

Animating the future of community based research

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Community based research requires a close and democratic collaboration between the researcher and the communities studied, by recognising that the starting and ending point of knowledge is the experience of the community (Schwandt, 2007; Beeman-Cadwallader et al, 2012). Such research does not sit easily within disciplinary departments where knowledge is usually seen as the domain of a trained elite of scholars who engage in particular practices of knowledge production and dissemination as dictated by disciplinary rules and codes of behaviour.

If this is the status quo, what sort of future can we envisage for community based research and the relationship between academia and community? We suggest that to explore the potentialities of such futures, we should draw on resources already available around us and animate the relationship between academic rigour and community relevance. However, this requires courage and a form of morality that is not taught on research methods courses in universities. We draw on and reflect on our own experiences resulting from a project funded by the AHRC Connected Communities programme, that sought to ‘Bridge the gap between academic rigour and community relevance’.

As early as 1994, there have been calls for the development of more relevant and ‘actionable knowledge’ (Hambrick, 1994) that could serve relevant communities more effectively. Yet, the responses to this call have diverse and contradictory. Many academics believe that academia and the world of practice speak different languages, have incommensurable goals and as such they cannot learn anything useful from one another (Keiser and Leiner, 2009). Other scholars, while acknowledging differences in the nature of the interests of the two parties, believe that one should enhance the relevance of academic research by moving to a Mode 2 form of knowledge production and dissemination (Starkey and Madan, 2001) where a variety of stakeholders come together to define the agenda and the methodology needed for solving a particular problem. The call for a multi-disciplinary approach to research

as a useful strategy for rethinking the nature of practical problems (Kilduff and Kelemen, 2001) has also been advocated strongly.

Central to the controversy is the academia–community gap, which is characterized by the opposition of ‘rigour’ and ‘relevance’ (Aram and Salipante, 2003). Rigour is associated with a form of knowledge that is produced through an academic agenda. Academics are typically concerned with methodological rigour, which is achieved by relying on standard methods of data collection and analysis (Gulati, 2007). The ultimate purpose of this type of knowledge is to develop universal laws and principles describing the nature of things. Communities on the other hand, need knowledge that is useful to solving the problematic situations they face on a day to day basis. The issue at stake is whether the knowledge created in community based research could meet the double hurdle of rigour and relevance. By adopting a Pragmatist agenda, our project demonstrated that this is not only possible but also doable and indeed necessary for any type of scientific inquiry. Pragmatism regards experience as part and parcel of knowledge for the latter is not a copy of something that exists independently of its being known, but an important instrument/tool for successful action. The truthfulness of knowledge is therefore assessed by its usefulness, for if people do not find ideas useful for some purpose, they will simply discard them (Kelemen and Rumens, 2013).

The pragmatist’s interest in what works and how and why it works (or doesn’t) translates into a notion of knowledge which is directed towards problem solving using the data and the understandings available at the time. The pragmatist researcher shows a genuine interest in the future, in the alternatives that may just happen, and in perspectives that are not yet realised. Pragmatic thinking is thinking oriented towards the future consequences rather than about the past. Acting in the present is about anticipation and projection rather than about evaluating the past (Kelemen and Rumens, 2012).

Our pragmatist approach translated in a methodology of research entitled ‘Cultural Animation’. The online etymology dictionary defines animation as the "action of

imparting life," from Latin *animationem* or as "vitality". As a verb, to animate means "to fill with boldness or courage," from Latin *animatus* or to "give breath to", "to endow with a particular spirit, to give courage to" from *anima* which in Latin means "life, breath".

Pioneered in the UK, by New Vic Borderlines and Keele University, cultural animation puts day to day experiences of the individuals at the heart of the process and builds on the idea that when people get up and do things they can think in fresh ways about problems and experience them from multiple perspectives. Culturally animating a community involves acknowledging existing power and knowledge hierarchies and taking steps to minimize them via techniques that build up trusting relationships between participants by inviting them to work together in activities which may be new to them but which draw on their life experiences. These techniques require participants to articulate ideas and experiences in actions and images rather than the written word, consequently dissolving power differentials that may exist within groups.

In the process, participants create experiences and artefacts (such as poems, songs, puppets, human tableaux, mini performances and installations, and documentary dramas) that are memorable and energise people around core themes and problems that require solutions. When people make such art together, they engage in different forms of communication, re-define relations between themselves, between ideas and concepts and this allows for new identities to emerge and a sense of community to be formed (<http://www.keele.ac.uk/bridgingthedivide/outcomes/>). Some of the participants describe this process as liberating and as allowing themselves to express the most intimate views about themselves and the world around them. The approach has as a starting point the validation of the language used by community members to describe their experiences, and placing the 'mantle of expert' upon their shoulders in exploring what changes they would like to see, who should be involved and how to make it happen. By enlisting the creativity and potentiality of the individuals and embracing the historiographies of community members, cultural animation dissolves hierarchies and creates an environment where 'ordinary people' can play a role in

shaping their world and realising their aspirations and ambitions. In so doing the knowledge created is not only useful but also rigorous and democratically achieved.

Drawing on cultural animation techniques, the ‘Bridging the gap’ project explored what counted as actionable knowledge for communities and what made knowledge relevant, useful and practical at their end, particularly as these communities were in crisis. We worked closely with communities based in Stoke on Trent, UK and Minami Sanriku, Japan. At first sight, these communities have little in common, yet they have both lost their most important markers of identity, Minami Sanriku as a result of the 2011 Tsunami while Stoke on Trent, as a consequence of a slow moving economic Tsunami (which had seen the collapse of its main industries: mining, steel and ceramics). <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/News-and-Events/Watch-and-Listen/Pages/Weathering-the-storm-How-communities-respond-to-adversity.aspx>

The project brought together people who would have not met otherwise such as academics, NGO and business leaders, members of the community including ex-offenders, unemployed and people with learning difficulties. Participants worked together to create new worlds out of what remained of the old ones, using ordinary materials and objects at hand. In negotiating tasks, individuals discovered new abilities and skills they did not know they possessed or had not used for a long time. One of the ex-offenders, for example, became the informal leader of one of the groups while an architect who believed he was best placed to design the new habitat discovered that his team mates had a better understanding of how to build the new habitat than himself. Instead, he started playing the piano and engaged in other activities that were not related to his academic expertise. Through this bottom up and organic process, a more democratic form of knowledge emerged as participants’ stories, skills and experiences counted in equal measure towards the collective task of building new worlds and new habitats that made possible new ways of being in the world and new ways of learning and sharing with the *Other* at an individual and community level.

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