

Connected Communities

Bridging the Gap between Academic Rigour and Community Relevance: Fresh Insights from American Pragmatism

Prof. Mihaela Kelemen (PI), Dr. Anita Mangan, Dr. Busayawan Lam, Dr. Theodore Zamenopoulos, Prof. Graham Crow, Professor Toru Kiyomiya, Sue Moffat, Sophia de Sousa, David Humphries, Mondo Challenge Foundation



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Executive Summary

The 'Bridging the gap' project had an effective model of inter-disciplinary collaboration based around the delivery of two main events: a two-day networking/experiential workshop hosted by Keele University and the New Vic Theatre in June 2013 and a one week field trip to the Minami Sanriku, Japan, held in November 2013. The different academic disciplines and interests represented in the collaboration, coupled with the broad range of experience and skills held by the community partners have been an important strength of the project, allowing us to explore the synergies and tensions between academic and community understandings of various issues relating to communities in crisis. The work we have done with various communities in Stoke on Trent and Minami Sanriku has unearthed interesting stories about how communities respond to different types of crises as well as tested our assumptions about collaboration, challenged our taken for granted ways of working and allowed us to explore theory and practice in new, exciting ways.

Researchers and Project Partners

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Partner); David Humphries, Mondo Challenge Foundation (Community Partner)

Key words

community, crisis, American Pragmatism, inter-disciplinary collaboration, cultural animation, theory, practice

Background to the project

Our project captured stories about communities based in Stoke on Trent, UK and Minami Sanriku, Japan. Stoke on Trent is a city which has seen the gradual and almost complete loss of its traditional industries: mining, steel and ceramics, being one of the most deprived local authority in England, with an average income that is 20% below national average, having 28% of children live in poverty and a life expectancy well below the national average (Cities Institute). The economic and social crisis facing Stoke on Trent communities has changed the physical, cultural and emotional landscape of the city, destabilizing traditional identities at an individual and collective level.

Minami Sanriku is a municipality in Japan that faces a different sort of crisis, one brought about by natural disaster. On March 11th, 2011, a 9 degree magnitude earthquake hit the Pacific coast of Japan, triggering a tsunami wave of up to 10 meters high that engulfed large parts of the north-eastern area and also damaged the Fukushima nuclear power plant. Minami Sanriku was one of the coastal municipalities destroyed by the tsunami. The process of reconstruction had been very slow with more than 70% displaced people still leaving in temporary accommodation, more than two years after the disaster. Our community partners were Minami Sanriku City Government, Isatomaie Fukko Shoutengai shopping street cooperative, Heisei-no-mori temporary housing residents' association (248 houses), Iriya Yes Craft, Minami Sanriku Fukko-dako-no-kai (citizens' association for town reconstruction through manufacturing and marketing "octopus-kun" character goods).

The project explored three questions:

- How do communities respond to socio-economic crises or natural disasters?
- What can we learn from communities in crisis?
- How can a Cultural Animation methodology of research can help synergise learning across cultures and across academia and community?

Theoretical Underpinnings: Classical American Pragmatism

The project was underpinned by a classical American pragmatist philosophy which posits that the starting and ending point of knowledge is the experience of the community (Schwandt, 2007; Kelemen and Rumens, 2013). Rather than being antithetical to knowledge, experience is part of it and contributes to its enhancement. If experience and knowledge are seen as the two sides of the same coin, thinking and acting refer to the same process, namely the process of

making our way, as best as we can, in a universe shot through with contingencies and ambiguities (Menand 2001).

In *Experience and Nature* (1925: 8), John Dewey, one of the founding fathers of classical American Pragmatism, writes that experience is about what 'men (*sic*) do and suffer, what they strive for, believe and endure, and also how men act and are acted upon, the ways in which they do suffer, desire and enjoy, see, believe, imagine...'. To research (with) communities meant for us to *experience* their world with all our senses and to communicate our experiences in a multitude of ways that went beyond the written word (via interactive audio-visual installations, mini performances, human tableaux, and so on). Accounting for the multi-faceted, perennial and contingent experiences of the communities with which we worked and translating such experiences into theory/learning lessons ensured that the knowledge co-created became relevant and, indeed, 'actionable' for the communities themselves.

The American 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 the future, in the alternatives that may just happen, and in perspectives that are not yet realised. Pragmatist research seeks to intervene in order to actively create particular futures for communities that are affected by the issues at stake but also beyond these communities. Acting in the present is about anticipation and projection rather than simply evaluating the past (Kelemen and Rumens, 2012). Pragmatism, in its focus on the future, upholds the promise and the possibility of social reform. Our tasks as pragmatist researchers was a *practical* one, bearing on social, economic and political problems with the view to ensure that individuals and communities could live richer and more fulfilling lives (Wicks and Freeman 1998). What we took from Classical American Pragmatism was a sense of the significance attached to the aim of revisioning and creating new futures in order to improve human experience and condition.

Methodology: Cultural Animation

Our pragmatist philosophy translated in a community based 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.

Strengths of cultural animation:

- Animates everyday life in a genuine way
- Dissolves hierarchies: commonsense, expertise, practical skills are valued in equal measure and each participant contributes to the process according to their own abilities and agendas
- Rapidly identifies and engages with the yawning gap between “official” plans and strategies for reconstruction and regeneration, and what people actually say they want, and explores new ways of communicating across this gap.

Challenges of cultural animation revolve around questions such as:

- How does one represent in words something that is felt/experienced rather than said in words?
- How does one orchestrate multiple voices/acts in an inclusive and democratic way, while assuming an authorial position in writing academic papers?
- How could we encourage policy makers to use these techniques in their own engagement strategies?

Findings

More than 40 participants from all walks of life took part in a two day event held at Keele University (first day) and the New Vic Theatre (second day), representing academia, businesses and NGOs, public sector, local volunteers and the community at large (see picture 1). The first day had a more traditional format with talks by UK, French and Polish academics, a presentation by an international NGO and a community led design workshop. The workshop reflected on the Cutteslowe Community Centre and local government in Oxford, sharing reflections on a collaborative process of thinking about place and how place connects with people. The main task of the cultural animation workshop (second day) was to create new worlds and identities from lost worlds, using the metaphor of a boat for the journey from the past to the future. The workshops

started in the main auditorium where a storm was performed through sound and visual imagery and participants were asked to find refuge on a boat, and take with any objects they could rescue from their immediate environment. They were then split in four groups and given the task to create new worlds around the four essential elements: fire, water, air and earth. Participants built dens, created community songs, negotiated new rules of engagement enshrined in newly created constitutions, and performed their journeys in front of the other groups. They then had to find ways to communicate and work together in the newly created world order. The workshop demonstrated the prevalence of bottom up processes in the construction of new worlds, the reversal of roles between professionals/experts and community members and an abundance of creativity at individual and group level.

Similar cultural animation workshops took place in Minami Sanriku (see picture 2). Given the sensitive nature of the metaphor of a boat, coupled with the practicalities of transporting the boat to Japan, we opted for the 'Tree of Life' as in Japanese mythology, the tree symbolises endurance and longevity. A tree made of interlocking parts travelled to Japan, and communities were invited to work together and create artefacts, poems, song that expressed their old and new identities. These artefacts became the leaves of the Tree giving it new life. The workshops took place in the temporary shopping centre and in a temporary housing complex. More than 60 community members attended the workshops along with ten academics from Seinan Gakuin and Osaka City University (some of whom acted as translators). Through our translators, we learnt that people from Minami Sanriku felt 'disused' and forgotten by the central government. Their response to crisis was to build from within and not wait for hand outs from above. The inhabitants of Minami Sanriku felt a deep connection with their land despite the constant threat of a new tsunami. Very few people migrated to other parts of the country in search of job opportunities. Most people stayed in Minami Sanriku looking for ways to start new businesses or doing volunteering in their community. The new businesses that were created in the aftermath of the disaster followed a cooperative business model rather than one based on market competition.

The strengths and weaknesses of our collaborative project are closely aligned to the breadth and size of the project group. Academic partners came from diverse disciplines such as management, design, architecture, sociology, communication studies and philosophy, while community partners represented a theatre, a charity supporting community led design and collaborative place making and an international NGO. The result was a series of activities that addressed a broad range of concerns and had to negotiate very different understandings. The wide variety of opinions, skills and expertise were a constant source of fresh insights.

However at times, it has been difficult to find common ground in order to produce academic papers not only because the academic discourse of each discipline imposed certain rules that were not shared by the other disciplines but also due to the fact that academic and community partners work to different time scales and have different rationales for engaging in community based work.

Creative Outputs

The 'Bridging the Gap' Boat Installation: Journeying from past to future

This interactive audio-visual installation took the participants on an imaginary voyage of self-discovery, inviting them to make artefacts, write poems, record stories about matters that they or their communities might have lost and how that could feed into imagining a different future. The Bridging the Gap Installation was displayed at the Connected Communities Showcase in Edinburgh, 2013 and a podcast was commissioned by the AHRC to capture the complex process by which it had been created and re-enacted.

Podcast: 'Weathering the Storm: How Communities Respond to Adversity'

<http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/News-and-Events/Watch-and-Listen/Pages/Weathering-the-storm-How-communities-respond-to-adversity.aspx>

The Tree of Life Installation

As a symbol of longevity and endurance in Japanese mythology, the 'Tree of Life' Installation captures stories and artifacts made by Japanese communities affected by the 2011 Tsunami, in experiential workshops led by Sue Moffat, Director of New Vic Borderlines, in Minami Sanriku. The Tree of Life Interactive Installation was showcased at the Connected Communities Festival in Cardiff, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRa71sYijxI>

Ongoing dissemination

Project website: <http://www.keele.ac.uk/bridgingthedivide/>

Blog: How can American Pragmatism support community-led design?

This Blog published on the Glass-House website was written following the event at Keele University, and aimed to disseminate both information about the project and event in the context of community led design and to pose relevant questions to the community and professional networks engaged in making physical transformations to places.

http://www.theglasshouse.org.uk/blog-entry/_/how-can-american-pragmatism-support-community-led-design/93/

The 'Bridging the Gap' Boat and 'Tree of Life' Installations travelled to Rotherham in January 2014 and were exhibited at 'My Place', a youth cultural venue, as part of the Holocaust Commemoration. The event attracted a large audience over two days, including people with disabilities, elderly people and the Roma community. Sue Moffat, New Vic Borderlines Director, led experiential workshops encouraging participants to think about their own life journeys and imagine a future in which discrimination, exclusion and marginalization will no longer exist.

The Tree of Life Installation was selected by the AHRC to represent the Connected Communities programme at CUVIC, University of Victoria, Canada, in May 2014. The same installation was the focus of a debate and presentation given at The Arts in Society International Conference, Rome, June, 2014.

We ran a series of experiential workshops at the *Community Organisers Action Camp* organised by Locality at Yarnfield Park, between 20-22 of June, 2014. The event brought together community organisers from across the UK. The workshops introduced the participants to the principles of cultural animation, encouraging them to add their own community stories to the 'Bridging the Gap' Boat Installation and to the 'Tree of Life' Installation.

We presented a conference paper entitled 'Accumulating discourse: Using experiential drama techniques to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and community relevance', at *the 11th International Conference on Organisational Discourse*, Cardiff, July, 2014

The Glass-House is currently working on a small publication which will extract stories and anecdotes from Minami Sanriku to explore participatory design and to provide a series of design challenge tasks for design students.

References and external links

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Bridging the Gap Workshop: UK



Bridging the Gap: Minami Sanriku, Japan



The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

"to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities."

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC's Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx

