

# River Flows – An Artistic Approach Towards Community Resilience, Participation and Social Learning in Natural Resources Management

Loes Witteveen and Jacomien den Boer

## Introduction

Although the societal justification for new and urgent spaces of communication, participation and knowledge creation in times of conflicts over natural resources, sustainability issues, and climate change adaptation is widely recognised, it is not yet aligned with the training of professionals involved. Themes like agricultural art, creative complexity, learning by designed confusion or poetry for transformation are not yet found in the curricula of the life sciences.

The research group ‘Community resilience, participation and social learning’ of the professorship Sustainable River Management at Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Sciences, in the Netherlands explores the contribution of community art and visual arts in relation to complex public participation processes in a context of sustainability. To that end, the research group cooperates with the Dutch nature foundation *Natuurmonumenten*. In June 2017, a ‘Media design for Social Change’ course was organised for international students of the MSc program Management of Development (MoD), who all have functions related to agricultural knowledge and governance systems in their home countries. Students gained exposure to graphic design; painting, theatre, poetry, and processes of supporting community resilience, participation, and social learning. The experiences were put in practice in a community art project with *Natuurmonumenten*.

The students embarked on producing a poetry route to express a ‘sense of place’ in relation to the new nature conservation area *Koppenwaard*, with a former brick and stone factory, along the river IJssel. They were invited and challenged to create their interpretation of the landscape, their appreciation of the natural resources and surroundings in poems and painting. To the surprise of the commissioning Dutch nature foundation and the international students themselves, the collective effort materialised in a series of banners with poems and painted monotypes portraying the river and the riverbank as a source of wealth, natural splendour and delightful inspiration.

After some experimental use in public consultation workshops, it has now been agreed to use the poetry route for community participation in the redevelopment process of nature conservation areas across the major riverbanks in the Netherlands. The poetry route is expected to function as a ‘conversation starter’ and ‘source of inspiration’ in participatory processes, in which nature development, flood safety and economic viability are key. It is expected that the poetry route will support involved stakeholders to participate in the consultation process from a perspective of cultural and environmental values. Using the artworks of outsiders’ and yet insiders for their creative production on

location, aims to induce an element of positive dissonance or disruption, producing new openings to the public debate. The poetry route aims to rebalance conflictive situations and jammed positioning by presenting novel views.

### **Quest for New and Urgent Spaces of Communication, Participation and Knowledge Creation**

This is not the place to further elaborate on the nature and impact of climate change and resource depletion as we search to explore strategies, which have qualities to act on resulting societal challenges. We also don't elaborate on the sense of urgency and since the Paris agreement we can conveniently refer to the Obama quote "we are the first generation to feel the effect of climate change and the last generation who can do something about it."



<https://twitter.com/barackobama/status/514461859542351872>

In our search to understand methods of poetry and arts as a means to facilitate the sustainability transition, we build on our work in the field of communication for sustainable development and social change and align with authors such as Servaes and Lie (2014), Leeuwis and Aarts (2011), Van Herk et al.

(2015), who focus on process approaches and space configurations in the sustainability transition. In this field, participation is considered a crucial element to create a shared sense of urgency that evolves in action and consequently supports a societal transition. As Servaes and Lie (2014, 4) state that "[...] participation remains one of the key concepts in development studies and interventions, and many other concepts relate in a direct or indirect way to participation." However, a certain bias for bottom-up processes based in small networks of actors without effective impact on higher governance levels started to occur when researching participation for development and transitions (Jørgensen 2012, 999). Instead, transitions "are still crucial dependent on shared recognition of the urgent need for change" (Jørgensen 2012, 1009).

In an attempt to gain further insight on the significance of such critiques on our work we also align with critiques which often define participation in more vague and ambiguous

terms. See for example Carpentier (2015), further elaborated in Carpentier (2016) taking the clear stand that participation in a political perspective (considering the power dimensions of participation) is not limited ‘to merely taking part in.’ We have interpreted such perspectives to stronger focus on a more inclusive configuration of all actors involved and exploring participation somehow disconnected from linear and formal processes of public participation in obligatory environmental impact assessment processes. Moving away from any ‘ladder’ modelling of participation also supports our notion of participation as a design challenge rather than a process whereby participation is often conceived as granting access by dominant or higher-level actors to less influential actors.

Participation as a design challenge has some sense of controversy in line with the above, as it assumes a role for ‘process-designers’ to outline an envisioned process configuration; a relation which most probably comes with its own particularities of power aspects. However, the mentioned design challenge refers to the creation of spaces that enable participation in communication, interaction and knowledge exchange, legitimised by the relevance of the issue at stake and also by the attractive invitational qualities of the space due to the qualities of the design.

Voicing is another way of framing such processes, as the design challenge we attempt to come to grips with is not a conversion of participation as democratic activity in certain decision-making contexts. In a context of the sustainability transition we search to gain insight, through the use of artistic or creative approaches and innovative strategies to facilitate community resilience, participation and social learning. The concept of social imaginary is more recently articulated to understand our work: “A social imaginary is a way ordinary people imagine their social surroundings; it is not a social theory because it is carried in images, stories and legends rather than theoretical formulations.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Learning Out of the Box, Artistic Approaches and Positive Dissonance**

The 30 students from the international master program Management of Development who joined the course Media Design for Social Change that would eventually lead to the creation of the poetry route. The course was deliberately designed to create a sense of positive dissonance for the students: they had to leave their comfort zone of standard or conventional written and spoken communication in knowledge creation and were pulled into artistic activities to explore new avenues in social change communication. The course works every year with a commissioned media production. Over the past years students worked on designing digital interfaces and film productions. In 2011, the course

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1 <https://www.missouriwestern.edu/orgs/polanyi/2014pprs/Haney-2014PSppr-11-5-14.pdf>

also worked with poetry resulting in the poetry route, 'Resilience: touching a colourful sky.' A student from Ethiopia, years later, reflected on the course in the following way:

"In the arenas of rural development poetry plays a crucial role in facilitating social learning and fostering innovation trajectories and networking among actors. Thus, we argue that in order to contribute to the resilience of small scale farmers, 'we' scientists, researchers and communication professionals engaging in rural development should re-think our multiple roles of communication [...] that could facilitate resilience and social learning in order to explore innovation of small scale farmers." (Kasim et al. 2016, 51).

The poetry route 'Resilience: touching a colourful sky' served as a model for the course in June 2017 which was built around the request of the Dutch nature conservation foundation *Natuurmonumenten* to provide a strategy for creating public engagement in the process of creating new nature conservation areas in river banks of the province Gelderland. The programme is introduced in the course manual as: "The programme reflects the dynamics of the subject; a limited amount of theoretical exposures will be combined with practical assignments, excursions and other events." Students were exposed to a series of artistic workshops such as colour theory, images and imaging, painting, graphic design, poetry, theatre, drawing and classroom lessons on river management, in which the gifts of the river were extensively addressed. These parts of the course were clearly reflected in the poems, as for instance, 'sense of a river' by Nayel Sayed Hassibulah: "We are here! / The river, a gift of God... / The river passes, / spreads the lights, / the sky in the river, / as blue as my eyes. / Its music makes / me feel blessed."



Figure 1: Touching sculptures at the Kröller Muller museum.

Photograph: Loes Witteveen



Figure 2: Desta Mohammed at the Koppenwaard, close to the river IJssel.

Photograph: Loes Witteveen

To gain familiarity with the Dutch reality and art works in relation to nature conservation areas, students explored settings where natural resource management, art and learning are a meaningful whole. Three visits took place at National Park *Veluwezoom*, the *De Hoge Veluwe*, and the corresponding Kröller Muller Museum of Fine Arts. The actual poetry writing activity took place on location of the *Koppenwaard* area, a former stone brick factory that was recently acquired by *Natuurmonumenten* (2010).

Similar to reports of earlier work (Goris et al. 2015) we came across dilemmas of participatory versus artistic qualities in the finalisation of the art works. The course is implemented by 'lecturers' and 'artists' which is introduced in the course manual to students as follows: "The course is as interactive as demanding and will be facilitated by professionals who combine activities in research, education and community art in international settings." This description anticipated further explanations to students as the envisioned poetry route would not consist of all poems neither of all produced monotypes; it had to become one entity that would resonate with the foreseen participatory and artistic quality of the compiled poetry route. All students submitted 3 poems. After review and editing, all students received one of their poems for their adaption and/or approval. From the resulting poems the lecturing artists made a selection of poems and combined the selected poems with a monotype (without participation of the students or the non-artist lecturers).

The recurring phrase 'we are here,' stated and practised since the start of the course induced a sense of place in the both the classroom and the parks visited, and resonated in the poetry. An example is the poem 'Gate to nature,' where Yewdbar Mesfin Tadesse writes: "so why are we here/is because to destroy the nature / if we are not inspired by nature/there will be end of land." Also the poem title 'Sense of a river' is considered a reflection of the relevance of working on location.

During the course, students were challenged to document their experiences, lessons and remarkable insights in a personal notebook by writing, drawing, sticking clippings and any other means. Considering this collection of documented experiences as data for their analysis of the events confronted students with a need for a suitable discursive way for analysing their learning trajectory. The analysis was presented in personal reflective journals, in which students had to explain the lessons learned concerning the use of artistic approaches for natural resources management. Mohamed Jalloh from Sierra Leone described: "Prior to this I had never written a poem and I was wondering how possibly can I be able to do this. After hard thinking and observing things around me (river, forest etc.) I started composing my poems and ideas kept flowing." From the reflective journals we read that students were very much surprised by their own abilities to write poetry, to design theatre pieces and do visual research; they were very much surprised that their efforts resulted in something as beautiful and visually attractive as the poetry route. The reflective journals shows positive dissonance: students views were stretched

and challenged, but with positive outcomes. The learning strategy in the course enabled students to express a 'sense of place.' They were able to find words to express their experiences in a natural area, also related to development and sustainability challenges. In 'as it all comes together,' Brinah Senzere writes: "be reckless/and we will all get less/nurture it/and we will gain from it/as it all comes together."



Figure 3: The poetry route 'river flows' at Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Sciences.  
Photograph: Jacomien den Boer

### The Resulting Poetry Route

The *Poetry Route River Flows* (figure 3) consists of twelve, 85x120 cm banners. The poems were printed against a background of monotype paintings both made by the MoD students inspired by, or at the nature conservation area *Koppenwaard*, alongside the river IJssel.

The poetry route reflected the other focal points of the course. As mentioned before, the poetry route was designed to serve as a conversation starter and a source of inspiration in Dutch participatory processes, in which nature development, flood safety and economic viability are key. It aims to involve actors in participatory processes from a perspective of cultural and natural values; both the monotypes and poems do reflect these values.

Based on written and oral student evaluations we consider the ‘Media Design for Social Change’ with its *Poetry Route River Flows* a successful and convincing strategy for agricultural extension workers and rural development professionals to experience, and learn about innovative and artistic approaches for their professional challenges in rural sustainable development.

### ***Poetry Route River Flows: Use in the Public Domain***

Based on positive experiences with the first public exposition in June 2017, the poetry route was used in a participatory setting for area redevelopment at the Rheden municipality in the Netherlands. Its assumed contribution was to call on collective natural values rather than more technical point of view also categorised as Not-in-My-Backyard sentiments. Another assumption was that sustainability transformations are speeded up when participatory processes urges citizens and other stakeholders to actively think and engage in a development process, instead of leaving it to project teams and municipal or provincial boards. A specific quality of the poetry route is the consideration that using the artworks of outsiders (international students) and yet insiders (poems created on location) induces an element of positive dissonance or disruption, for the consumers and audience members, and/or for the participants, thereby rendering new overtures to the public debate.

From the first experiences using the poetry route in the public domain the necessity for properly positioning the poetry in the exhibition or meeting room transpired, so as to make sure that the banners are fully exposed and can take up their rightful space. Figure 4 below reflects how the banners were not hanged but positioned on the floor outside the conversation circle. Another major issue we had overlooked (or ignored) was the language barrier resulting from the English language of the poems. Upon witnessing talks by observers about their English language competency it was a quick decision to work on a Dutch translation or another native language of intended participants, to avoid language barriers and misunderstandings.

Other lessons learned from these early experiences, for participation to occur in the foreseen use by *Natuurmonumenten* and the Province of Gelderland relate to the phase of a development project and the facilitation of the poetry route. Exploiting the contribution of the poetry route requires its active positioning to an intended audience in relation to the phase of a development process. When it is used early in a development process, the anticipated use of the more open way of processing results of its consumption need to be outlined and when used in a phase of decision making is requires articulated positioning in relation to proposed development.



Figure 4: First public use of the poetry route at Rheden municipality, at a participatory event  
Photograph: Loes Witteveen

The *Respublika!* festival exhibited a selection of five of the artworks in a smaller size, at the NeMe Arts Centre, while all twelve artworks were included in the *Respublika!* online platform (and this catalogue). The exhibition was revealing in a sense that it showed us the specificities of material art as the banners ‘allowed’ the public to ‘consume’ each banner and the combined the poetry route in a glimpse or with more dedicated time. Compared to digital exhibits, which have a more confrontational character for impatient audiences to realise, they do not pay attention to the full work; the poetry route does not call for the specific time frame of attention required for its complete or attentive ‘consumption.’ Just a glimpse is not enough to read and feel the poems.

Realising that the materiality of the poetry route is an important feature of its applicability in participatory processes, we envisioned how people are talking and experiencing the poetry route depending on its spatial positioning and visual qualities to create the space it needs.



## **Positioning *River Flows* in the Wider Research Theme on Resilience, Participation and Social Learning**

The poetry route touched upon numerous themes that are topic of research in the research group 'Community resilience, participation and social learning.' Inclusion and participation are recurring topics. The group aims to support innovative governance by designing processes of participation and social learning, which produce social imaginaries of sustainable futures. We aim to create practical insights and to develop actionable tools that support the re-configuration of unsustainable systems. Aspects of discourses, and portrayal are critically questioned in the context of film, poetry and other art forms, thereby exploring the potentials of these methods. We design learning spaces with transformative qualities for transdisciplinary professionalism. Regularly occurring questions deal with the global sustainability transition, how it can be influenced and what is the relation to visual media. Everything works towards the creation of a learning environment for sustainability transformations.

### **Wrapping Up**

When exhibiting and using the *Poetry Route* for its intended purpose, the challenge remains to articulate in more precise terms what the expected impact is, and how the 'consumption' process should be facilitated. Practicalities relate to translation or local adaptation and the logistics of exhibiting the poetry route and attention needs to be paid to the physical organisation of the printed banners in the space available, ensuring readable distances between the audience and the artworks.

As future activities of exhibiting are foreseen to go beyond 'showing' the *Poetry Route* for its aesthetic or intellectual interest, we search to find ways for evaluation or indicating evidence. Documenting and measuring this evidence for an artistic approach towards community resilience, participation and social learning in natural resources management no straightforward methods are available. People sharing their experiences will probably not tell their stories in a linear way or indicate a quantified (dis-)liking but instead will jump from one highlight to another, leaving gaps and returning to associate with other thoughts, feelings and ambitions. To keep us on track in the quest for poetry and participation in the sustainability transformation we rely on the last line in the poetry route river flows by Linda Agbotah: "Suddenly this field/becomes a part of me/I cannot but dance along" (in 'Apology to nature').

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