

The Meanings of Co-Creation

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June 2012

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to the diverse strands that underpin the still emerging concept of co-creation. The paper suggests that there are alternative views rooted in psychotherapy, critical theory, software development and design that can help provide us with a richer understanding of the meaning of co-creation.

Findings – Co-creation is often seen from a managerial perspective. In this general review of the concept, we demonstrate that co-creation can also be seen from the perspective of consumers and other stakeholders. This also shifts the idea of co-creation away from a strongly rational approach to one that is more spontaneous and playful.

Practical implications – Our review focuses primarily on consumers and how they can be encouraged to collaborate with each other to meet their needs for socialisation and meaning making and how organizations can influence and use the insights of co-creation.

Originality/value – Over the past decade there has been a rapidly growing interest in co-creation, but much of the research focuses on the creation and management of online communities. By recognising the antecedents of managerial co-creation and its diverse heritage, it is possible to see the concept as a development of other practices. By drawing on these practices, it is possible to look at co-creation in a new light.

Keywords - Co-creation, participation, open source

Paper type –General Review

Introduction

Co-creation has become a widely used term to describe a shift in thinking from the organization as a definer of value to a more participative process where people and organizations together generate and develop meaning. In business it has come to inform approaches to insight, new product and service development and marketing. However, much of the research in the field has been conducted with consumers and marketers rather than other stakeholder groups (Hatch and Schultz 2010). Similarly many researchers and writers have been focused on a managerial perspective that stresses the organizational opportunity to co-opt customer competence (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000). The danger with this instrumentalising approach to customer involvement is that it has the potential to create a consumer backlash that has been foreshadowed by some commentators (Cova and Dallli 2009; Zwick, et al.,2008) and observed in the comments of some community participants (Ind, Fuller and Trevail, 2012). To counter charges that co-creation exploits consumers and other stakeholders who gift their time and intellect for the benefit of organizations, it needs to move beyond the co-opting lens and engage stakeholders in a reciprocally useful way. In this paper we will explore the antecedents of the modern interpretation of co-creation and demonstrate how a broader perspective that draws on different disciplines can help deliver a more sustainable and diverse approach.

The origins of co-creation

Traditional approaches to customer relationships have stressed two elements: the primacy of the knowledge of the organization and the act of purchase. However, both of these are questionable. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) note that individuals are always linked through social interaction, so that while an organization may believe it controls the meaning of its brand(s), it can be argued that brand meanings are created by consumers and other stakeholders in a process of interaction. Kärreman and Rylander (2008) in turn stress that the marketing led approach to brands tends to focus on the organization and to ignore the meaning that emerges through social and communicative processes. The implication is that while organizations may be able to influence the field of possible meanings in that they write the narratives of the brand, meaning itself is dialogic (Morris 2003). This connects back to very notion of authorship and the authority of the lone creator in particular (Johnson 2010) and reminds that the culture of co-creation is wider and more diverse than the managerial

interpretation seems to suggest. We should note that the idea of ‘creation’ isn’t simply about the creation of things, it’s also about interpretation and meaning-making. Meaning is always co-created. As Roland Barthes wrote in his essay on authorship and meaning, ‘La mort de l’auteur’ (1968): *“a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination...to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author”*. This perspective is particularly relevant when we consider co-creation, because it makes us think of the togetherness implicit in creative processes and the needs of the stakeholder. This move towards constructing brand meanings beyond the walls (and firewalls) of the organization is evident in the emergence of consumer brand communities (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Fournier and Lee 2009; Schau et al., 2009).

The second element that has impacted on the emergence of the idea of co-creation is the move away from products. This is both a real transition, in that countries such as the UK (77.7%), France (78.9%) and USA (76.7%) are dominated by services, but also a transition of perspective. As Vargo and Lusch (2004) pointed out, products always include service elements, because it is their usage that matters to consumers. The services dominant logic model connects what the organization offers at the point of purchase to usage by consumers over time. Merz, He and Vargo note (2009), ‘the logic of brand and branding is also evolving and has shifted from the conceptualization of brand as a firm-provided property of goods to brand as a collaborative, value co-creation activity of firms and all of their stakeholders.’ From this perspective value is not inherent in the product as such, but in the way the consumer acts as a result of acquiring it. Grönroos makes the point that the producer generates potential value, whereas it is in the act of usage that real value is created – although the exact roles of the firm and the customer remain unclear. He argues that the nature of value co-creation depends on perspective. Is it the firm that leads and invites the consumer to participate or is it consumers who are in charge of value creation? If co-creation is perceived to be concerned with value in use, then it is the user that creates value for the user (Grönroos 2011).

From a managerial perspective, the coming together of the potential for engagement provided by the Internet and the burgeoning appreciation of the importance of the consumer as a value creator, has spurred the growth in co-creation. While it could be argued that consumers have long been vital to the marketing perspective, it could also be said that this was not always true in practice (Mitchell 2001). Martin (2010) also notes that much management thinking lacks a strong customer orientation. His argument is that from Berle and Means well-known work,

The Modern Corporation and Private Property, (1932) which signified the emergence of managerial capitalism to Jensen and Meckling's influential *Theory of the Firm*, (1976), which signified a shift to shareholder capitalism, the customer has largely been absent. His argument is that the dominant credo of maximizing shareholder value, which has actually done little for shareholders, should be discarded in favour of maximizing customer value. The centrality of the customer also pervades Prahalad & Ramaswamy's thinking (2000, 2004). Their focus was on the creation of 'value' between the customer and the firm rather than solely inside the firm. Moving beyond a focus on the organization's assets, they argued that the firms that succeed will do so on the basis of their ability to connect with partners and to focus on personalisation for customers at the point of production. Yet in spite of this customer orientation, the perspective is from the organization outwards and focuses on what firms can do to become closer to customers. Though this view does recognise the togetherness of co-creation, it is the firm itself that becomes co-creative (Ramaswamy and Gouillart 2010) and the value accrues to it through the adoption of ideas developed by working consumers, whose main reward is the intrinsic benefit of participation in something that is perceived to be worthwhile.

Participation and Open Source

A different approach to co-creation revolves around design and innovation at the front end of the product and service development process, which is often the main focus of co-creation activities (Prandelli et al., 2006). In market research this is the dominant use and meaning of the term, co-creation. The orientation here is on innovation: creating *new* things that are more relevant, quicker to bring to market and in many cases more innovative than in a traditional expert-driven R&D 'stage-gate' process (Matthing et al., 2004, Kristensson et al., 2004, Witell et al., 2011). While involving customers/users in helping to shape products and services is relatively new to market research and certainly new to many companies, there are precedents from the design world that began in the 1970s with a Scandinavian approach called 'participatory design'. The idea of participatory design was that if you want to create usable services, spaces, products you should involve the people who are going to have to use them. The thinking behind participatory (or cooperative) design was to provide some empowerment to workers and to generate their active input. One of the important elements of the process was the continuous use of prototypes as a mechanism to bring abstract ideas to life and to generate feedback. Bødker and Grønæk (1990) argued that, 'We see prototyping with active user involvement as a way of overcoming some of the problems that current

approaches have with developing computer applications that fit the actual needs of the users.’ Subsequently the idea of prototyping was extended to make it explicitly more democratic. Grønbaech et al. (1997) described an approach defined as Cooperative Experimental System Development (CESD). This was similar to participatory design but was characterized specifically by a focus on: ‘active user involvement throughout the *entire* development process; prototyping experiments *closely coupled* to work-situations and use-scenarios; *transforming results* from early cooperative analysis/design to targeted object oriented design, specification, and realisation; and design for *tailorability*.’ The Scandinavian experience is a reminder that participative practices can involve groups other than consumers and that there is a powerful democratising element in co-creation that can also be used to involve citizens and influential groups in co-creating social innovation in such areas as governmentality (Ind, Fuller and Trevail 2012), public services (Ramaswamy and Gouillart 2010) and healthcare and education (Leadbeater 2009).

The democratizing principle has also been influential in the development of design thinking (Brown 2008) and the emergence of the open source movement (Raymond 1999). The idea that a product like Linux would be running nuclear power stations and netbooks on a large scale and powering more than one in four corporate servers in Fortune 500 companies would have seemed preposterous not so long ago. Similarly Wikipedia with its commitment to involving people in the development of content has challenged the traditional idea of the encyclopedia and has become the dominant form of knowledge dissemination. Indeed Wikipedia and other participative processes have undermined what has been called Royal science (DeLanda 2002) – knowledge determined by agreed elites – and replaced it with minor (or nomad) science – knowledge agreed among a community. The underpinning of open source (and indeed most forms of co-creation) is that it is based on a gift (Mauss 2000; Constant et al., 1996). Individuals are often willing to help others for the intellectual, social and hedonic benefits of sharing (Nambisan and Baron, 2009). While there is still structure and often very detailed guidelines that enable participation in participative processes (Hemetsberger and Reinhardt 2009; de Vugt 2010) there is a far greater opportunity for individuals to influence content by bringing their cognitive diversity to help elaborate problems and share solutions (Levy, 1997). Raymond likened the resulting, bottom-up, structure as more like a bazaar (or souk) and less like top-down structures, such as a cathedral. Cathedrals are highly planned, highly controlled and beautiful, but less organic. The souk has its own order, its own logic, its own patterns, but it does allow people to lose

themselves. However, while open source starts with the same spirit as co-creation, because of the strong technology focus, it tends to attract expert co-creators or 'lead users' rather than 'average' users.

Many co-creation practices have adopted the principle of the lead-user with semi-experts or people screened for their creative skills (Von Hippel 1986; Dahlsten 2004; Von Hippel 2006). The underlying assumption is that creative processes are best undertaken by those who seem to be the most innovative in their thinking. Yet there are three countervailing points to make here. First, while innovation is sometimes derived from the spark of individual insight, ideas tend to be developed by groups working together (Sawyer 2008; Johnson 2010). This makes the point that rather than focusing on how to spot individual creativity, co-creation practitioners should concentrate on how to make groups productive by working to create an atmosphere where people trust each other and the organization. Second, there is a requirement in creative processes both for the inspiration of original ideas and the application of detailed creativity in their working out. As Kirton pointed out (1984), there is a need for both innovators and adaptors in processes. Further Ekvall (1997) in a study of innovation in two Swedish organizations demonstrated that radical and adaptive creativity can co-exist to generate and market new ideas. Third, Amabile suggests (1998) in her components of creativity that individuals need to have expertise, creative thinking skills and motivation. This structure is supported by Füller (2010), who observed that intrinsically interested consumers are highly motivated and are more knowledgeable and creative than other personalities. So rather than looking for inherent creativity, it can be argued that creativity is a result of engagement and knowledge. As George Orwell observed of Charles Dickens, 'we can only create if we can care.' (Orwell 1981). The implication of these three points is that everyone has the potential to contribute to creative processes if they are motivated to do so and if the right conditions and processes exist.

Serious Play

The elements of spontaneity, play and exploration are often notably absent from work and organizations (Burns and Stalker, 1994, Czarniawska 2003, Bauman 2001), yet these are the very things that help to stimulate creative thinking: 'Thinking is always experimenting or experiencing.' (Vähämäki and Virtanen 2006, 220). To nurture these elements a safe space need to be established that brings the internal world of the imagination and the external world together. The paediatrician and psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott, argued that creativity was

present in all individuals and could be expressed through play: ‘... in play, and perhaps only in playing, the child and adult is free to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self’. (Winnicott 1971) Wark argues (2011, 52) that art is playful and play is social. To play, people need environments where there is the opportunity to experiment with ideas, without any conscious end goal, but rather for the joy of doing so. For example the use of a technique such as ‘art from within’ in co-creation events, where the participant is asked to quickly draw an image without reflection has its origins in a combination of Winnicott’s doodling techniques (which he deployed in his work with children) and French surrealism which experimented with automatic writing and drawings. As Breton suggested in the ‘Manifesto of Surrealism’ (1924) the idea is that rather than trying to conjure up images, the artist must allow them to happen. The goal therefore is not to try and think one’s way through a problem but to take advantage of ideas and accidents as they occur. As a technique, ‘art from within’ is not concerned with providing answers, but rather to encourage exploration and sharing. In one sense it is clearly purposive or ‘serious’, in that it is designed to generate insight, yet it is also playful in that there is no right solution, just the opportunity for the artist to illustrate their experiences, anxieties and hopes. The idea of ‘serious play’ is seen by some as an important component in creative processes (Kelley 2001; Statler et al., 2002), but is often absent from co-creation processes and discussions, which tend to highlight rationality and the organizational benefits of the innovation process. This might be more familiar territory for managers, but given the scale of the video game industry (estimated at \$60.4 billion in 2009 by DFC) and the importance of play in people’s lives, gamification can be a powerful way to explore and engage. Co-creation community members draw on their experience of game playing when discussing the future of co-creation and also suggest the use of game elements in co-creation (Koch 2012).

The play aspect of co-creation also serves to emphasise ‘creation’. Just as play provides the freedom to do things differently on each occasion, so creation does not start with a preconceived end point. The very idea of creating, suggests the importance of process. Individuals create through exploration, dialogue and experimentation. If the conclusion of the process was already evident, there would be no creation. A space of creation provides a range of possibilities in which ideas can be realized, but the ideas that are chosen combine determinism and chance (DeLanda 2002). Techniques such as crowdsourcing assume the answer is ‘out there’ and that through wide-scale involvement the answer can be found. In creation and co-creation, the process generates an answer while recognizing that many other

answers would have been possible in a different process and with different participants. This parallels the process of group psychotherapy, and group analysis, in particular where instead of the therapist analysing the patient, the group reaches insights and direction through the process of interaction and mutual self-commentary.

Conclusion

Co-creation has emerged due to the coincidence of several developments: the mainstream adoption of internet technologies, the orientation towards services and experiences, a more open approach to innovation (Chesbrough 2006) and the growth of social, collaboration and customisation technologies. These are all relatively recent developments, but co-creation did not appear fully formed after its announcement by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004). Co-creation has long been practised in the partnerships to be found in Business-to-Business contexts and the management writer, Mary Parker Follett was arguing for the principles of co-creation back in 1925 (Graham, 1995). Indeed, co-creation has rich and diverse roots that stretch back into the 20th Century. Rather than adopting a narrow view of the concept, our argument is that the diversity of co-creation's heritage should be recognized by bringing together psychotherapy, management science, innovation and open innovation, design, literary theory and creativity practice. From these various strands, we can pinpoint ideas that suggest new opportunities for co-creation:

From **participatory design** - involving end users leads to more relevant and usable products and services, while reducing risk. This implies a willingness to engage with participants and incorporate their suggestions for the benefit of the user and the organization. Participatory design (like design thinking) can involve the development of iterative prototypes as a means of testing user reactions.

From **literary theory** - meaning is co-created and interpretation is a two-way process. While there is authorial (or organizational) intent in creating something, meaning emerges as the idea is used and in the conversations that recipients have with each other and the organization in naturally occurring communities, face-to-face interactions and organization-led interventions.

From the **open source** movement - starting with a gift produces more generous returns. Giving something to people that creates meaning or utility generates reciprocal behaviour and

strengthens the sense of community. People are willing then to share their personal experiences and opinions for intrinsic benefits associated with participation.

From **collaborative innovation** - breakthroughs come from 'group genius' not lone epiphanies. Innovations since the renaissance have been dominantly generated by groups (Johnson 2010). This does not deny the creativity of exceptional individuals, but beneath the surface of the claims of individuals lies the involvement of others.

From **psychotherapy** – the answer or insight isn't already out there waiting, it has to be discovered with others. It is the process of co-creation and the co-discovery through interaction (Shotter 2005) that generates new ways of seeing the world and leads to the opportunity for self-development.

When these strands are woven together, the idea of co-creation moves away from a managerially dominated focus on the often nebulous idea of value to a view that instead focuses on how individuals can collaborate with each other to meet their needs for socialisation and meaning making and how organizations can influence and use the insights of co-creation from a position of equality rather than dominance. This is what Follett calls, 'power with': 'whereas power usually means power-over, the power of some person or group over some other person or group, it is possible to develop the conception of power-with, a jointly developed power, a co-active, not a coercive power.' (Graham 1995, 103). Seen in this way, co-creation can be a force for participation and democratisation that does create meaning for all, rather than simply an alternative research technique or a way of creating value through co-opting the skills and creativity of individuals. This is what Magala calls the 'Postmodern pattern of sensemaking' where there is a transparent, open-ended flow of social communication built around the negotiation and renegotiation of meanings that leads to a networked, evolving social world. The implication for organizations is that co-creation ought to be viewed as a process that provides an opportunity for on-going interaction, where the organization is willing to share its world with external stakeholders and can generate in return the insight that can be derived from their engagement.

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