

Inclusion in the neighborhood:

To be a better listener to the individual, rather than to work plan based

Although it is not always easy to combine your daily work with research far beyond your own expertise, it can be quite inspiring and enlightening. That is what researchers Lieke Stelling and Daniël Tetteroo experienced, while performing research on inclusion in the neighborhood, together with Monique Simons. I spoke to Stelling and Tetteroo, who looked back with 'delight as well as frustration' on their temporary work outside their trusted bubble.

The research Stelling, Tetteroo and Simons have been occupied with for the last two years, is part of the Power of One Project, an initiative launched by the Centre for Unusual Collaborations. CUCo particularly encourages researchers to go and explore off the beaten path and discover other ways to contribute. Instead of finding the right people for a certain research program, like in most cases, the first step here was to gather small groups of academics. These were then tasked to find a topic that appealed to all group members, in this case inclusion in the neighborhood.

Commonalities

Daniël Tetteroo works at the Eindhoven University of Technology, where he is involved in *design for health*. "At first sight, it would appear as though our research has few things in common with that," Tetteroo admits. "And yet in a certain sense it is closely related. In my daily job I look at ways how to design the personalization of healthcare. Power of One connects perfectly to that. There is an increasing trend showing that healthcare is shifting towards home versus hospitals and clinics only. For instance, after a stroke a patient rehabilitates at home for the most part. Therefore, the neighborhood is a place where a large part of my research occurs."

Language and meaning

Lieke Stelling's work, who focuses on English sixteenth and seventeenth century texts at Utrecht University, seems to be miles apart from inclusion in the neighborhood. "In many aspects that is obviously true. For instance, I don't work with living people, but with texts that might be hundreds of years old. As a humanities scholar I deal with other sorts of research and ways to understand things. But what is quite relevant indeed, is that in my daily work I am involved with language and meaning. I am a trained listener in the way things are formulated and framed. My research partly covers building communities and the ways in which people living in the sixteenth and seventeenth century tried to approach each other. Therein lies a clear resemblance."

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Still, for some time she had second thoughts about participating. The decisive reason for Stelling to finally come on board is clear: "It felt like a kind of mission. In research programs such as ours a strong emphasis is often placed on technique and numbers. I find it of great importance that the humanities are represented too. Since there are only very few people who are engaged in that, I thought: if I don't do it, who will? So, I have joined out of a kind of idealism really. Moreover, as a scholar or scientist you just want to sink your teeth in a difficult problem. And this is a complex problem."

Finding individuals and listening to them

Tetteroo became excited during a number of CUCo meetings. Together with fellow researcher Mathias Funk he first submitted a research proposal for data gathering and health. "We found it important to look at the split between massive quantities of data on the one hand and individual interests on the other. In the end our proposal was embedded in the current research project, in which finding those individuals and listening to them is considered to be of major importance."

Valuable insights and connections

The contributions of Simons from Wageningen University & Research (Consumption and Healthy Lifestyles group) have proven particularly valuable thanks to her expertise in the field of healthy lifestyle stimulation by means of co-creation in the neighborhood. She also did research for the municipality of Utrecht and she is active in the Vitality Academy, where she commits herself to exercise stimulation through apps and games together with and for the benefit of juveniles in priority neighborhoods. "Monique has numerous insights and connections that have contributed to our research in a positive manner," says Stelling.

The research has opened many doors

To my question how it feels to perform research outside of the usual 'bubble' of your daily job, Tetteroo smiles and answers: "Delightful and frustrating at the same time! Frustrating because initially our views were quite different, and we all seemed to speak our own foreign language. And delightful because the research has opened so many doors. I have gathered many new insights, for example when Lieke enlightened me about how valuable the input from a humanities scholar who loves languages can be in scientific research. She was the one proposing a glossary that put an end to the terminology confusion that we were confronted with at the start."

Limited number of hours per week

The combination of research and their own jobs led to struggles every now and then. Stelling and Tetteroo had only a few hours a week at their disposal and in that limited time it was a challenge to go for it at the full 100%. "When you are allowed to work full time on a project like this for two consecutive weeks, you are able to achieve quite a lot," Stelling explains. "But when you have got the same number of hours spread across 40 weeks, then it becomes a different story. You always waste time to come up to speed again. I was also busy writing my own book this last period, which sometimes made the challenge even bigger."

With their feet in the mud

Something else that especially Stelling felt, was the intention to help individuals that fell between the cracks. "Very idealist and a wonderful thought of course, but a certain form of paternalism creeps in. We as researchers sitting in our pretty office may think we know what exactly it is these people need and compile this into a nice report. But how is this really perceived by the persons who work with these people every day? That is, by the people standing with their feet in the mud day by day? I struggled with that sometimes."

The importance of looking further

"This is Lieke at her core," Tetteroo laughs." She is able to perfectly bring out the awkwardness in any research. I can only very much appreciate that. It's something we should do much more often. So many times plans are made 'from above', without thoroughly asking what the real needs are. Of course, I have known this for a long time already, but once again it was confirmed recently that we often work too plan based. Whereas we are talking about individuals here, about human beings. Take that case of the rehabilitation after a stroke for example: the patient is asked which three things he would like to be able to do again. Are they playing guitar, gardening and doing the

groceries? Then we concentrate our efforts on achieving those goals. What came to realize during the project, is the importance of looking further. Why does someone identify precisely those three points? What is behind that?"

Gain trust

What they learned too, is the significance of a solid relationship of trust. "You should prevent people from getting the idea that they are part of a project that's based on time and money," Stelling believes. "That is how you can really damage something. We are talking about persons here. Maybe it sounds obvious, but each time I understand better why individuals feel abandoned. And I don't mean people who are engaged such as community coordinators or pastors, as they are especially important. But in my opinion, it occurs still too often that municipalities or policy makers make generalist decisions."

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Despite the challenges the researchers faced, they do not regret taking part in the project at all. On the contrary. Tetteroo cherishes warm memories of the contact with his fellow researchers. "The nice collaboration with Lieke and Monique was quite valuable. In the beginning we could hardly be more insecure. Nobody among us had ever done anything like this before, and so we didn't if we were doing the right thing. Fortunately, we were able to be very open and honest about it to each other. We allowed ourselves to be vulnerable, something that in our trade, is not natural at all. As researcher you are often supposed to be the ringleader. It turned out that, in this project, it didn't work like that at all. The fact that we could be open and honest to each other, also about our insecurities, was very enlightening. I've learned a lot from it, both as a person and a researcher."

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Stelling too, is very positive about the collaboration. "We did not know any of us three, but we made great progress in a short time. In fact, exactly what our research is about: how do you make contact as an individual with others? And how do you maintain the human contact in a world where so extremely much is automated and poured into algorithms? Everything must be efficient and streamlined. On the one hand that is fine, but by doing that we lose sight of things that matter. Fortunately, we managed to continue having nice with each other. There has always been a huge mutual respect and, not unimportantly, we've had more than a few laughs together too."