Connected Communities

Untold stories of volunteering: A cultural animation project

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Executive Summary
The project’s aim was to give voice to untold stories of volunteering by employing a cultural animation methodology to ensure that such stories are co-designed and co-produced with and by volunteers and other interested stakeholders. The project had two phases. In the first phase, we worked closely with volunteers from Staffordshire and other stakeholders involved in volunteering, particularly the New Vic Theatre and NCVO (National Council for Voluntary Organisations) to co-design a cultural animation methodology in order to explore volunteering experiences from multiple perspectives and uncover untold stories of volunteering. In a series of cultural animation workshops, participants explored volunteering through the creation of songs, plays, puppets and human tableaux. Drawing on the themes developed in Phase 1, we broadened the stakeholder community in Phase 2 to include a large spectrum of volunteers from around the UK, umbrella groups, support organisations and local government. The project concluded with the performance of an interactive documentary drama entitled Untold Stories of Volunteering which was co-designed, co-produced and co-performed by participants in venues based in Newcastle-under-Lyme, Leicester and London.
Researchers and Project Partners

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Key words

Volunteering, cultural animation, documentary drama, voluntolding, ethics, co-design, co-production; community
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The project was funded as part of the AHRC Connected Communities Development Grants, intended to explore co-design and co-development of research with community partners. This report will focus on three aspects of the research: cultural animation as a methodology for knowledge co-production; theoretical themes emerging from untold stories of volunteering; and cultural outputs and dissemination. We conclude with some reflections on how the project contributed to the quality, originality and legacy of Connected Communities research.

Cultural animation as a methodology for knowledge co-production

Trans-disciplinary co-design and co-production are at the heart of the Untold Stories of Volunteering project. We used cultural animation as a methodology to engage in knowledge co-production in an ethical, non-hierarchical and safe environment that allowed all participants to have a voice in the conversation of research. Cultural animation puts day to day experiences of ordinary people at the heart of inquiry (Kelemen and Rumens, 2013). Culturally animating a community involves acknowledging and critically approaching existing power and knowledge hierarchies and taking steps to minimise them, as a means to developing more interpretative and less legislative approaches to understanding and working with communities (Phillips, 1998a; 1998b; 2002). Cultural animation starts by validating the language used by community members to describe their experiences, placing the ‘mantle of expert’ upon their shoulders in order to explore what changes they would like to see, who should be involved and how to make them happen. By enlisting the creativity and potentiality of the community (Dworakowska et al, 2011), cultural animation creates opportunities for academics, policy makers and others in relative positions of power to access and understand the ambitions of these communities and create an environment where ordinary people can play a role in shaping their world and realising their ambitions. The outcomes of cultural animation are tangible actions with which all parties are able to identify and play an active role.

Cultural animation practices involve critical reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2004), storytelling (Gabriel, 2000), documentary theatre (Favorini, 1995), and drama performances (Bradby and Lavery, 2007). These practices helped us to create an environment in which trusting relations with volunteers were established, emotions and needs were expressed openly, and potential conflicts were revealed and resolved. Volunteers and stakeholders were encouraged to articulate their ideas and experiences in actions and images rather than using the spoken word. In Phase 1, this led to the collective production of a series of artefacts, based on themes and issues that were raised by participants in four cultural animation workshops. The artefacts included songs, puppets and models, poetry, shadow puppet theatre, human tableaux and short plays. In Phase
2, we continued to employ the cultural animation methodology whenever we engaged with large groups of volunteers and stakeholders. Thus we conducted a cultural animation workshop with FC United of Manchester and two further workshops with other participants at the New Vic Theatre. The final workshop culturally animated the meanings of legacy, quality and novelty of research within the context of the Connected Communities Programme with a focus on our own project. In broadening the research base beyond Staffordshire, however, we often could not employ cultural animation because of the additional costs involved in getting to a location. We conducted more than 20 interviews around the country with volunteers and volunteer managers from a range of third sector and community based organisations. These included a technology hub, religious charity, arts festival, support organisations and national umbrella groups, as well as individual non-institutional volunteers.

Examples of the cultural animation outputs can be found here:

http://www.keele.ac.uk/volunteeringstories/culturalanimationoutcomes/

**Untold stories of volunteering: Main themes**

From the Phase 1 cultural animation workshops and a series of extensive interviews and workshops in Phase 2, we developed a series of themes that captured the untold stories of the volunteers and stakeholder groups. The preliminary Phase 1 themes were used to develop a set of semi-structured interview questions for Phase 2. We refined and developed the preliminary themes during Phase 2 and these were then used to help in the co-development of the documentary drama. Recurrent untold stories included:

- Volunteering encompasses everything from mundane tasks to unusual undertakings. It is done for all age groups and by all age groups.
- Volunteering provides a personal haven in times of uncertainty, grief or job loss and can act as a pathway to a better life.
- More attention needs to be paid to volunteer management in order to provide clear roles, policies, structures, training, support and communication. It can help to avoid volunteer burnout and conflict. This benefits the volunteers and the public.
- The risks of volunteering include risks to volunteers’ physical health and emotional wellbeing.
- Individual volunteers have a complex, often paradoxical, relationship with government:
  - Volunteers are mostly unaware of official policy, choosing to concentrate on the immediate needs of individuals and their community. The role of local government is rarely considered.
  - Long-term unemployed volunteers feel stigmatised by government as the non-monetary benefits of volunteering are not recognised
  - The *voluntold* experience is widespread as we encountered multiple stories of individuals being forced to volunteer to keep their benefits, often in
unsuitable, irrelevant field. In contrast, others were told not to volunteer because it reduced the time available to look for work.

- National bodies, charities and individual volunteers found it difficult at times to understand each other’s experiences and points of view.
- Volunteering gives people a feeling of engagement with their communities and volunteers point to altruistic and what could be seen as more selfish motivations; they contribute to the community, but also get something back.
- Volunteers are often fearful of what could be lost if they did not volunteer (e.g. services or community cohesion). They worry that materialism is turning people away from volunteering and emphasise the importance of 'just turning up'.

Most of these themes were enacted and performed in a documentary/interactive drama which toured the UK as part of the Volunteers’ Week celebration.

Our research provides a nuanced picture of volunteering as it occurs in day to day life, intersecting with people’s perceptions and understandings of what volunteering is. We developed a context-bound understanding of volunteering which transcends simplistic universal structure/agency explanations for why people volunteer (Williams and Nadin, 2012) and prevalent dichotomies within the sociology of work (Acker, 1998). Our research suggests that volunteering is a relational concept which unfolds on the ground in ways that are difficult to map out and managed in a top down fashion. Focusing on volunteering in its local context, as performed by people in their day to day lives, helps bridge commonplace dualisms between private/public, individual/collective, and paid/unpaid work.

**The ‘Untold Stories of Volunteering’ interactive documentary drama**

The documentary drama *Untold Stories of Volunteering* was performed in three different localities across the UK: New Vic Theatre, Newcastle-under-Lyme; the Richard Attenborough Centre for Disability and the Arts, University of Leicester; and Oxford House Theatre, London. After each show, there was a question and answer session to assess the degree to which the performance resonated or not with the audience’s own experiences of volunteering.

Our documentary drama was constructed in such a way that through individual oral testimonies collected via semi-structured interviews with people who volunteer in their local communities and via our cultural animation workshops, we were able to foreground communal issues around volunteering. We used multi-media material (recorded voices, music, poems, costumes, lighting and movement) to create a kaleidoscope of perspectives which ultimately facilitated the emergence of a communal multi-voice about volunteering. The communal nature of the subject on stage was also realised through the style of acting, with performers shifting from role to role to show what has happened rather than becoming the character to whom it has happened (Claycomb, 2003). Lanser (1993: 21) notes that “unlike authorial and personal voices...the communal mode seems to be primarily a phenomenon of marginalised or suppressed communities”. Indeed,
documentary theatre has often functioned as a device for silenced and marginalised communities to articulate a voice and push to the surface the hidden and the unheard. The goal of documentary theatre is the creation of some notion of community that is meaningful to the actors on the stage, the audience and the wider community.

Establishing resonance with the public’s aspirations and needs is crucial along with enabling a dialogue to encourage the audience to examine its own problems in light of the story being articulated on stage at any one point in time. According to Turner (1982), documentary theatre has a deep affective effect on audiences by providing the experiential tools by which spectators can think for and of themselves in terms of what is being performed on the stage, thus becoming to some extent spec-ators (Boal, 1979). Documentary theatre does not attempt to change the substance of what we know (about volunteering for example), but instead it aims to change the way we look at certain events by creating dialogues where none might have existed before. The voices who perform are multiple, dialogic and open, yet the communal narrative that is constructed sends one overarching message, in our case that volunteering is crucial to the wellbeing of our communities and to individuals.

**Additional dissemination**

We created a website for the project: [http://www.keele.ac.uk/volunteeringstories/](http://www.keele.ac.uk/volunteeringstories/)

We presented a paper at an international academic conference and another paper at a practitioner conference:


The techniques of cultural animation were disseminated via three further workshops:

- The Connected Communities Show Case, Edinburgh, 2013

- The Connected Communities Festival, Cardiff, 2014

- The Art of Management and Organisation Conference, Copenhagen, August 2014

**Conclusions**

The legacy of ‘Untold Stories of Volunteering’ is multifaceted. At an individual level, the cultural animation exercises have changed the way participants think about each other’s aspirations and agendas providing new skills that are useful in community work and also in teaching. This project refines the on-going work New Vic Borderlines is doing with marginalised categories of people in our society, strengthens Keele University and
Leicester University’s agenda of community leadership and community sustainability and provides evidence for NCVO to influence government and other umbrella organisations on issues which are central to volunteering. The study accessed stories of volunteering from the ‘voluntolds’, a marginalised category whose voice is hardly represented or accounted for in the academic literature or the policy making debates, and challenged taken for granted views about existing motivations and rationales for volunteering. The project contributes a methodological legacy to academic studies on volunteering advancing a unique understanding about how volunteering practices condition and are conditioned by the wider social practices and relations in which they are located.
References and external links


Comb R M (2003), (Ch)oral history: Documentary History, the Communal Subject, and progressive politics, *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, p. 95-120


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