) identification? What are the effects on dual identifications? And how can we craft identities that are compatible with the interdisciplinarity needed to confront contemporary challenges? These questions particularly concerned some of our junior scholars, who submitted and discussed papers on the tensions between publication performance and meaning creation, on the role of researchers embedded in industry contexts, or on the value of applying a transformative science approach. We discussed whether engaged researchers could develop an identity of “tempered radicals” that – like for instance CSR managers in corporations – try to change the system while also being a part of it. This depends on the degree of direct engagement in the industry context and how overt-covert (Stafford and Stafford, 1993) the researcher decides to be in this process. This consideration raises a central point of ethics in engaged scholarship as to who is involved in the process and how free it develops within the industry context. Following the complexity of organizational life, the researcher must demonstrate flexibility when adjusting to the everyday life of the organization.

In line with this perspective of modest changes within the system, the role of the scholar-activist as a bridge between the university and activist communities was also a noteworthy discussion considering the potential of building new connections between the role of critical theories and practitioners of social change. Performing such a role pushes the usual boundaries of the management and organization knowledge production and contributes to the transformation of the research practices, the university as an institution, and the academic identities by embracing the challenges mentioned above.

In addition, identity was discussed as a crucial driving force for conducting interdisciplinary research. One paper explicitly problematized identity-based interdisciplinary research in which scholars (ab)use the label of interdisciplinary research to make their work seem more relevant and impactful without fully engaging in the hard work that is associated with “real” interdisciplinary work. While the boundaries of interdisciplinary teams might be hard to pin down, interdisciplinary work can be classified as a challenging and often time-consuming endeavor with uncertain outcomes. Although an alternative way of doing interdisciplinary research was suggested (practice-based interdisciplinary research), a few questions remained: can identity-based interdisciplinary research become an emerging though dangerous phenomenon in academia due to strong performance and publishing metrics? (How) can early career scholars engage in interdisciplinary research projects knowing that these kinds of projects are associated with productivity penalties?

As the creation of an “engaged identity” will remain a constant process that will impact scholars’ relation to practice and hence their impact on the world, instruments to encourage reflexivity that can be included in everyday research need to be discovered and assessed.

Power and politics

Inevitably, questions of power and politics accompanied our discussions. Papers explored the position of researchers and other stakeholders and how their interests may influence the dynamics and outcomes of those collaborations. Relatedly, when ‘experimental’ spaces were theorized, the discussion turned on what would be a suitable form of governance of these spaces. In the context of collaborative research and co-creation, for example regarding e-platforms, some questions were raised on who gets to participate in such inclusive spaces and, more importantly, who is funding such projects and what the role of “new philanthropists” is in this process. At the theoretical level, the question about how ‘nature’ is represented through the frameworks we use in organization research for instance in innovation and the environment was a debated one.

Where to go from here?

This 2021 EGOS sub-theme allowed us to imagine ‘ideal’ spaces for generativity. There is lots to build upon both for our research and for the next EGOS 2022. A promising sub-theme with the challenge to question idealized images of ‘perfection’ perhaps will allow us to zoom into the messiness of engaged scholarship in practice, and perhaps ask ourselves what the methodological implications of the rigour-relevance debate are when it is applied to questions of environmental and social justice.

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List of contributors

Dr Katharina Burger, The University of Bristol, UK

Dr Anika STEPHAN-KORUS, HES-SO – School of Management, CH

Giuseppe Delmestri, WU Vienna University of Economics and Business

Elke Schuessler, Johannes Kepler University, Linz

Dr Marc Thompson, Said Business School, Oxford

Dr Sophie Michel, EM Strasbourg business school, University of Strasbourg

Dr Stefanie Habersang, Leuphana University Lüneburg




Ozan Nadir Alakavuklar, Utrecht University School of Governance

Carolin Puhl, Freie Universität Berlin

Joel Bothello, Concordia University

Gabriela Gutierrez-Huerter O, King's Business School

Louise Kringelum, Aalborg University Business School

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