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# **The transformation of participation? Exploring the potential of 'transformative participation' for theory and practice around children and young people's participation**

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## **Abstract**

A wave of interest, policy and activities in children and young people's participation has passed through many countries over recent years. As participation activities have proliferated, so have challenges arisen as people have sought to translate the rhetoric of children's participation into realities.

Working across collaborators in Brazil, India, South Africa and the UK, this article draws on the collaboration's interest in 'transformative participation' as a potential way forward. The article begins with reviewing the growth of this concept within development studies, including its ties with empowerment. The article seeks to go further, to consider other potential concepts and theories that may critique or add to ideas of 'transformative participation': namely the concept of 'co-production'; and ideas of performance and multimodal pedagogy. The article discusses the potential for co-production to recognize children and young people's assets, capabilities and abilities and to facilitate deeper engagement in service and policy development. The potential of performance-as-participation is more testing, valorising different ways of participation and communication, emphasizing creativity, affect and embodiment rather than rationality and governance. Such ideas may have equal, or even more potential, for 'transformative participation'.

## **Introduction**

A wave of interest in children and young people's participation has passed through many countries over recent years [1]. For example, at an international level, treaties assert rights for children and young people to be heard (such as Article 12 of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child and Articles 4 and 7 of the more recent United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities). Selected children and young people have been supported to put forward their views at international events like the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children 2002 (Ennew 2008) and

international development agencies have promoted and funded participation programmes. At national and local government levels, children and young people's participation has been supported by related legislation, policy, funding, projects and structures. For example, children's and youth parliaments have been set up (e.g. in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Finland and across the UK), certain governments and services have involved children and young people in decision-making about policies and services, and numerous projects have been developed by both statutory and non-government sectors to promote and support children and young people's participation (e.g. see Percy-Smith and Thomas 2010). Children and young people's participation has thus gained increased prominence in international, regional and national settings, with a proliferation of policies and participation activities.

This prominence has been recognised by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. In 2009, the Committee produced General Comment No. 12, *The Right of the Child to be Heard*, with the following description of participation:

This term has evolved and is now widely used to describe ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes. (paragraph 3)

The General Comment distinguishes between the right of an individual child to be heard and the right of a group of children to be heard. This article addresses this second type of participation.

With the proliferation of participation activities, the challenges of realising the UN Committee's description of participation have become more and more evident. Despite the differences in socio-economic, political and cultural contexts, a remarkably similar list of challenges can be generated across countries (e.g. Thomas 2007, Hinton 2008, Percy-Smith and Thomas 2010, Lansdown 2011, Martin et al. 2013). For example:

1. **Tokenism.** Children and young people may be consulted but their views have no discernible impact on decisions. The timetable of the policy process often leaves insufficient time to involve children and young people meaningfully.

2. **Lack of feedback.** Children and young people are asked to participate but they do not know what has happened with their contributions.

3. **Who is included or excluded.** Some children and young people risk being 'over-consulted', frequently asked for their views, and become frustrated at the lack of subsequent action. Other children and young people are never reached by participation activities. Some children and young people are only invited to participate on certain topics: for example, disabled children and young people have expressed frustration at only being consulted about issues around their disability.

The children and young people consulted are too often presumed to be speaking on behalf of the majority of their peers, although they are not supported to be representative in this way.

3. **Consultation but not dialogue.** Children and young people are frequently consulted in one-off activities but are not involved over time in on-going, respectful dialogue.

4. **Adult processes and structures exclude children and young people.** Children and young people's participation is frequently not integrated into how policy decisions are made, implemented and evaluated. It is seen as a specialist activity and not a mainstream one. As a result, children and young people's participation risks being sidelined, if their advice and recommendations run counter to views of other, more powerful, groups.

5. **Lack of sustainability.** Children and young people's participation is frequently supported by short-term funding. As a result, supporting staff may move on, the groups dissipate and the participative process stops.

[2]

Those committed to participation, whether within practice, policy or academia, are seeking to find ways to understand these challenges – and, even more importantly, resources to address them and create new opportunities (e.g. Hart et al. 2011, Johnson (no date), Crowley 2013).

To contribute to such developments, a collaborative programme has been undertaken through the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships at the University of Edinburgh, to formulate, refine and test ideas [3]. One of these networks ("Theorising Children's Participation: learning across countries and across disciplines") brought together collaborators from Brazil, India, South Africa and the UK. The network developed a particular interest in

'transformative participation', with its potential meanings and implications. This article draws on this interest, reviewing the growth of this concept within development studies, such as Sarah White's seminar paper (1996) and Cornwall and colleagues' considerations of the 'spaces of participation'(Cornwall and Coelho 2007; Cornwall 2008). The article seeks to extend this further, to consider other potential concepts and theories that may critique or add to ideas of 'transformative participation'. Drawing on examples from practice and research, the article will explore two areas: the use of and claims for 'co-production'; and ideas around performance and multimodal pedagogies. It will end by considering the potential of these ideas for expanding and reformulating the concept of 'transformative participation'.

### **Transformative participation in development studies**

Those working in international development, and within development studies, have referred to 'transformative participation' for some time (see Hinton and Bayes 2013). Indeed, Hickey and Mohan (2004) assert that the literature on participatory development sees "the proper objective of participation" as ensuring

... 'transformation' of existing development practice and, more radically, the social relations, institutional practices and capacity gaps which cause social exclusion. (p. 13)

While Hickey and Mohan are highly critical of development practices that fail to be transformative, they believe such transformations are possible.

White's (1996) article is frequently cited, for distinguishing between four forms of participation:

- **Nominal participation** is for display, with 'top-down' interests wanting legitimation for decisions, while 'bottom-up' interests seek inclusion.
- **Instrumental participation** is to achieve a particular end. 'Top-down' interests may consult local people as an efficient and cost-saving exercise; for the local people, such consultation is a demand or cost on them.
- **Representative participation** can provide 'bottom-up' interests with 'voice' in decision-making. For 'top-down' interests, this can lead to better decision-making and thus more sustainable and effective results.
- **Transformative participation** is both a means and an end. For both 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' interests, the aim is empowerment.

Empowerment, then, is a key term to understand transformative participation.

In her article, White writes:

The idea of participation as empowerment is that the practical experience of being involved in considering options, making decisions, and taking collective action to fight injustice is itself transformative. It leads on to greater consciousness of what makes and keeps people poor, and greater confidence in their ability to make a difference. (p. 8-9)

Much in vogue in the 1980s and 1990s, 'empowerment' was widely used across literatures and disciplines, frequently related to ideas of a 'just society', of 'taking charge', and 'ennoblement' (Banja 1990; Cowen 1991).



Empowerment addresses the individual, micro-level, but also the macro level; as Rappaport (1987) writes, empowerment ties together personal competences and abilities, to environments that provide opportunities to demonstrate them. If these environments did not exist, policies and conditions much be developed so that such environments are created (Cowen 1991). The use of 'empowerment', and the subsequent definitions and re-definitions, have only proliferated since this early work: for example, Ibrahim and Alkire (2007) list 32 definitions of empowerment. In the development field, the World Bank offers a conceptual framework in its *Empowerment and Poverty: A Sourcebook* (PREM 2002), combining agency ("an actor's or group's ability to make purposeful choices") and opportunity structures ("the broader institutional, social, and political context of formal and informal rules and norms within which actors pursue their interests" (Samman and Santos 2009, p. 3)). Empowerment is a process where people can gain:

... power over (resisting manipulation), power to (creating new possibilities), power with (acting in a group) and power from within (enhancing self-respect and self-acceptance). (Samman and Santos 2009, p. 8)

'Empowerment' itself is subject to sharp critiques, both in theory and in practice. In some of its conceptual and practical incarnations, those with power – professionals and practitioners, in particular – sought to 'empower' those who did not have power. But such power transfer often failed to occur, as one cannot empower others (they must empower themselves) and the status quo was in fact not challenged (Kelly 2004). The criticisms of

empowerment are very similar to criticisms of participation: essentially, that 'empowerment' is not radical enough to transform the institutions/institutionalisations of power and that it fails to consider adequately time and space, place and context.

Cornwall and Cohelo (2007) explicitly seek to consider such factors, reflecting upon what is required for participatory institutions to be inclusive and effect change. They lay out five requirements:

1. People need more than invitations to participate: they need to recognise themselves as citizens, rather than beneficiaries or clients.
2. Representative claims must be considered critically and mechanisms to be representative in place.
3. Structures are not enough. The motives of those who participate – including state actors – can be competing and are in constant negotiation.
4. Three factors are essential for change: involvement by a "...wide spectrum of popular movements and civil associations, committed bureaucrats and inclusive institutional designs..." (p.9).
5. Participation is a process over time and must be situated alongside other political institutions and within its own social, cultural and historical context.

A consensus is growing, writes Gaventa, that "a more active and engaged citizenry" is needed *and* a "more responsive and effective state" (2004, p. 6).

There is a move from top-down government to more horizontal governance, engaging a wider range of actors in policy processes (Richards and Smith 2002).

But this move to governance does not necessarily result in participatory institutions. Governance can be used to control dissent. Individuals and groups can be invited to participate in governance structures, to find that their involvement is dependent on their complicity with the resulting decisions (Ilcan and Basok 2004). Their agendas can be narrowed by the governance structures, constrained to considering certain issues but not others (Barnes et al. 2007). Issues remain about who is included or excluded in such activities, and representation and representativeness tend to be difficult to deliver in deliberative, participatory activities where ongoing, cumulative and in-depth participation is required. Governance essentially works *within* the status-quo of neo-liberal democratic structures, rather than more fundamentally challenging them. It retains a focus on structures and rational decision-making rather than necessarily changing attitudes and ways of working. Their ability to be transformative, in the sense Hickey and Mohan suggest above, may then be limited considerably.

What alternative ideas may be more challenging – and how do they help define and understand transformative participation? Two conceptual areas will be considered in turn: first, the use of and claims for ‘co-production’ and, second, ideas around performance and multimodal pedagogies.

### **Co-production**

Co-production is becoming a popularised term in children and young people’s participation. The term’s heritage can be traced back to the 1970s in the USA, when academics attempted to explain how service delivery resulted in

outcomes. They concluded that services users were not only 'customers' but also active in service delivery; for example, a service professional might play an enabling role while the service user actually performs the task (Normann 1984). In some of this literature, service users' assets and expertises were emphasised, as was the value of harnessing them to improve services (see Ryan 2012 for overview).

More recently, co-production has been revived in public management literature (e.g. special issue of the *Public Management Review*, 2006). This is influenced by the re-consideration of consumerism, governance and civic society engagement, which are seen as providing insufficient understandings of service delivery, and a different political vision of public services (Bouvaire and Loeffler 2012). Boyle and Harris (2009) argue for co-production:

Co-production means delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using their services, their families and their neighbours. Where activities are co-produced in this way, both services and neighbourhoods become more effective agents of change. (p. 11)

Certain forms of co-production can be transformative, according to Needham and Carr (2009), when they create new relationships between staff and those using services. This includes recognising service users' expertise and assets, creating new relationships between service users and staff, facilitating durable peer support, and incorporating 'a whole life focus'.

Williams (2010) argues that co-production goes beyond the collaborative work of youth participation because co-production requires deeper engagement

and is thus more challenging for services. Similarly, Stephens and colleagues' write:

The point is not to consult more, or involve people more in decisions; it is to encourage them to use the human skills and experience they have to help deliver public or voluntary services. (2008, p.10)

In Scotland, for example, the term has been used to describe an intensive way of involving children and young people, to develop policy recommendations. An influential, initial project was the Youth Commission on Alcohol, funded by the Scottish Government and supported by Young Scot, a non-governmental organisation. Sixteen young people were recruited onto the Commission, through an open recruitment process. An Advisory Group was set up with members from the Scottish Government, media, business, education, health, police and voluntary organizations. The contact with the Advisory Group proved pivotal, according to one of the Youth Commissioners:

This face-to-face exposure helped us to not only gain an insight into the key issues, but also to interact throughout the process with greater confidence so that we could maximise the opportunities presented to us. (Paul 2011)

Running over a year, the Youth Commission undertook consultations, surveys, investigations and study visits. After the launch of their report, the Scottish Government supported several of the recommendations, which became part of the Government's policy agenda (see Young Scot no date).

Influenced by this Youth Commission, Scottish Borders Council (a local government within Scotland) set up its own Youth Commission on Bullying (see Scottish Borders Youth Commission on Bullying 2012; Robb 2012). Again, youth commissioners were appointed through an advertised recruitment process, resulting in 12 commissioners aged 14 to 24 years. From July 2011 to March 2012, they gathered evidence through interviews, focus groups, surveys, observation and secondary sources. They analyzed this evidence and presented 33 recommendations. The Council accepted the recommendations and proceeded to develop its policy on anti-bullying. This development was overseen by an implementation board including education staff, elected councilors, parents, and children and young people.

Both these examples sought to create meaningful participation that would impact on policy decision-making. Both sought deep engagement of those involved, in the processes and understanding of the issues. This intensity was for *everyone* involved, adults and children, policy-makers, practitioners and service users. Both examples sought to increase the influence of children and young people in forming policy, by giving children and young people a leading, initial role to investigate and make recommendations. As one of the Scottish Borders Council Youth Commissioners described in a press release:

Being a Youth Commissioner has given me the opportunity to meet young people and to work alongside adults to create change for the future of children and young people in the Scottish Borders. (Scottish Borders Council 2012)

Professional adults were primarily involved to support (e.g. practicalities supported by Young Scot and Scottish Borders Council respectively) and advise the children and young people.

These Commissions seem to fit most of five requirements of Cornwall and Coelho's participatory institutions well. The children and young people recognized themselves as more than beneficiaries or clients, as primary actors (and presumably citizens). The open recruitment process sought to create a transparent process that all eligible could apply for, while selection criteria included a search for diversity. Additional children and young people were involved, through evidence taking. Efforts were made to ensure the children, young people and policy-makers had congruent motivations and responses to children and young people's involvement. There were committed bureaucrats and the ways of working sought to match how children and young people could and wanted to contribute. Participation occurred over time and had particular channels into political decision-making.

The co-production between children and young people, on the one hand, and adult policy-makers on the other, was sequential rather than co-terminous. This form of co-production is arguably a form of peer research and investigation set within a seemingly effective framework of policy-maker engagement and practical support. Children and young people's influence may be substantial to the subsequent policy-making. The Youth Commissioners on Alcohol were not actually part of the subsequent democratic decision-making process of national government, although a few children and young people were on the implementation board of the Scottish

Borders Council. Children and young people's involvement was time-limited, so sustainability and renewal was not a concern beyond that time limit.

What does co-production potentially contribute to ideas of transformative participation? It valorizes the results of children and young people's involvement, privileging (or at least recognizing) their evidence-taking and analysis of the results. It shows the potential to appreciate children and young people's timetables and ways of working, while tying their findings to policy impacts. It shows how adults can productively support children and young people's participation, in advisory and supporting roles. It thus may be transformative in terms of assumptions about children and young people's capacities, about ways of working and adult roles. It certainly seems to have been transformative for the children and young people involved – who report the value of the experience in skills development and capacity to make change.

Yet, the criticisms of co-production are worth considering. The term's heritage in service delivery – however radical – can be seen as narrower than other views of participation. The concept is fundamentally about individualized, collaborative and relational forms of service delivery, which should not replace other forms of citizenship participation that may be more conflictual and address deeper issues of structure and inequalities (Needham and Carr 2009). Take, for example, the protests of children and young people in South Africa against inadequate public school facilities. In March 2011, an estimated 20,000 young people marched to Parliament, to insist on minimum standards for schools (Equal Education 2011a). Later in July 2011, 60 children, young



people and adults camped outside Parliament to demand a ministerial response (Equal Education 2011b). [4] This type of participation is not likely to be considered co-production within public management circles. But it may in the long-term be more challenging.

### **Performance and multimodal pedagogies**

In the field of children and young people's participation, 'performance' has been subject to considerable criticism. Commentators working in certain Asian countries, for example, have criticised the use of children and young people's participation as performance, with participation being equated to an artistic display of children and young people dancing or playing music (Theis 2007; West et al. 2007). There have been highly critical comments on children and young people taking the international stage – literally – at UN and other events. While highly emotive, the (lack of) effect on subsequent decision-making has been questioned, along with how those few children and young people selected can 'represent' broader groups (see Ennew and Hastadewi 2002). The participation rhetoric has led to the need for local or national governments, or other public, private, or voluntary organisations, to be *seen* to have consulted with children and young people. Not doing so can lead to negative media attention or criticisms from the conference floor; more positively, involving children and young people can garner particularly media and political attention. But all these kinds of performances can easily fall into tokenism and fail to impact on decisions (see Tisdall and Davis 2004).

But can performance be seen differently? Learning from Brazil, India and South Africa shows the potential of *transformative* performance, where cultural expressions are harnessed and children and young people engaged by artistic opportunities to develop and express their views. In Brazil, the “Theorising Participation” network spent some time learning about the reclaiming of community space through the medium of play, in a favela in Rio de Janeiro (see <http://rocinhaludica.blogspot.com/>). The Landless Movement in Brazil has used theatre to inspire family members to take political action and claim unused land (Hinton and Bayes 2013). In the state of Bihar in India, a literacy programme in rural areas mobilised volunteers and learners through *Bal Kala Jathas*, children and young people’s ‘travelling cultural troupes’ (reported in Rampal 2008). Children and young people performed on themes that concerned them, such as school, the status of girls, child marriage and health. The children and young people increasingly took on more responsibility, supported by adults, organising the shows, writing songs, making posters, mobilising local support and rehearsals. The performances promoted the literacy programme, leading to the engagement of over 300,000 adults in the literacy classes, and increases in local literacy rates. As well as significant impacts for certain individuals, qualitative and quantitative evaluation showed wider social and economic impacts, like the reduction of child marriage and the increase in school enrolment (albeit with continued inadequate provision within many schools). At the most politically obvious are the South African protest songs sung by young activists throughout the 1960s, and more intensively in the mounting struggle against the apartheid state during the 1980s, celebrating political leaders and trade unionists and

expressing the wish for their release from prison (Henderson 2011). In South Africa, the network engaged with a community group of young performers ('The Kasi Group') from the African suburb of Khayelitsha in Cape Town. The Kasi Group regularly perform in community shows, street parades and during 'cultural' festivals in the township in which hundreds of children and young people participate. Within the Group's repertoire are explorations of their concerns and their places within their communities.

Henderson (2011) argues for the potential of recognising the significance and potential of such participation by children and young people:

... performative acts – including various forms of improvisation – frame, mimic and reproduce what children have come to know, yet at the same time offer possibilities of distance, the reorganisation of memory, and a degree of transcendence through creativity and imagination. (p. 22)

She suggests that theorisations of multimodal pedagogy, in particular, are helpful for recognising how embodied forms of engagement make learning meaningful for participants beyond narrow ideas of cognitive engagement (see also Percy-Smith 2010). Stein's work (2007), for example, brings out the importance of affective, embodied and collaborative forms of pedagogy. More generally, multimodality conceives of verbal language as only one mode of communication amongst many other modes, such as gestures, sounds, body movements (van Leeuwen 2005; Poyas and Eilam 2012). Meaning-making occurs through transforming available resources, so that every instance of meaning-making is innovative and transformative, even if sometimes in very small ways (Newlands 2011).

In their articles, Henderson (2011) and Newlands (2011) concentrate on the performers, on their meaning-making, on their potential for transformation and transcendence. Performance can also raise consideration of audience. The interaction between performer and audience, claim Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998), can open up a “kind of window, a ‘limited area of transparency’, through which an examination of socially and culturally sensitive issues is possible” (p. 40). The ‘mode of address’ – the way a text communicates with audiences – can encourage audiences to accept or not accept, to agree, refine or disagree (Ross and Nightingale 2003). Audiences are engaged in meaning-making and thus potential transformation.

These theorisations move beyond the rational ideas of rights and governance, and arguably co-production, to affective, embodied and collective forms. The ‘affective turn’ in the social sciences has recognised the role of emotions and emotionality (Clough and Halley 2008; Seigworth and Gregg 2010). The potential of participation-as-performance to change attitudes, ways of perceiving problems and solutions, may be more fundamental and have long-reaching potential than the more mechanical translation of children and young people’s views into a particular decision. For example, Badham (2004) writes of the inspiration of professionals, local and national decision-makers following the viewing of CD-ROMS produced by young disabled people. Attitudinal change was reported, including a sense that ‘something could be done’. Action was subsequently reported, from training to new projects. A specific outcome at a national level was identified: the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister issued a Good Practice Guide *Developing Accessible Play*

*Space* (2003). The affective response to the young people's CD-Rom may well have contributed to significant impacts.

Children and young people's involvement in producing the CD-ROMs above, and the Brazilian and South African examples of harnessing play, story-telling and drama, fit surprisingly well with four out of five requirements for Cornwall and Coelho's participatory institutions. Children and young people were more than participants, being very active creators and performers within those particular 'spaces' of participation. The appeal was not just to structures but directly to attitudes and motivations of those the children and young people wanted to influence. Coalitions were made across communities and civil associations and bureaucrats, in the example involving young disabled people. All the processes occurred over time – and perhaps very significantly – tapped into social and cultural 'creative' expressions whether they be singing and performing, traditions of play and story-telling, or producing videos on digital media. The one requirement of Cornwall and Coelho that was not substantially addressed, is 'representativeness', as involvement was based more on invitation and initiative (sometimes by non-governmental organisations or social movements, sometimes by adults and peers) than statistical or democratic representation.

## **Conclusion**

The phrase 'transformative participation' raises at least two questions: transformation for whom? and transformation for what? Hart (2008) notes at least three answers: transformation for those involved, such as skills,

experiences and networks of children and young people, and changed relationships between children, young people and adults; transformation as a product of the activities, such as influencing a particular decision; and broad societal transformation due to the accumulated combination of the first two. While the first is well-evidenced, transformations of the second and third types are less well so.

Cornwall and colleagues' work reminds us that different 'levels' of participation may function simultaneously or at different times, for different people, and sometimes to good effect. The 'empowerment' of White's 'transformative participation' is not necessarily the ideal goal of participation, to be met continually. 'Empowerment' itself has its limitations theoretically and in practice, in failing to challenge significantly the institutions and institutionalizations of power.

Other ways of thinking about 'transformative participation' provide other, challenging potentials. Thinking about co-production emphasizes the capabilities and abilities, the 'assets' users bring to services. The concept has led to particular spaces for participation, which involve productive relational work amongst peers, and between children, young people and adult decision-makers. The involvement of children and young people in formulating and presenting the findings and recommendations means they have a critical role in distillation and analysis, a powerful role within policy development.

Co-production is arguably about a deepening of engagement and, in its best examples, meets the UN Committee's requirements for participation. For someone who has worked within policy processes, it fits well within ideas of

policy networks and governance: while recognizing the importance of relationships, it follows a rational and thus familiar process to influence. The potential of performance-as-participation is more testing. How does this promote children's rights and ensure children and young people's views actually impact on decisions? The social sciences interest in creativity, affect and embodiment valorises the different ways children and young people may participate and communicate. It questions an emphasis on rationality, effectiveness and impact, to consider a range of other 'transformations' that may have equal or even more potential for change. They can include the 'invited' spaces of participation primarily written about within the participation literature, as well as a wider range of participation spaces that children and young people live and claim. And of course different 'participation' modes can be combined together, or in sequence, as the Indian literacy programme did in engaging people through performance.

The promotion of 'transformative participation' implies that transformation is always positive and constructive. But that is not inherent in the phrase. Transformation may in fact create tensions or be uncomfortable. But perhaps it is the very unsettling, the distance between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the 'windows' opened up between performers and audiences, where 'transformation' has the most potential to influence change, whether that be in attitudes, practice or policy. Given the concern that the proliferation of children and young people's participation activities has not resulted in the embedding of their participation rights, perhaps more unsettling is needed.

## Endnotes

[1] The phrase 'children and young people' is generally used in this article, following young people's typical preference to be referred to as the latter. Broadly, 'children and young people' refers to children up to the age of 18, following the definition within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

[2] This list is extracted from Barnardo's Scotland, Children in Scotland and CRFR (2011), p.1.

[3] For further information on these activities, see <http://www.crfr.ac.uk>  
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[4] These examples are contained within Jamieson et al. 2013.

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