'People Places' by Kelvin Burke and Jo Offer

'10 down, 10 to go!'
University of Brighton and the future of community partnerships
Creative writing edit

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In 2013 Cupp celebrated ten years of successful and innovative operation and engaged in a number of ways of looking forward to the next ten years.

Among these was a tailored creative writing exercise, the results of which are presented here. The exercise was undertaken collaboratively by the following people (with the perspective they were representing in brackets): Paul Bramwell (community partner), Stuart Laing (university manager), Emily-Ann Nash (student), Juliet Millican (academic), David Wolff (community-university broker) and Jess Moriarty (facilitator).

This exercise was intended to present a vision of the future – specifically of community-university partnership working in 2023 - in a very immediate and concrete way – a future in and around a university which had fully embraced the social and community agenda. What would/could it be like on a typical day for a range of participants engaged with such a university?

The raw material on which this exercise was based was generated both during a day of structured consultation in June 2013, a set of interviews and from an analysis of a number of national and international reports looking into the future scenarios for Western societies and their universities. The full record of these processes and outcomes is set out in the Cupp report – '10 down, 10 to go!' (see www.brighton.ac.uk/cupp or contact cupp@brighton.ac.uk for a copy).

The results of the exercise are deliberately set out here in the form of an imaginative and exploratory collective journal, but one which is intended to help shape our future reality. It may appear in part as a wish list but it is one founded on current realities and achievable future aspirations.
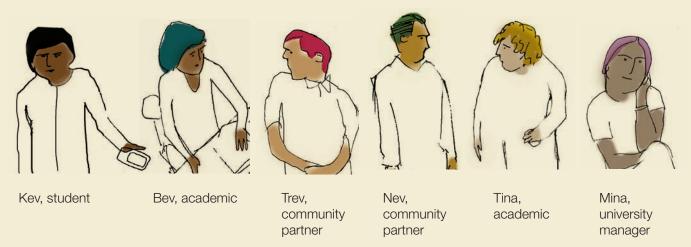
The picture we offer is one of a university enterprise in which there is exceptional permeability with both the local community and a range of international partners, where different activities overlap and where value is developed through mutuality. This includes a world of the flexible and natural use of social media to enable and support a rich experience of personal interactions, of multiple identities and of the use of grounded and fully applied intelligence.

The form of the journal is also intended to invite debate, disagreement and the construction of alternative or extended perspectives on the future of the engaged university and of how community-university partnerships can develop. We hope it will be used to prompt and enable discussion between all those with an interest in sustaining and developing community-university engagement as a core element of the mission of universities in the twenty-first century.

Let us know your views, let us share your aspirations as you can share ours - that is how we can first imagine, and then create, the future we need – and deserve.

A Creative Writing Exercise:
An ideal day in the future of University of Brighton working with local communities

Having completed the research process and developed the findings above we then set about trying to create a practical version of an ideal day in the life of a future University of Brighton working with local communities. This was done as a collaborative writing exercise by the following people, with the perspective they were representing in brackets: Paul Bramwell (community partner), Stuart Laing (university manager), Emily-Ann Nash (student), Juliet Millican (academic), David Wolff (community-university broker) facilitated by Jess Moriarty, a creative writing academic at the University of Brighton. Together we created the characters below and their stories; they are based on the findings of the research and are intended to be a starting point of debate, and to inform reflection on strategy to promote co-working between the University of Brighton and local communities.

| Kev, student | Bev, academic | Trev, community partner | Nev, community partner | Tina, academic | Mina, university manager |

8:00

Kev: I open my eyes and my tiredness hits me, luckily my first study session can be done without getting out of bed. Reaching for my tablet I click onto the 'Community Game' – an online project planning a real time scenario being played out by students on similar courses in universities in India, Australia, Canada, South Africa and Holland. It's apparent that the Indian students had taken the scenario further overnight. Damn these different time zones. They always make changes while I am sleeping. It takes a while to get my head round the social theory they have used to inform their moves so I buzz an email to my mates in Australia. They're still up from the night before and no doubt wide awake, I can rely on them to give me some pointers to help interpret the motives behind the Indian moves.

Bev: I am working in India for the next three weeks so I need to prioritise face to face meetings. The online marking can be done from that end, but introducing students to partners, talking through personal issues, getting agreements firmed up, is always better face to face. Lots to think about but this process gets easier every year, especially with the student mentees helping out.

Trev: I log on over breakfast and continue my literature search for the research the University has asked me to undertake on the key issues for the sector. There is still so little academic material about the voluntary and community sector, so I'm undertaking a review of publications and data sets with a view to making some recommendations about future areas of study to address gaps in knowledge. This is being led by a steering group made up of staff and volunteers from the sector and we hope it will result in more material published online that is openly available.

9:00

Nev: I am due at the Brighton strategic mental health network for a specially convened meeting in Community Base to discuss high instances of serious mental health problems identified in the city amongst young people. Rates of suicide and serious self-harm have doubled over 3 years and homelessness is an increasing problem with erratic and extreme weather making sleeping out difficult. There are people from Local Authority social work, GPs acute psychiatry and the 3rd sector. I am present in 2 roles; I have a 3 day a week community psychiatric nurse gig and am a researcher and teacher at the University of Brighton. I have been given time by the university to identify and write up gaps in the mental health system and bring forward new research from elsewhere that is relevant. Accessing this is sometimes difficult. Since the privatisation of parts of the internet there are a host of different search engines needed, and I can't always keep up with log on subscriptions needed. My dual role though gives me access to a broader range of search facilities.

10:00

Tina: I have carved out an hour to work on an article with Glen from Nursing about our 'I did it my way' project. We have been working with LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender) over 50 year olds for years now and some of the original group are now leading writing sessions and archiving autobiographical experiences for the website. Interesting to see how the experiences of members have changed over the years with increasing rights, escalation of marriages among the LGBT community, and recognition of common law ownership. Some of my students have been using the interview data as a source of inspiration for their own writing whilst the occupational health students have been looking at the stories and thinking about health care provision becoming more inclusive and how the groups impact on individual wellbeing. The interesting thing about working with elders is that they bring attitudes towards sexuality from their own era rather than today's more inclusive culture. We have just had the second edition of the original book accepted for publication with new writings and research into the therapeutic dimensions of writing groups. What I love is that the students and LGBT partners have been able to coproduce chapters and this has never been queried as being not academic enough. The accompanying case studies have been used in teaching and learning in the humanities, health and social sciences.

11:00

Kev: Two hours on and I have done my reading, caught up with my emails and drunk several mugs of tea. I am ready for the outside world. On the way into uni I stopped by at the Student Union café to confirm I would do my stint at the sexual health drop in, in town tonight. Actually it's interesting work and offsets some of the cost of my fees and thus reduces my end of course debt. Lectures finish at 8 so I could get there in time if I ate at the café on the way in.

Trev: Realising I'm late for a meeting with Claire - neighbourhood Community Development Co-ordinator - I run for a bus, flash my network card that is provided by the City as recognition of the community-university partnership work I undertake. I manage to get up to Community Centre by 11am. We spend half an hour finalising our plan for supporting the Christmas social, in which University students are playing a major part. Claire has worked hard to support the development of the group and we are keen to promote the event to new members and develop a small group of people who will organise the next community get together in the neighbourhood. Useful innovations in approach are identified to contribute to my research.

Mina: Meeting with the Head of the Centre for Learning and Teaching to discuss further expansion of community experiential learning into the curriculum – and the related staff development required.

12:00

Bev: I give myself a two hour lunch break, time for a swim at the Uni pool and to clear my head. Glad these days that we have a chance to focus on relevance and quality rather than quantities of outputs. We need the chance to get at depth as well as breadth, to make sure what we do is fit for purpose rather than rushing through activities and coming up with compromises. Matching the needs and demands of different groups is a complex negotiation, unless it's done with care you can end up with the soupy stuff in between which is not much good to anyone. When I am there I have a useful chat with one of my community partners as they also have access to university sports facilities.

Mina: Lunch meeting with potential funders (charities/philanthropic individuals) of Cupp projects. We eat at the Student Union Cafe which uses produce grown on campus by community partners and students. Not a bad veg stew.

1:00

Tina: I go for a walk with Alan from Diversity Sussex as we have found this the best way to work. Being in the university used to make him uncomfortable and we never get anything done in the cafe in town as too many people want to talk to him. We laugh about it now and the walk is the only exercise I'll get today. We are talking about taking the students involved with the Leonardo project to Turkey and presenting the performance piece from last year. We have co-written several papers on this project which I want to mould into a book but Alan wants to discuss how we can ensure that the community partner has a strong enough voice. Alan talks me down and we agree to draft a book proposal that might not tick every academic box but will be interesting, have an impact and above all, will be useful to the students, community partners and me.

Bev: I eat an excellent meal at the Student Union community café, catch up with some colleagues, hatch a few plans and then cycle into town for a 3.00 meeting. The café is good value and attracts community partners as well as staff and students, facilitating networking and bringing income for the Students Union. I particularly enjoyed the vegetables grown on campus by Occupational Therapy students and people with disabilities. It is brilliant to see that nearly half of the people in the canteen are from local communities and not just students and university staff. It is the Community Partner network session on current local funding rounds, their chance to decide on the projects they want to pitch for and me to suggest whether or not they might find an academic partner. As it's approaching Cupp's 20 year anniversary we have also agreed to take on 20 Citizens' questions, an idea we stole from one of our Dutch partners some years ago. The Community Partner network will provide us with some publicity, as will the local papers, and people will be invited to send in questions to our research desk. We will get our students to focus on the 20 best questions they come up with and circulate answers through the press, anything from the latest research on air quality to the impact of gender segregated education or the contributions to happiness.

2:00

Trev: In the community engagement seminar that I am teaching the undergraduate students really engage with the concepts of structure and culture and the extent to which they help or hinder the work of their partner organisation. A couple of students are working with small community organisations, and we have a useful discussion about the greater level of chaos versus the ability to have a greater level of input because there is less structure and hierarchy. Several are involved in eco building projects, sourcing local recycled or waste materials to begin self-build sustainable housing. Building on previous work, the university is planning to construct a new student housing complex using a similar approach.

Nev: I am meeting with my multidisciplinary research team to discuss the next steps in our research on "improving mental health – a multi discipline and practice perspective" As a practitioner at heart I often find myself at odds with the approach offered by the biomedical scientist on the group, but happily the community voice offered by our co-researcher from the wellbeing project generally helps us reconcile these differences by reminding us of the whole person and complex environment that is the context here. We also avail ourselves of the ever improving open data sets made available by government, public and community bodies to check the regional, national and international picture. 'Big data' hasn't always delivered the gains that some had hoped for but there is some excellent concerted work by some of the new enterprises that extract public data and make it accessbile.

Kev: Those of us in the flexible learning space stop what we are doing and gather round the large screen to watch the afternoon lecture together. While I know others will be doing this from home, for me, the chance to watch with others, talk it through afterwards and share notes gives me a far better shot at understanding the conceptual stuff. I guess that's just the way I learn.

Mina: Skype discussions with Further Education College partners about how their HE students (and staff) can be mobilised to deliver social engagement – also to discuss how the Further Education mission and activity fits in.

4:00

Nev: Meeting with the co-supervisors of my doctorate (an academic and a practitioner). As normal we discuss the frustrations of lone study and how to deal with this. I am hopeful that the level of practice interest in my studies can help, as will online action learning sets. We are getting very good at those and the video images at least make us feel we are constantly in real contact.

Kev: I finish just in time for me to get to a course board meeting. I am one of the student reps there but there were lecturers, community partners and employers. I gather feedback from the rest of the cohort and discuss how the course is going mid-way through and how we might adapt the second half. The community partners press for a change in timetable for the next running of the course as the current availability of students doesn't best coincide with when the project needs them.

5:00

Tina: Head for home to have a quick Skype chat with the EU funded project partners and discuss the performance symposium in March. Bringing community partners, students and academics from all over the world to meet face to face at last. We have been working via second life which has gone well but one thing we all decided was that we needed to see the whites of each other's eyes too. Quick bite to eat and then off to contribute to an evening training event on co-writing for academic and community partners run by one of our many hybrid community-university enterprises.

Mina: Comment on proposals for new buildings regarding spaces for university/community work and community access. Buildings are using eco materials but this has an impact on budget and there is often disagreement but the university has established sustainability and green estate management so we won't be swayed by the developers and they quickly come round.

6:00

Kev: Evening lecture is in town, a bike ride away. It's delivered by an academic and a community partner looking at the latest research in reoffending rates and how they relate to the work of the probation service and the changing literacy rates of 15 years ago. Amazing to see how people's literacy, as school children, has an impact on this stuff, and how probation might be able to use that research in their own planning. There is an advantage to these open lectures with people other than students present. The questions afterwards are always so much more interesting and it forces the lecturers to make sure their language is clear and accessible. No fluffing! We can also quickly see how the research might be interpreted differently by different services and the competing pressures on the different sectors.

Nev: Last meeting of the day is the Advocacy Matters management committee. It's taken years to feel like we've made progress towards the proper integration of people with learning difficulties into community life. It's only through advocacy and partnerships like the university and community project on Inclusive arts, that we have slowly changed people's attitudes.

7:00

Kev: I eat in the Students Union café and use the time to Skype my mentor. She graduated from the same course three years ago and has been working in the field for the past couple of years. She has started sending me details about job opportunities though even as a third year all that still seems a bit far away. We try to speak online once a month and by our next chat I won't have long to go here so I had better start sounding interested!

Bev: I catch up with emails in the early evening before heading home. I have a trustee meeting tonight after dinner and want to get all my uni work out of the way first so I can focus on my other role. But I find it's always better to approach emails at the end of the day rather than lock up my slightly brighter morning head or be constantly interrupted by them popping up on my screen. I put the requests for reviews and second marking to one side, I have a long plane journey later this week, the perfect time for that kind of work, but send a few supportive emails off to new colleagues who are still trying to get their heads around this stuff. I let them know I will be in the Students Union café for long lunches over the next couple of days before I go away. They can always come and find me there.

7:00

Kev: At the drop-in and my mentee is there before me. As a third year I have to support a first year in how to do some of this stuff. It is a reasonably simple session, a pregnancy scare with a 14 year old that was thankfully negative, and the usual first years looking for condoms. Thought by now they might have condoms available in schools! I go home tired but not too tired for some face time with the Canadians who had been in the field today. They have posted videos of their work online and we had a laugh about this together. Then a quick look at the community strategy game before I go to bed. The Indian group are up and working and already ahead of me again.

Artwork and illustration
Jo Offer and Kelvin Burke were asked by Cupp to develop images and layout ideas for this report. Kelvin is a member of the Arts Council funded learning disabled Rocket Artists group. Jo is a graphic artist, Inclusive Arts practitioner and educator at the University of Brighton. They collaborate on art and design projects, arts based action research projects and co-deliver Inclusive Arts workshops.
See their blog **http://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/sidebysidebook/**
Visit the Rocket Artists **www.rocketartists.co.uk/**
Find MA Inclusive Arts Practice here **http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/study/fine-art/maiap**

This study is part of 2 other larger pieces of work, the Imagine Project and the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement's Engaged Futures