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# Citizen Science Winter School – Of Ivory Towers and Building Bridges

👤 Manuel Baer | January 20, 2020

Last week I attended the Citizen Science Winter School ([#cswinterschool](#)) organised by the [Participatory Research Academy](#) and the [Graduate Campus](#) of the University of Zurich. Here is me “giving my mustard” as we would say in Swiss German aka “my two cents” for the more international readers.

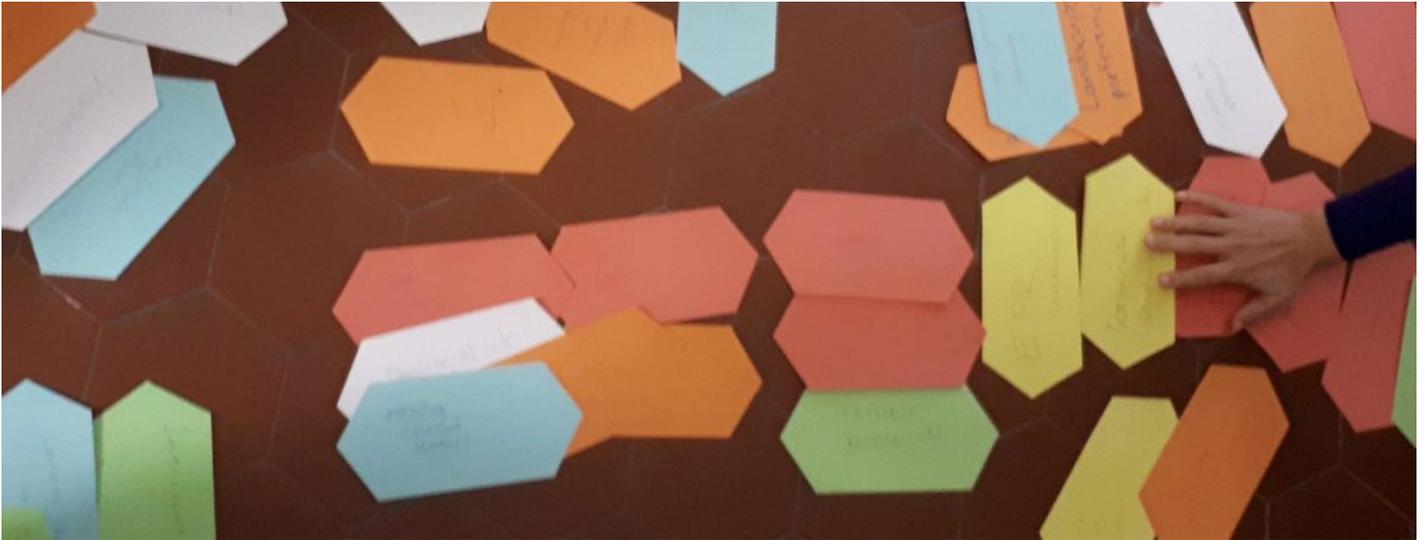
[ TL;DR ]



Photo by Oleg Laptev on Unsplash

After a week of discussing what citizen science means and how the future of citizen science should evolve, I sound like a broken jazz record from an old pawn shop. I realised, I am not actually used to talking and interacting with people for more than a few hours on end and this was one whole week of intensive interactions and discussions! So, without further ado, my first takeaway of the week: working closely and interacting with people for an extended period needs some getting used to. **The constant interesting and motivating discussions with enthusiastic people really gets your intellectual synapses firing, but can also be quite exhausting.**

Let me give you a short overview of our week: We started the week with two great keynote presentations. The first was about the history of citizen science and if the term “Citizen Science” is just another label which sounds trendy and fresh. The second came from the ethical perspective and discussed the various dimensions of ethics in citizen science, which, in today’s world of big data and big brother are vital considerations. After these two thought provoking presentations, we started with some preparations for a mini-conference later on in the week. The next two days (Tuesday and Wednesday) had two sets of workshops conducted in parallel. I first attended a workshop on how to get a citizen science project up and running, how to formulate good research questions and how these can be addressed through participatory methods. The next day I attended a workshop on how artistic methods can be beneficial in citizen science which really taught me a few key things about rapid prototyping and testing out core ideas. On Thursday we attended a full day of workshops at the ETH organised by the [Citizen Science Centre](#) and discussed what aspects future efforts should focus on in advancing Citizen Science, ranging from early career developments to project funding. The last day of the winter school was more focused on enjoying our last day together and included a selection of wonderful excursions ([RaumSchiff](#), [StadtWildTiere](#), [BlindeKuhStadtführung](#)).



## Finding and clustering research topics for Citizen Science through the autumn leaves approach

All in all, we learned a lot about the different facets of citizen science and how to involve people from the public into research endeavours. But we also had the sobering realisation that, even though citizen science is now quite a hyped term, **participation in research is nothing new and has literally been around for hundreds of years**. It is rather paradox if we think about it: science started as a non-professional domain where citizens would not get paid for doing research. Ordinary (albeit mostly quite wealthy) citizens would spend time and money on research projects out of sheer interest and enthusiasm. Yet, now, in 2020, having “non-scientists” contribute to research projects is frowned upon by some scientists or academic structures?! Exactly this paradox makes winter schools and workshops which discuss and show the potential of citizens in science more important than ever before. And thanks to the wonderful participants and the extraordinary team who organised the citizen science winter school we are on the right track!



Tools for rapid prototyping and ideation

To end, a few additional takeaways:

- There are possibilities and potential of co-creation and public participation in nigh all stages of a research project. However, researchers and citizens should not just jump on the band wagon, but carefully plan a project and first work out if and how much participation is necessary or beneficial
- Citizen Science is relevant in a huge array of research topics and domains as shown by the international and interdisciplinary group of participants, ranging from clinical neuroscience over circular economy research to fieldwork with local communities in the Philippines. Citizen Science thus not only has the potential to build bridges between academia and the public, but also between different scientific disciplines
- If we truly want to advance Citizen Science and co-creation in research, we should start thinking about opening academic events revolving around Citizen Science to actual interested citizens. Maybe ask some active Citizen Scientists what their opinions are, why they contribute, what they would want to change etc.
- Having a great group of participants at a workshop can have a huge impact on learned transferable skills. From what I heard, people not only learned a lot about participatory research, but also: how to give and receive constructive feedback, how to quickly develop and pitch ideas, how to speak in-front of a larger crowd and handle a microphone, how to talk about their research to people from completely different fields and so much more!

**Let us leave the “ivory tower of traditional academia” behind and start building bridges with the scientific cement of participatory and interdisciplinary research within, amongst and between citizens and scientists alike!**

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