






“Gentle Disruptions”: A Critical Reflection on Participatory Arts in Expanding the Language System for Meaningful Community Engagement Around Local Climate Adaptation

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This paper proposes a critical reflection on the use of language to address the challenge of promoting and supporting civic agencies in adaptation to increasing extreme weather risk. Such reflection needs to focus on the opportunities and limitations of language, and the navigation amongst multiple or contested meanings within interdisciplinary and inter-sectorial collaborations. This commentary was inspired by the authors’ conversations on their journey in writing the paper — Liguori *et al.* (2023) “Exploring the uses of arts-led community spaces to build resilience: Applied storytelling for successful co-creative work” and the impact it had on their understanding of various language systems. Here writing was

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conceived as a form of networking, undertaking a sequence of intimate, in-depth discussions in a safe space. ‘Playing’ with words, moving out from our disciplinary homes, provided a fertile way of thinking within multi/inter-sectorial/disciplinary conversations to expand the language system for meaningful community engagement around local climate adaptation. Three key terms were at the core of these diverse — and sometimes divergent — ways of looking at social preparedness for extreme weather events: disruption, empowerment, and creative ecosystem. The meta-reflections, based on iterative conversations around these three key terms, highlight the importance of explorations of language as a generative meaning-making process that can be boundary-spanning.

There is significant value in understanding the implications of language used in public engagement — its different interpretations, their loading and potential for transformed thinking when conceived creatively. Such insight can contribute to more effective approaches for participatory research and practice working with communities when addressing issues related to climate adaptation. This commentary argues that the socially engaged or participatory arts are particularly well placed to be active in such processes.

Keywords: Participatory arts; community engagement; language system; climate adaptation; disruption; empowerment; creative ecosystem.

1. Introduction

The challenge of how to promote and support civic agencies in adaptation to increasing extreme weather risk within the wider disaster risk management (DRM) cycle, working with communities, is being explored from wide-ranging disciplinary and professional contexts (e.g., Wamsler and Riggers 2018; Tuhkanen 2023). This poses questions about what can be learnt from boundary-spanning explorations of language and the juxtaposition of ideas and descriptors. This critical reflection on the use of language, its opportunities and limitations, and the navigation amongst multiple or contested meanings is critical within interdisciplinary and inter-sectorial collaborations. This recognizes the “disciplinary tribes” of Becher and Trowler (2001), each with their own language for communicating within a discipline, which can act as barriers to interdisciplinary socio-ecological research (e.g., Kelly et al. 2019). For example, the language around story and storytelling can provide an example of different understandings, practices and misconceptions, e.g., of data value, within research and practice (Moezzi et al. 2017).

Hence, embarking on new explorations of language can be an important part of interdisciplinary research and the evolution from interdisciplinary to transdisciplinary practices. While already argued as valuable activity in co-working between the natural and social science researchers (e.g., Bracken and Oughton 2006), there are also benefits of explorations of language within, and looking out from participatory arts research and practice.

In this commentary, we share our approach focused around ‘gentle disruptions’ that moves understandings of disruption out from the heat of the ‘disruptive (extreme weather) event’ to reconceive language of ‘disruption’ as applying to creative processes within other cooler phases in the DRM cycle, particularly preparedness. We reflect on our journey in writing the paper — [Liguori et al. \(2023\)](#) “Exploring the uses of arts-led community spaces to build resilience: Applied storytelling for successful co-creative work” and the impact it had on our own understanding of various language systems. In this process, a new team, comprising academics and practitioners in applied storytelling, socially engaged or participatory arts practice, and water risk management from UK and Australia, came together to write that paper. This represented a development of discussions that took place during a CASCADE-NET seminar (February 7, 2020) entitled: ‘Co-creative strategies with Civil Society for resilience: role of the arts and humanities’.¹ Our writing team met online for a sequence of nine meetings from September 2021 to January 2022 where we recorded our interdisciplinary dialogue. In this short commentary, we reflect on that process — our explorations of our positionality, differences in language and meanings, using our networking as an opportunity for recalibration of concepts and as a generative process to challenge, coalesce and reconfigure ideas. We conceived writing as a form of networking, undertaking a sequence of intimate, in-depth discussions in a safe space. ‘Playing’ with words, moving out from our disciplinary homes, provided a fertile way of thinking within multi/inter-sectorial/disciplinary conversations to expand the language system for meaningful community engagement around local climate adaptation. This is a critical underpinning to navigating the present and future role of arts and culture in community-focused, extreme weather risk management, the latter being the theme of this special edition ([McEwen et al. 2023](#)).

2. Exploring Language and Meanings

Three key terms were often at the core of our diverse — and sometimes divergent — ways of looking at social preparedness for extreme weather events. These terms functioned as prompts for conversations that were partially represented in the shaping of the paper ([Liguori et al. 2023](#)) but were key to unpacking the complexity behind each of our individual and disciplinary perspectives. In this short section, we identify these terms as emerging themes, contextualizing them within relevant literature to potentially prompt new conversations and a more diverse range of meanings.

¹<https://www.cascade-net.com/seminar-8-loughborough-university/>.

2.1. Disruption

Our conversations were often steering towards an imaginative route. In fact, collective imagination “disrupted” our own way of thinking, making us realize the positive effect of a creative disruption stimulated by our multiplicity of voice and perspective.

In the natural sciences, the language of disruption and the journey of recovery tends to be focused on the negative impacts of the ‘extreme event’, within systemic thinking. Gaspard (2019) reflects on the positive role of the arts in the era of disruption in “imagining a better world.” Flipping this thinking, Borrup (2018) explores the idea of creative disruption in the arts, as a gentler more positive process than destruction. The link between creativity and positive disruption is more obvious in Gaspard’s (2019) definition of the role of imagination as “ultimate disrupter”. This reasoning can link to ways of building cultural capital for resilience within place-based communities. In our discussions, we explored what bringing together the words ‘creative’ and ‘gentle’ with ‘disruption’ might contribute to participatory arts-based approaches, and ways of engaging communities around risk and resilience outside the extreme event stage (‘hot phase’) of the DRM cycle. This involves developing counter narratives of disruption as positive rather than negative — in a similar way to how ecosystem disruption can be followed by renewal. It offers opportunities to explore the notion of ‘controlled explosions’ that enable a “creative rebuilding” (Borrup 2018: 224).

2.2. Empowerment

Another term commonly used in academic research and organizational resilience narratives in risk management, is ‘community empowerment’. The existing vast literature in this field presents empowerment as an outcome of interpersonal (mutual empowerment) and collective social action (social empowerment) (Pigg 2009). Yet the language used — and perceived — in its application within community engagement embeds externally held perceptions of need and deficit, which may be counter to those perceptions of citizens and communities themselves. A diverse range of understandings of ‘empowerment’ have implications for how engagement processes are affectively attuned in design and delivery and evaluated. They also have implications for how local decision-making in risk governance – involving the role of communities and risk management organizations — is conceived and played out. There is a need to challenge the notion of needs that lead to deficit-led approaches and ‘filling the gap’. This also involves questioning who the agents of change are, and how pre-/post-disaster decision-making processes are driven.

2.3. Creative ecosystem

Another linguistic juxtaposition emerging in our conversations is the recent language of “creative ecosystems” (e.g., Komorowski *et al.* 2021). In the arts and cultural sector, this does not focus on the biological but rather is “more concerned with an increase in the use of complexity and systems frameworks in social science (Byrne 1998) and in application to the cultural and creative industries (CCIs) (Comunian 2019)” (de Bernard *et al.* 2022: 332). Starting from the common understanding of ‘ecology’ as complexity, our discussions highlighted the importance of interdisciplinary engagements around the meaning of words and processes, and their recalibration. There seemed particular value in the juxtaposition of the counterintuitive expressions that provoke different thoughts — like ‘gentle disruption’ and ‘creative ecosystems’ — terms which also enabled us to disrupt and then cohere our collective expectations of the paper.

In a gentle disruption, the ethos of co-creation is embraced and power is not considered at the center. Similarly, in the creative ecosystem, where the arts are disrupting the center of power, opportunities for complex meaning/decision-making processes are multiplied. This contrasts with the ‘Western Science’ idea of highly structured knowledge hierarchies and perceptions of relative value, versus flatter, more braided understandings of knowledge systems (Fletcher *et al.* 2017) that enabled us to move from a knowledge exchange approach to a knowledge co-production process. It also links to the idea of disruptive knowledge and ways of working with communities that foreground more oblique ways to explore local knowledge, skills and values, instead of having an agenda that is immediately obvious.

3. Implications

These conversations brought us to explore the common ground of ‘our’ creative ecosystem, that in the two case studies described in the paper (Liguori *et al.* 2023) provide a space for co-creative, participatory storytelling both in the digital and in the physical space — to discover and support community resilience through story-sharing. Such processes value different skills in the researcher, e.g., listening as a selective process, in a diverse knowledge sharing approach.

Such participatory arts-based processes can impact significantly the ways of working beyond the academy. There are opportunities to move from more curatorial approaches (to knowledge) to creativity (in the generation and sharing of place-based knowledge) within participatory approaches, community engagement and supporting citizens’ agency. Within a language systems approach, a disruption

within community engagement could be challenging and changing the language currently used or how it is used. This might include, for example, challenging ‘empowerment’ and ‘needs’ as words, with underlying assumptions, that are currently widely adopted in community-focused processes in DRM.

This fertile territory is not without practical challenges. Our experiences revealed that community participation can be an exclusive process, because not everyone impacted by extreme weather events can/wants to be involved in another disruption, even if ‘gentle’. This potential exclusion of the ones who are not actively involved in a participatory process, that can be demanding both in terms of time and intellectual and mental energies, poses new questions in terms of social responsibility in disruptive times. A further challenge that emerged while exploring the implications of developing and co-working in a creative ecosystem is that, especially when working with artists, the attribution of authorship can be difficult (McEwen et al. 2020). The notion of lead-authorship can undermine the democratic dynamics activated in the participatory process.

4. Conclusions


Our meta-reflections based on our iterative conversations highlight the importance of explorations of language as a generative meaning-making process that can be boundary-spanning. They also underscore the value of making space for writing as networking and exploring different understandings of — sometimes implicit — language systems in research and practice. This is particularly in collaborative writing involving researchers from different disciplines and arts practitioners.

Concern for language also emphasizes the importance of meaning-making in public engagement. The value of understanding the implications of language used — its different interpretations, their loading and potential for transformed thinking when conceived creatively — can contribute to more effective approaches for participatory research and practice working with communities. The socially engaged or participatory arts are particularly well placed to be active in such processes. Such deliberations around language used — alongside the implications for participant perception and response — have important implications for the future role of communities within meaning-making processes. This is critical in the move from curatorial to more co-creative understandings of community-owned, place-based knowledge for resilience.


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