

Learning and building knowledge for degrowth: communities of practice and peer production across scales and beyond roles

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From autonomous and grassroots political movements, to transition initiatives or the broad range of „nowtopias“ (Carlsson and Manning, 2010), learning and innovation seems to be taking place at a pace never seen before. However, such projects are often too loose and disperse to be able to significantly develop learning processes and promote civic engagement in complex political issues. Degrowth has the potential to offer a framework for bridging these movements and engage them in collective action (Baptista et al. 2012; Kallis et al., 2012).

Within the degrowth movement there is an involvement of a diversity of actors, which leads to tensions and confrontations, therefore posing problems to collaboration and learning across levels Demaria et al. (2013). On the other hand, multiple forms of traditional and emergent grassroots mobilization seem to be converging in temporary and permanent spaces, as a response to the crisis (D'Alisa et al, 2013). As a consequence, the diversity of actors in the movement should not be seen as a disadvantage of the movement, but rather as one of the key features which configures it as an emancipatory and critical thought.

In fact, by exploring these contradictions, researchers and activists can develop a sustainability dialectics (Giampietro, 2004; Baptista, 2011) that is capable of dealing with the multiple narratives of degrowth and advancing its concepts and paths towards societal transformation. Within „nowtopian“ communities, which Kallis et al. (2012) consider to be related to the degrowth movement, a dialectic process is already taking place. On one side, the new practices and imaginaries that these initiatives build, create a diversity of narratives and strategies to work beyond the logic of capitalism; on the other hand, these movements come together – for example on the occupied squares – to organise politically in defense of their mode of living (Alexander, 2011 cit. Kallis et al., 2012). Within this process, a new political subject might be emerging (Conill et al., 2012 cit. Kallis et al., 2012).

The creation of spaces of convergence for the diversity of actors in the degrowth movement, appears in this sense as a fundamental condition for the existence of a dialectics on sustainability and degrowth, capable of bridging and politicizing the constellation of nowtopian communities, as well as providing an advancement of knowledge and research on degrowth. This convergence, I argue, needs to be supported by a learning and knowledge building framework – and related physical and virtual infrastructures – that moves beyond the standard processes of communication and production of knowledge and supports an active exchange, collaboration and co-production by practitioners, activists and academics.

A large part of the degrowth movement and research is actually very close to the epistemological foundations of post-normal science (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1994; D'Alisa and Kallis, forthcoming). As D'Alisa (personal communication) notes, „the systemic uncertainty that characterizes much of contemporary environmental problems, climate change being one of these, doesn't allow to simply use the old technicalities used for tackling with uncertainty by scientists in the past. It is not simply a matter of how the politics enter in scientific conundrum; but how the scientific community re-locates its puzzle inside the political arena.“. Degrowth international conferences already create a form of “extended peer review community” for degrowth research, but there is still limited reflection concerning the role of science and of the ways problems will be solved in a hypothetical degrowth society (D'Alisa and Kallis, forthcoming).

The concept of „Communities of Practice“ (CoP) provides an interesting construct of what, on one hand, many of the nowtopias already are and, on the other hand, an indication of what needs to be built within the degrowth movement across scales. CoP have been defined by Lave and Wenger (1998) as „a collection of people who engage on an ongoing basis in some common endeavor. Communities of practice emerge in response to common interest or position, and play an important role in forming their members' participation in, and orientation to, the world around them. It provides an accountable link, therefore, between the individual, the group, and place in the broader social order, and it provides a setting in which linguistic practice emerges as a function of this link“.

Brown and Adler (2008) emphasize that building a community of students and scholars is as important as providing access to educational content. Open access and open knowledge creation communities can provide a strong potential in bridging and removing the gap between the different forms of "expertise" that are transversal in the degrowth discourses and practices.

Successful examples of meshing traditional roles are seen in „nowtopian“ initiatives like community-supported agriculture, where the gap between producers and consumers is minimized or even eliminated. Examples of empowerment strategies, contractual mechanisms and construction of collective choices have been presented as success case stories for the involvement of consumers in fair trade and local food systems (Dubuisson-Quellier & Lamine, 2008). Participation of practitioners in the development of learning approaches have been successful in overcoming the constraints of conventional systems of learning (e.g. Warner, 2005).

On the digital sphere, the open source movement has provided an example on how to overcome the role division of specialized producers (the IT specialists) and the consumer (end users). The concept of commons-based peer production (CBPP) emerged recently as a socio-economic system anchored on the same ideas of exchange and participation that the digital era brought: groups of individuals join to work together to produce information, knowledge or cultural goods from and for the commons (Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006)

This blurring of roles, which Alvin Toffler designated as „prosumers“, might nevertheless contribute to generate new forms of capitalist exploitation, throw the tendency towards generating unpaid labor, while keeping power and decision structures untouched (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Rogero, 2010). Bauwens (2006) and Benkler and Nissenbaum (2006), argue, however, that peer production which follows the distributed logic of P2P and CBPP may operate independently from the market logic or existing power structures.

Awazu & Desouza (2004) reported that in open-source projects, most frequent contributors are elite users with „adequate knowledge and training that allows them to be tolerable of nonuser-friendly systems and works-in-progress. End-users who want easy-to-use in-terfaces without bugs, open-source participants will tolerate lower levels of ease-of-use facilities for higher-performing tools“. They argue in favor of importing this logic for the creation of open knowledge. Open knowledge communities on degrowth could probably benefit from the engagement of the large number of activist researchers that form part of the movement (Demaria et al., 2013).

This paper is part of an action research on the undergoing EU Lifelong Learning project „GROWL“, (<http://co-munity.net/growl>), which is trying to build mechanisms of open knowledge creation and supporting of communities of practice that have been discussed in this paper. The platform co-munity.net, an open-source platform based on Drupal Open Atrium, is being developed to support processes of exchange and collaboration among practitioners, political activists and academics that relate to degrowth.

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