

RESEARCHING WITH
COMMUNITIES
SYMPOSIUM

October 15th 2011

What the day is about

- Welcome and introductions
- Presentation of Research Results
 - ▣ Background - Arts Humanities Research Council Connected Communities Research Programme
 - ▣ Our background – our bid
 - ▣ Community Advisory Group
 - ▣ Complexity theory
 - ▣ Results from research
 - ▣ Results using complexity as an explanatory framework
 - ▣ Discussion
- Lunch
- Over to you!



Part 1

AHRC's Connected Communities Programme

- Connected Communities is a cross-Research Council Research Programme, led by AHRC, in partnership with ESRC, EPSRC, MRC & NERC
- The vision of the Programme is:
“to mobilise the potential for increasingly interconnected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders & communities”
- At the core of the programme is the mainstream academic aim of *understanding communities*; however, *“engagement with communities at all stages of the research is a key feature”* of the Programme



Connected Communities Programme

- During the ongoing development of the Research Programme, 3 underpinning, cross-cutting, themes have been identified in collaboration with researchers:
 - Connectivity within and between communities
 - Connecting research about communities
 - **Connecting research and researchers with communities**



Connected Communities Programme



- Our research project was funded following a call announced around a year ago – this call identified five areas for potential research:
 - ▣ Conceptualisations and meanings of ‘community’
 - ▣ Changing nature of ‘connectivity’ within and between communities, including connectivity between communities and their broader environment and the impact of new communication technologies;
 - ▣ Evolution of ideas about community self-reliance, resilience, social & community ‘capital’, empowerment and participation
 - ▣ Conflict within and between communities
 - ▣ **Community perspectives and approaches to engaging communities in and with research**



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Connected Communities Programme



- Our research therefore contributes to the 3rd underpinning theme, & to the 5th area for research within last year's call:
 - ▣ *Connecting research and researchers with communities*
 - ▣ *Community perspectives and approaches to engaging communities in and with research*

- Our overall aim is to work towards informing the AHRC's community engagement strategy for the Connected Communities Research Programme



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Part 2 – Our bid

- When, why, and how, do researchers engage with communities
 - It's accepted that there's a continuum of types of engagement from outreach to consultation to co-inquiry – from our perspective, this represents the *difference between communicating academic research to the “wider public” through to being challenged to work differently by community partners*
- The research questions we posed:
 - How to create the enabling conditions which make engagement possible?
 - Is complexity a useful theoretical framework to make sense of, and transfer, engagement processes?



Our bid (cont.)

- We wanted to research different ‘engagement projects’ where academics had worked alongside communities/the public
 - ▣ We specifically wanted to concentrate on *processes* by which engagement took place, and the *conditions* that facilitated – or inhibited – these engagement processes
- We considered the six Beacon sites to be a very good place to understand how engagement processes can be initiated and supported



Our bid (cont.)

- Our initial thinking was based on several years' experience of conducting research with communities
 - ▣ Retrospective and prospective research looking at facilitators and barriers to regeneration in West Cornwall
 - ▣ Grant-holder for a group looking at creating a culture of partnerships between academics, service providers and service users in health and social care research



Part 3 –

Community Advisory Group

- Was important from the outset to try and mirror what we considered to be good practice
 - ▣ *However, timescales were such that we couldn't develop the proposal with the community advisory group*
- Drawn from people we have worked with or are working with
- Acted as a source of advice and support
- From the meetings we have developed a further proposal for a 'follow on' project with some of the Advisory Group



Part 4 – Complexity

- Our work has been informed by Complexity Theory

- A system is said to be complex (as opposed to simple or complicated) when:
 - ▣ It is composed of many elements which interact dynamically, and non-linearly.
 - ▣ The behaviour of the system as a whole cannot be predicted from, or reduced to, the parts of the system in isolation.



Complexity (cont.)

- To the extent that they are unpredictable, properties of the system, such as its structure or organisation, which occur following processes of change within the system, are said to be emergent
- It is open, and thus interacts dynamically with its environment; as a result, system and environment tend to co-evolve with one another
- It has a history, which influences the present behaviour of the system (in other words, the system can demonstrate path dependence – locked in behaviour)



Complexity (cont.)

- Self-organisation within the system tends to occur when the system is far from equilibrium, or at the edge of chaos.
 - ‘Edge of chaos’ – the region where the phase transition occurs between the ordered state of a system and its chaotic state.
 - Self-organisation – components in the system tend to behave in a way which neither dissolves into turbulence nor locks into ordered behaviour, and which can therefore begin to display emergent properties.
- The system is able to explore “adjacent possibles”.



Wriggle break and questions



Part 5 – Results from Research

What did we do?



- Initial site visits to all six Beacon sites, the National Coordinating Centre, and Brighton CUPP
 - 16 interviews and focus groups carried out to get an overview of engagement activities at each site and organisational context within which these activities are taking place
- We looked in detail at seven case studies of engagement projects
 - 22 further interviews and focus groups were carried
- We conducted two negotiated feedback sessions



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Interviews and focus groups

- Participants were from the community; academics; service providers; administrators; volunteers; managers involved in supporting or delivering the projects
- All interviews and focus groups were transcribed and read and discussed between us all to identify key themes



Overview of results

- Overarching question – what are the conditions for community engagement, & how are they created?
- Structure of research findings:
 - ▣ Data from case studies
 - A few of “the usual suspects”
 - Some “challengers”
 - ▣ Case study data challenges to our complexity assumptions
 - ▣ Development of possible new way of conceiving engagement processes
 - Is the model plausible
 - Is the theory plausible
 - ▣ So what?



Beacons – background

- Although the Beacon teams at each of the sites had their own distinctive aims & objectives, and ways of working, one common theme that emerged was that they each supported the development of new relations and gave ‘permission’ to people to work in ways they wanted to (but possibly hadn’t felt supported to do, up until now)
 - *I think I always wanted to do public engagement so actually for me when the university said that you should do it, it was an excuse for me because I already wanted to do it*
 - *Beacon was a wonderful opportunity to get that little bit of cash and formalise the partnership [project]*
 - *I wouldn’t have met [name] from the museum without the Beacon [project]*
 - *I happened to be sitting at a table with [name] and that was the first time [name] and I met. So it was serendipity really because it was immediately obvious to me that the three of us could make use of Beacon money.*



Beacons – achievements

- On the basis of our own research, we are primarily interested in community engagement work that changes the ways academic research is conducted – and we found rich evidence showing that the Beacons had achieved this:

I think the other thing that was useful is that, in the lead up to the actual event, you had a number of workshops...which were organised by the Beacon, and I think this helped – well, it helped me, anyway, to reflect on myself, really – 'cos, right at the start, we were asked questions – I felt quite uncomfortable about answering them, because I am a scientist, you know, I have lacked confidence in engaging with people, and then you had to reflect on those [questions] again after the event, and it felt different, it felt, it's more of a humanity sort of way of thinking about things, rather than just as a scientist.



Beacons – Evaluation

- All of the Beacons recognised the significance of evaluation for public engagement work
- Evaluation responds to a number of objectives:
 - Determining the value of engagement work
 - Measuring the impact of engagement work
 - Providing an evidence basis for claims about the success of project work, for future funding applications
 - Allowing reflexive learning, which can feed-back & shape project development
- However, evaluation raises a number of interesting challenges
 - How to do it? When should it be done? Who should do it?
 - How does evaluation relate to value? What is ‘success’ and how is it judged? According to what ‘scale’? According to what timetable is it determined – before, during, after? Can evaluation stifle engagement work, or turn communities off becoming involved in collaborating in research?



Cross cutting themes – Some “Usual suspects”!

Higher Education Institute structures and processes

- Senior level buy in
 - ▣ Recognition and incentives (legitimate part of job)
- Tension between centralised management structures within HEI and need for flexible and responsive processes for engagement
 - ▣ Funding and paying people/venues/food



Cross cutting themes – “The Usual suspects”!

□ Time and Rhythm

- Having *enough* time to do meaningful work
 - *“a key difference in just having the time to explore”*
 - *“there’s got to be time”*
- The importance of investing in ‘lead in period’ and ‘following up’
 - *“to acknowledge both the lead-in and the follow-up is a legitimate part of university work”*
 - *“people are still asking for it now”*



Cross cutting themes – “The Usual Suspects”!

□ Time and Rhythm

- Intuiting and respecting the varying rhythm of projects
 - *“there’s something about the just hanging out together [...] there’s something about the kind of possibilities”*
 - *“something that’s quite important is happening but isn’t necessarily immediately visible”*
- University work & project funding aren’t co-terminus with rhythms of community life
 - *“so much of the funding is kind of short term or is a bit like a smash and grab like okay you’ve got six months here’s a thousand pounds run out there you know find a community, whack them over the head, drive them back, stick them in a conference for half an hour and done”*
- Is now the time
 - *“is the community ready for this type of project [...] do they really want these stories to be told?”*



Cross cutting themes – “The Usual suspects”!

Commitment

- Staying the distance (as opposed to hit-and-run)
 - *“some of the committee members were concerned regarding they just wanted to come in and do the project, tick their boxes and kind of leave”*
 - *“people from the university are always coming in and researching what our problems are and then they go away”*
 - *“if you are hit and run and you’re parachuting in and out they’ll never trust you”*
 - *“it’s about going down to their community centres, sitting with them and if they’ve got activities going on engaging with the activities. If it’s outside of the project that’s where the trust is built”*



Cross cutting themes – “The Usual suspects”!

Mutual Benefit

- Mutual benefit was identified by all case studies as essential
 - *“What we did agree on was we had to benefit everyone”*
 - *“I wouldn’t even ask them to do that unless there was something in it for them”*
 - *“I do feel very strongly that actually you do need to establish a mutual benefit”*
 - *“it’s about both people trying to meet everybody’s agenda and finding a workable solution or deciding not to but in a constructive way”*
- Mutual benefits can, nevertheless, be quite different (eg for communities & academics)



Challenging themes - systems and structures

- **Benefits of pre-fabricated systems and structures**
 - *“the support network is already formed somewhat all you are doing is transporting it”*
- **Negotiating between organisational systems and structures**
 - *“one of the biggest barriers and obstacles to come into and work out is organisations understanding other organisations and how they work and their policies and their procedures and their remit and their ethos as well”*
- **Benefits of structure-less spaces and non-systematicity**
 - *“[at the Centre] everything is quite structured really so all of the things that they are waiting to say but they can’t they come out here [away from the Centre]”*
- But to what extent is this freedom ‘structured’...?
- Are there two different levels of systems at play here?



Challenging themes

project planning and outcomes

- **Benefits from meticulous pre-planning and identified outcomes**
 - *“it was very well organised and I think that was the key to success”*
 - *“if you don't plan and try and proactively address what issues you think are going to arise then you are going to be reactive and fire fighting and it's not going to work so well”*
 - *“if you two hadn't had the vision of what the end result was I don't think it would have happened it would have fizzled out after that initial engagement I think. It is only because there was a vision”*
- **Good planning necessary for good evaluation (of the plan and the extent to which what occurs resembles the plan)**
 - *“planning and evaluation sit side by side. If you don't plan well you can't evaluate well because you've not settled your indicators for success to measure success”*



Challenging themes

project planning and outcomes

□ **Benefits from open-planning and emergent outcomes**

- *“the thing about [our project] is that it’s kind of a wide open space but you can’t entirely predict it”*
- *“it does feel like the space and openness is a useful thing, it’s not obsessed with rules and regulations”*
- *“There’s not exactly a long term plan, it’s evolving and emerging”*
- *“so the question to me is kind of a bit more how do you kind of keep people involved and how do you keep it going. It’s not exactly about having a vision for it”*

□ **What makes over-determined planning/outcomes helpful in some cases, and at times necessary, but a hindrance in others?**



Challenging themes – roles (functions) and responsibilities

□ **Benefits of fixed roles and responsibilities**

□ Identified by many as contributing to the success of projects

- *“what their role is, that is really important for the project to succeed from my experience”*
- *“clarity of respective roles and expectations is important at the beginning”*

□ Some roles and responsibilities cannot be exchanged, nor should they

- *“I had my role and I didn’t go and moan about my role [...] I knew what I had to do [...] and I went and did it and I brought it back to the table and said yeah we’ve done that”*
- *“But we couldn’t have expected you to go and do his role when he knows what his role is”*



Challenging themes – roles (functions) and responsibilities

□ **Benefits of fixed roles and responsibilities**

▣ Fixed roles/responsibilities can aid communal partnership

- *“When we are there we are all the same. Yes there are boundaries for [them], that’s good, yeah there are boundaries for us, that’s good, but I learnt so much”*
- *“the idea that they run a university and the idea that we are academics the idea that they were something else completely disappeared and I think that for me is where engagement is”*
- *“I think clarity of roles is actually a great way of avoiding ambiguity about responsibility and actually makes it easier for people to have mutual respect for each other”*



Challenging themes – roles (functions) and responsibilities

- Clear roles can be liberating
 - ▣ *“we knew where responsibility lay and therefore we were actually more relaxed about missing our roles because in the end it was clear who was responsible for the role. It sounds almost contradictory but it is, it’s how it worked in a strange way”*
 - ▣ *“it was because we’d originally agreed what those roles were that then people became paradoxically more comfortable crossing over those roles because it was done within the framework of understanding that everything, core things had been dealt with and sorted out in a very organised and structured way”*



Why were these themes challenging?

- We began from the complexity stance which effectively privileged
 - ▣ Open systems over closed systems
 - ▣ Non linear over linear process
 - ▣ Fluidity over fixity
 - ▣ Unpredictable & emergent outcomes over pre-determined & planned processes
- These assumptions have been called into question
 - ▣ Rather than thinking of fixity, pre-determination and hierarchical structures being at odds with fluidity, responsiveness and creativity – might we instead think the relation otherwise...
 - ▣ Might the one give rise to the other (at least in some cases!)?
- We raised this possibility during the negotiated feedback sessions and it resonated with the participants



Revised understanding of Engagement Cycle

- We therefore want to suggest that we should conceive of there being two distinct phases, each of which possesses its own specific dynamics & processes:
 - ▣ Engaging phase – the “prior” phase during which engaging occurs, which is therefore the phase where we should be looking for the “initial conditions”
 - ▣ Project Phase – consisting of the engaged project work, which both emerges from, & is determined by, the engaging phase



Revised understanding of Engagement Cycle

- What might the characteristic processes of the 1st phase be?
 - Typically across the Beacons, we have seen that, at the outset, there were “pockets” of existing engagement work, passionate individuals doing engaged work in greater or lesser degrees of isolation
 - We think 2 processes need to occur:
 - The more or less long-term process by which relations of trust are developed between academics & communities
 - A process whereby engagement activities & practitioners are brought together within the research organisation(s)
 - The activities co-ordinated by the Beacon Teams have been instrumental in supporting the development of this process
 - Together, these 2 processes lead to the emergence of more or less organised partnerships between researchers & communities



Revised understanding of Engagement Cycle

- These 2 basic processes characterising the 1st phase are very susceptible to standard complexity theory analysis
 - ▣ They consist in relation building, tend to be fluid & dynamic, partnerships form serendipitously, outcomes are emergent – in effect, the work of the Beacons take the research organisation to the “edge of chaos”
- At the edge of chaos, systems start to create & explore “adjacent possibles”



Revised understanding of Engagement Cycle

- We want to suggest that the engaged project work of the 2nd phase consists in the “exploration” of adjacent possibles, & requires a more nuanced “application” of complexity theory
 - ▣ Projects tend to be emergent outcomes of the prior phase of (organised) engagement
 - ▣ They tend to coalesce around co-identified mutual benefits
 - ▣ The emergent projects *determine* roles & responsibilities for project partners
 - ▣ The prior planning, identification of outcomes, & design of evaluation is also determined during the process of the design of the project
 - ▣ Within these projects, flexibility & innovation can develop on the basis of the “constraints” within the projects



Further questions

- From our own research perspective, a number of further questions arise:
 - What are the relations between the dynamics of the processes which comprise these 2 different phases?
 - Can we interpret the processes comprising the 2 phases equally adequately through the lens of complexity theory? &, if so, do we need to refine the way complexity is applied to each of the 2 phases?
 - Can we interpret the operative constraints within engaged projects as emergent phenomena of the processes comprising the 1st phase of engaging?



Further questions

- However, a further set of more wide-ranging questions arise:
 - ▣ Does this 2 phase model have any implications for the strategy for funding engagement that should be adopted by AHRC for the Connected Communities Research Programme?
 - ▣ Do we need to re-think the role that communities can play in the 1st phase? or in the development of the culture change which supports the 1st phase within organisations?
 - ▣ Does this 2 phase model have any implications for how engagement work is evaluated – for instance, are there outcomes from the 1st phase which can be meaningfully evaluated?
 - ▣ Should there be different models for transferring the learning which is applicable to the processes comprising the 2 phases between communities & organisations?
 - ▣ Does this 2 phase model have any implications for how we think about the *sustainability* of community engagement in research?



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Over lunch- what would you like to know to more about



- ▣ Strategy for community participation in AHRC – C2 summit [July 2012]
- ▣ Future work/ collaborations between us
- ▣ Values of engagement for Higher Education Institutes how does way of working relate to the value- what sorts of engagement are
- ▣ Anything specific which community partners want
- ▣ Carry on morning discussions (CT/ evaluation/ engagement)