



*Working in
Community University Partnerships*

Academic Experiences



University of Brighton

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Programme**

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Contents

	Foreword	5
	Introduction	7
Alice Fox	<i>Ducking and diving:</i> Creating new curriculums for practice-based learning alongside community groups.	10
Kath Browne	<i>The myths of community-university partnerships:</i> An Academic Partner perspective.	22
Angie Hart	<i>Early promise?</i>	32
Dee MacDonald	<i>Learning By Doing.</i>	42
Carl Walker	<i>From laboratory rats to community psychology:</i> Two and a bit years of community research in Brighton.	50
	About the contributors	60



Cover image by Louella Forrest.

Louella is one of the Rocket Artists group, and had previously participated on the A2A community-university partnership project. See page 13 for more information.

Foreword

This is a small collection of writing that provides five academic experiences of working in community-university partnerships. The contributors have all worked as part of the Community University Partnership Programme (Cupp) at the University of Brighton in the last five years.

This collection of stories is intended as an illustration of some of the experiences, thoughts, ideas and range of practices people are engaged in. Contributors were asked to tell a story in whichever way they wanted, based loosely on a set of questions posed by Cupp, and with a view to the final output being useful for those academics in the early stages of their community engagement work.

We would like to thank all the contributors for their time, efforts and insight.

Dave Wolff & Ceri Davies

June 2010



Further Information

For general information about Cupp and partnership projects, or to sign up for email updates go to www.cupp.org.uk.

To join Cupp's social networking site go to <http://cuppcop.ning.com/>

Leela Bakshi

Activist researcher with the Count Me In Too community-university partnership project.

*Hey there, Rapunzel in the ivory tower,
let down your golden hair...*

I gazed at and walked by the ivory brick that is the Cockcroft building for years before a community university partnership took me into it, and the university seemed like a pretty inaccessible citadel of wealth and status.

So it's exciting to know that the Community University Partnership Programme (Cupp) was founded with the aim of tackling disadvantage and promoting sustainable development through partnership working. It aims *'to support the University's contribution to social inclusion, economic growth and quality of life, and to learn from its partnerships in order to improve the quality of education we provide to our learners...'* Cupp also aims to act as a *'gateway'* between the University of Brighton and local community and voluntary organisations'.

A *'gateway'* suggests that there might be two constituencies separated by a divide, requiring some sort of link and passageway and support to increase opportunities for collaboration and exchange- maybe a helpdesk, and a pot of money and a funding scheme?

These academics' accounts describe how having brought people together, there is much more to be done in addition to the traditional practices of carrying out research. There are relationships to be managed, and cultural differences to be negotiated. There are unfamiliar situations and problems to solve, and uncomfortable emotions to endure – as well as good times and joy. And then there are the unequal power relations...

More traditional routes to exchange might consist of academics knocking at the door of potential community partners and inviting us to work with them on their research interest. When that happens, we usually ask each other, *well why would we want to research THAT?* And send back a polite email saying no. It's gratifying to see the university set up Cupp that engenders mutually interesting and useful research projects.

From a community perspective, finding a researcher with an academic background to even assist or advise us on pursuing a research interest has been a matter of luck, or searching for a needle in a haystack. So the solution has been to pay someone (often a consultant rather than an academic) and make a rudimentary

exploration of the issue. As a community partner taking part in university endeavours, it feels like community university partnerships offer an alternative, a route into the university, which can channel community partners as individuals or teams into the university, but also imports the knowledge and ideas that we hold. With Cupp, these can enter the university by a non traditional route—something like a rope (or Rapunzel’s plaits) to climb up and sneak in, instead of going by the main entrance with papers and proving you eligibility to the guards.

At the same time as community partners enter into the university, university researchers venture out of the castle walls into the land beyond...

Hey there, prince on a quest in a magical land...

From university partners who interact with the ‘community’ world outside, we hear accounts of journeys and encounters in foreign lands. They meet sprites and ogres with whom they have difficult encounters, and helpful hard working farmers and fair maidens who live in simple huts and grow beans. They discover amongst them the magic beans, that get taken back to the castle, maybe with the farmers who grew them, and studied and celebrated in the royal court, and presented to other royal houses.

The journeying academics talk of how to negotiate the different languages and customs outside the castle walls, and being enriched by these encounters. They talk of sacrifice and personal and professional gain. They talk about how to manage their status and privilege, and what benevolence and service might mean in this context.

What privilege? What royal status?

It took a while for me to discover the researcher in our community university partnership does not want to wear a crown or any other symbols of status that signal we should bow to royalty. I made the assumption that an academic would expect the communities that they engage with to accommodate their research project plans and accept their superior knowledge (not entirely erroneously because this has happened when I’ve met academics in other contexts).

I understand that, while acknowledging positions of privilege, academics are unlikely to feel like princes. I can see it doesn’t feel like royal status when universities, pretty much like everyone else in public services and the community and voluntary sector, are under resourced and expected to do more and more each year, working masses of additional unpaid hours without acknowledgement and sometimes without recognition or respect for their work.

However it remains true that from the perspective of community partners, you generally have proper offices with your own desk, better stationary and support services, and quite long periods when the students just go away – our customers don’t collectively draw away for weeks at a time letting us get on with things. From time to time you take off to distant places like Montreal or Montecarlo while we get to go to training days in Jubilee Library (and that would be a jackpot venue).

Ultimately, you get paid for thinking and talking about and making up special ways to do what we do and you do these things very well – but

these things are pretty much luxuries for us. Even when you offer to share your facilities with us, it can be hard for people who are good at growing beans to find a reason why talking about bean growing might be a good idea, surely the fact that we know how to do it is enough?

I think it's not unusual for us bean growers to be picky about dealing with theoretical knowledge and research findings: we usually like to hear about bean-growing elsewhere, and love to see our thoughts on bean-growing described and bean-growing strategies and technologies and yields recorded (*provided that you recount it 'right'!*). But we don't really like to hear that our practice is not so sound or effective, and it's always possible for us to turn our backs on researchers when our folklore is not supported by research findings, we feel it's relegated to superstition.

University partners bring passion, intensity, excitement and enthusiasm about bean growing. That in itself could be enough to make a community university partnership valued and valuable to the people it engages with. *You also bring clarity of purpose about looking at aspects of bean growing, and you are very very clever at analysing, understanding and describing what you see. You bring us vocabulary and systems for looking at things that enhances our understandings and thus the quality and outcomes of our actions within partnerships, and also outside of them.*

Academics also break away from neutral objectivity to acknowledge that you bring your personal selves, informed by your own life experience and living in the community –

I think it really helps that Brighton is not one of those universities where the academics live in dormitory suburbs, apart from the rest of us, so we see you and you see us and it all seems a bit less foreign.

You also bring fun and clever humour, your personality and your quirky ways. The relationships that develop are as much about generous sharing of self as they are about academic commodities... we like you for who you are. When it goes well and working together has transformative effects on all of our lives, we really love working with you.

For me the archetype of the community partner is that we're good and reliable at growing beans, the everyday kind that sustain us and the magic kind as well. We know an awful lot about growing beans but we're maybe not so skilled at sharing what we know or even identifying that we have this knowledge. The guys who seek to enter into community university partnerships are pretty passionate about finding out about what it is we do and how to do it better. And it's a happy day when we find a university partner with whom we can turn the passion into informative research.

Cupp has identified that shared passions bring partnerships together. As well as the commonalities, there are differences that maintain the distinctions that characterise different partners in the '*partnership*'. There are different cultural and interactional repertoires that reflect our allegiances to structures that are distinctly university and community, where we use different words for the same things, have different ways of going about tasks, and different values.

Ducking and diving: Creating new curriculums for practice-based learning alongside community groups.

Alice Fox



My career started as a singer in the 80s, progressing to that of artist/performer/filmmaker today. Working on the margins of popular culture led me to explore alternative experiences and approaches to self-expression. At the heart of this exploration was a questioning of the notion of society and how it is structured, who has power and who has a voice? For 12 years I worked in community arts organisations, devising and delivering exhibitions and performances, underpinning these through staff and volunteer training programmes. Whilst working in an arts organisation alongside people with learning disabilities I came across so many people whose artwork was of such a high standard I couldn't understand why they were excluded from high level, mainstream arts education. When I studied painting at University of Brighton (UoB), I learned new and exciting ways of thinking and seeing, I made new friends with the same interests as me, it changed my view of the world and myself. So, I started to think '*Why are so many artistically talented people in our community excluded?*' I didn't like the social injustice of this so decided to pursue research into some of the very real barriers to inclusion.

Motivated by this I secured some funding from the Arts Council whilst I was still working in the voluntary and community sector (VCS) to research current art provision for people with learning disabilities. The research I undertook exposed that there were many people with learning disabilities keen to study art but had little or no access to professional art training opportunities locally. With this evidence, I came to the university to lobby for opportunities for people with learning disabilities to access

professional arts training, and they were very receptive from the start. At first I was paid by the voluntary sector to work with the university, then I had a mid-point where I was paid by both to set up partnership working, and now I'm in a position where I am being paid solely by the university as course leader for my newly developed MA Inclusive Arts Practice. This all evolved over a period of about 5 years.

I am in an interesting position as I have moved from being the '*community partner*' to university lecturer in a partnership. This helpfully gives me insight into the organisational cultures and language of both. I frequently work with students with learning disabilities and the Arts Council funded learning disabled '*Rocket Artists*' group, but we haven't got a community partner that has an organisational structure for those people. Our community participants come from '*the community*' but not from one particular group. Due to funding and resource demands we have tended to work in partnership with several different organisations, these have been residential, educational and day services for people with learning disabilities and other marginalised groups, for example: Tate Modern; Phoenix Arts and Sussex Downs FE College. Our community engagement, rather than centring on one organisation brings people together from across the wider community into one place to share ideas, ambitions and collaborate through arts activities.

Working within the Arts and Architecture Faculty, supported by the Community University Partnership Programme (Cupp), I devise and deliver a wide range of community-university inclusive arts projects for students to learn in

THREE BEST PIECES OF WORK / 1

MA Inclusive Arts Practice

Two years ago I set out writing a new MA course. Looking back I was very naïve about the extent of the task ahead but now I'm really pleased because we've got a great new course. When I first started doing arts projects of this type, I was working with a small number of people, it was successful but I wanted to make a bigger change, to reach more people. A year into writing the MA I nearly gave up and on the validation day, I was very nervous. You know, worse than a driving test. So if I'd have known what it involved I might not have started it! I've consolidated all the learning I've done, probably throughout my whole life in one capacity or another, and built that in a structured way into the curriculum at postgraduate level. Running it has just been fantastic so far. It's just the sort of course I would have loved to take about ten years ago.

I know I'm in the right institution because the University of Brighton



really values community engagement. Through Cupp we have the expertise, structure and resources needed to initiate community partnerships. I think somehow, the combination of me, Dave Wolff, director of Cupp, and Karen Norquay, my head of school, being really enthused by this, and the Strategic Planning Department building socially purposeful activities and community engagement into the Universities Corporate Plan, has meant that the

situation has been right at this time at this university for the new MA to be created and prosper. At the moment, what is understood by the term '*Inclusive Arts Practice*' is fairly loose and undefined in many ways. I think it's fabulous because we are working it out, there are so many unanswered questions, which is great; that's the business of a university. It's exciting – it's a new field of enquiry that we have the privilege of navigating.

'live' scenarios with various marginalised groups such as learning disabled artists or mums from the local council estate. My Access to Art (A2A) project has been running since 2002 and is a good example of an inclusive community-university project where university students support the learning disabled 'Rocket Artists' group to make and exhibit artworks.

The A2A project won an 'outstanding contribution' Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce) Award and has been emulated by other organisations. Through the research, development and successes of the A2A project we have recently written a new MA course in Inclusive Arts Practice.

All the participants on these projects are following structured learning outcomes at different levels, ranging from entry to postgraduate levels. Although tailored to individual groups these are run in tandem through shared arts activities. Generally, the community groups are developing various art-making skills and university students are developing arts facilitation/collaboration skills alongside art skills. I structure my projects carefully to support the arts activities and the demands placed on staff when managing both students and vulnerable adults. By facilitating marginalised groups and university students to make art together, I create a forum where ideas can be exchanged and unexpected moments can flourish. The meeting point of very different minds and life experiences brings a new dimension to the learning process.

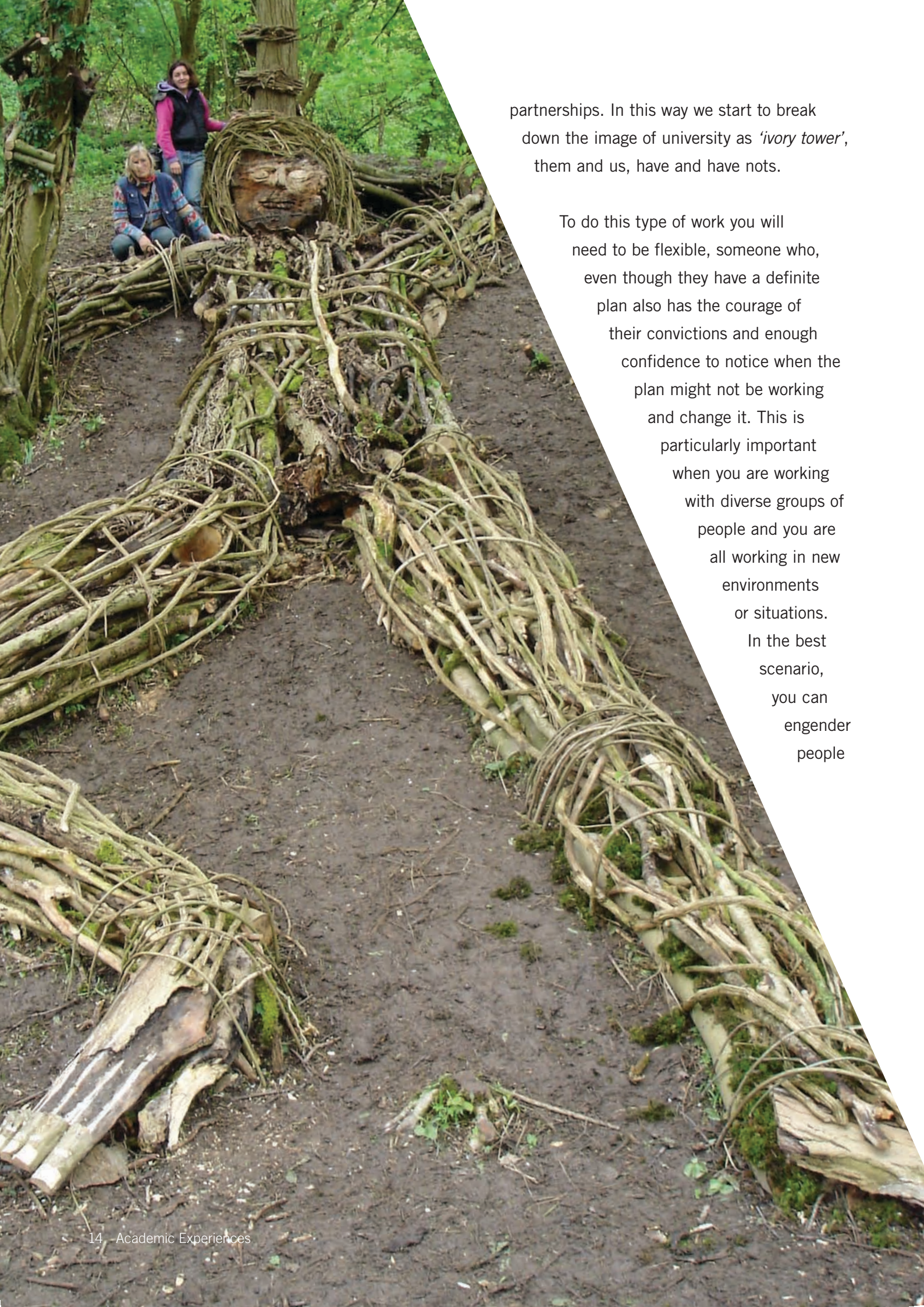
Moving into an embedded culture of teaching, learning and research at the university has

enabled me to consolidate, share and enhance my expertise. This in turn has furthered my engagement in the field of contemporary arts practice, helping me to question and challenge perceptions of artistic expression in society today on a broader international stage.

Making it work

Focussing on the mutual benefits to both the community and university ensures success and sustainability in my projects. That has become a mantra of mine, I teach the students how fundamental it is. If you have a mutual benefit model, where everyone's motivations are clear, equal and transparent then activities should really fit together properly. You need to make sure in initial meetings that you spend time understanding what everyone wants from the partnership and then don't carry on if it's not going to match. Working in this way takes a lot of work so be clear about the benefits to you and your team, there should ideally be an aspect of professional development for the staff.

Bringing people together who would not necessarily meet even though they live in the same city should and can be beneficial to all involved. As well as providing a rich learning environment, stereotypes and prejudice can be challenged and broken. When I look at Brighton I see a small city where people are ghettoised. For me, this is a significant problem. Projects like the ones I run and the principles underpinning the success of engaging with the community are aimed at people coming together and working together, about partnerships and about collaborations. That is the language we use – it's not 'doing things to', it's collaborative



partnerships. In this way we start to break down the image of university as *'ivory tower'*, them and us, have and have nots.

To do this type of work you will need to be flexible, someone who, even though they have a definite plan also has the courage of their convictions and enough confidence to notice when the plan might not be working and change it. This is particularly important when you are working with diverse groups of people and you are all working in new environments or situations. In the best scenario, you can engender people

to make some really exciting, inspiring and enlivening creative decisions whilst boosting their self-esteem. However the other side is that people may need support when issues come up that they may not want to deal with at that point. You have to be very aware of this and adapt accordingly to keep everyone emotionally and physically safe. You also have to have the confidence to take risks, this type of work can be unpredictable and risky because a lot of it is new territory. So you have to have the experience and structures to take risks but within that you need to be someone who can manage risk. Sometimes you need to take a considered risk when you are in the middle of working with people, and evaluate it later. Remember the risk assessment form is your friend. I'm not saying to take silly risks, but you need to push at the boundaries of this work, otherwise you won't know where those boundaries are and that's where some of the answers to questions lie. Have a brave heart, strong will and learn from mistakes without being too hard on yourself.

Be resilient, develop the capability to see problems as challenges or even opportunities. My favourite example of this was the famous private view of the Reclining Dragon sculpture in the woodland at Stanmer Park made by 30 collaborators from the Moulscombe Estate Women's Art Group, university art students and staff. The forecast said '*weather warning, heavy rain*'. We didn't cancel, and with two hours to go we wove a shelter in the trees from branches and leaves for the bar and bought 10 large umbrellas. The result was magical. It did indeed pour with torrential rain forcing everyone to cluster under the umbrellas in small groups laughing and chatting excitedly in a

way I have never seen at a private view. It was an equalising, intimate moment where social barriers were broken down by the shared desire to celebrate achievements and keep dry in a wet wood on a dark night. If it were possible to order rain I might well consider it for another time.

I believe diversity and difference contribute to a truly rich learning environment: through my teaching and research I have devised ways in which HE students can develop their arts practice alongside diverse and marginalised groups in an appropriate and mutually beneficial environment. I have found through doing this sort of work that you have to understand and manage different expectations, so when I am doing a project, the very first meeting is usually myself and another individual from an organisation about what we might do together and at that initial point start to explore '*What is it you want, what is it we want, what are our mutual aims? Where do these aims fit within the community organisation and university structures?*'. That's something I learnt really early on, don't always try and make new shapes (unless you have enough time and money) – try and find existing frameworks to fit.

Why Engage?

I think there is something about community work that is very exciting. There is something about the community work I engage in that makes the academic work make sense – and vice versa. The community work is, for me, like '*fuel*' for the academic work. If I didn't do the grassroots engagement with the community groups my academic work would sort of wither, I would struggle to be motivated if I had no meaning or

THREE BEST PIECES OF WORK / 2

Smudged Performance
at the Tate Modern
14th May 2008

This was a coming together of a lot of the things that I have personally been working on for many years. It was a combination of performance dance and visual art, which are my favourite pursuits. It was a quite complicated but successful collaboration between the University of Brighton (staff and painting students), the Rocket Artists, the Corali Dancers and Tate Modern. Five partners all collaborating together. What we did was a performance in response to the permanent *'Ideas and Objects'* collection at the Tate. So as well as it being

a collaboration within the two art forms, it was based on the performers with and without learning disabilities' reactions to the artworks and each others creative responses. We then structured these using dance and drawing. It was about ourselves and the work that we had seen and how we had smudged the boundaries between us as well as literally smudging our drawings and costumes using thick chalk pastels and charcoal. It was a successful performance, but what really struck me was that a lot of people in the audience were moved to tears. We hadn't expected or predicted that and we didn't think we had made anything sad. When

I talked to those people they said they

weren't sure why they were crying but something had touched them profoundly. One audience member thought it may have been watching the performers working together professionally, equally and within that process it had challenged their personal prejudices of the artists with learning disabilities who had for them become, somehow real people, with emotions and desires that they could empathise with. They became people who had things to say and had thoughts, ideas and feelings. I was very proud of that and proud to be at the Tate Modern, that they had valued the work enough to show it to the public in their gallery. That was good, things were making sense.



application to my research. It's also really nice going out and about in the City and being linked into your local community. I had made many community connections when I was in the VCS, but it's nice to maintain them and it's my way of keeping linked in with what's happening locally. I can go into most daycentres and studios and be fondly greeted by people. It's not only really nice for me; I think it's pretty crucial. I think I would have a really different experience of this city if I didn't do my community work. I would be living and operating in a monoculture, a middle class ghetto. So I love it. There is also something fantastically unpredictable about the creativity in my projects and I find that so inspiring. No one that I work with who has learning disabilities comes out with clichés and that fact means that every day is a different and interesting.

The practice-based community work is where new and exciting things often happen and the associated academic exploration is a fantastic opportunity to unpick and discuss it, further understand and formulate new questions to make improvements or change. It's great working at the university because this analytical process is not only supported but also expected, something that I found very difficult to make enough time for in the voluntary sector.

Not all plain sailing

One of the biggest obstacles in developing and sustaining this work is that it takes a lot of time and many of the activities such as project management and extensive fundraising fall outside the traditional paid academic roles. So more time often means more money. This alongside the fact that student numbers

sometimes need to be relatively small (compared to other student learning scenarios) can lead to significant pressure on staff teams to explain and justify their community engagement activities. More specifically there are three things that come up every time when I'm doing this sort of work. The primary one is language. When you are working in partnership, the very same word can mean entirely different things, radically different things, not even in the same ballpark things – and I learnt this the hard way, obviously! I think I went to three or four meetings at the start of the Access to Art project where the partnership was talking about a foundation course and people with learning disabilities. It didn't occur to us to check out our respective understandings, until the conversation got so bizarre that I actually admitted I didn't really know what we were talking about. I think that was in the fourth meeting – and if you have a meeting once per month that is four months gone when you think you are having a conversation about what you want to do and it turns out you are not. So language, language, language – I don't think you can ever be too clear. Never think you are making a fool of yourself, a good tip is to say '*my definition of this is... What is yours?*'

Another recurring consideration when you are working with disadvantaged people and students is that there can be an amount of personal fragility amongst participants that sometimes exhibits as defensiveness or other negative behaviour. You have to be mindful of the different levels of social standing in society that may be reflected in the group and what their opinions and feelings might be on this. I think you have to be really mindful of people's

sense of self. You also have to be clear on your role in the project and how others perceive you and likewise how people in the community feel about their social standing, the student's position and how they might perceive them. It's complicated: my experience is that left unchallenged, you only have to walk into a room and a fortress of walls goes up based on assumptions, stereotypes and prejudice. These obstacles can get in the way of creative thinking because people have put limits next to who they are, who you are and who you aren't. If you can get to a point where you are breaking those down, you can start being a room full of people who are solving a problem, working together and creating something.

Thirdly and not unsurprisingly is money. One of the often unspoken expectations of this work is that people do more than they are paid for because they enjoy it, people are relying on them etc – I have certainly worked many unpaid hours, and although it feels necessary at the time, it isn't sustainable. If you build a project, a pilot project, that doesn't fully acknowledge the time that people put in, then you are creating an unsustainable model, so you are in danger of thinking you have a fantastic project that has had good results, but it's not realistic. In some senses, it then becomes a waste of money. When I was younger it was my whole life, I didn't have many responsibilities and I was happy to put in unpaid hours. I find this type of enthusiasm admirable but if you really want to make a sustainable change then projects need to be properly staffed and funded.

However prepared you are there will always be conflicts to negotiate. When you say, as we did,

that in a week you can make a large outdoor, permanent sculpture with 15 students and 15 mums from the local council estate, with artists and National Trust wardens, there will be problems every time to some degree or another. But it's important to be ambitious and have high expectations of what people can achieve. I think the thing is that you just have to set it up so that there is a structure to support people when problems arise, that's really key. So we run briefing sessions, de-briefing sessions and in-between sessions. We have points where all the individuals can choose either to bring up a problem to the whole group or address it personally with a member of staff.

Skills

I have learned to bring together diverse groups of people over time through the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise, in this case developing high quality learning opportunities through community/university partnerships. The passion and self-direction of people sharing their experiences and knowledge in free-flowing creative ways fosters new approaches to problems and has been central to developing groundbreaking solutions for inclusive arts practices.

The university has a fantastic resource of personal development activities for staff; encourage all involved to make use of them. I've enlisted training on how to write articles, carry out research, present at conferences and have learned so much about teaching and learning during writing and delivering the MA Inclusive Arts Practice. These are skills I've enjoyed developing and are really important for deeper understanding and personal growth.

THREE BEST PIECES OF WORK / 3

Mouselecoomb Mums
and university students:
Art on the Downs.

I'm not sure where to start to describe this series of projects. What we created were three huge sculptures and I just love it that on one occasion, 30 women moved 60 tonnes of chalk to make a huge chalk spiral on the South Downs – just down from Devils Dyke. The sheer power of re-arranging that much rock and earth delighted me, made us all feel we were strong and invincible (for a while at least). We also made a 100 metre reclining giant in the woods and a 150 metre sleeping dragon in Stamner Park. It was an experience of chainsaws, chisels and large packed lunches. We all

pulled together and made a significant change, each time, to the landscape that we were in. One of the reasons I thought these projects were so good was that we were working with mums who had a 'can't do' self image, feeling they were bad mums, bad people, some addicted to drugs or alcohol or in abusive relationships. In some cases, they were under review for their children to be taken into care, or they had already lost them. This entrenched and constellated disadvantage dominated the group identity but when they finished creating the sculptures – really literally making their mark on the land with a group of people (university staff and students) we all left with a sense of pride and achievement. Seeing the difference it made to all the participants and their view of

each other and themselves was motivating. As was understanding that this feel good factor would ripple out into people's families. We don't know how long this positive 'can do' feeling would last, my guess in some cases not very long so the idea of doing the project 3 times was to build on this, it became something the participants looked forward to each year. At the private views, the women were proud, the women were strong. I'm sounding corny but it was just so positive and that's what we'd wanted as much as impressive sculptures. There had been challenges, there always are along the way – but I think the resultant artworks are now very special to those who made them and importantly the experience of making those together is now what we all have in common.



I think in order to do this type of community engagement it helps to be incredibly determined, it helps to be someone who perseveres – with a capital P. You need a sense of humour – seriously. And you have to be creative so that when you come up against problems you can find solutions. I always feel like a bit of a *'ducker and diver'* or *'wheeler dealer'*. I believe the formal term is social entrepreneur. My golden rules are never compromise your shared philosophy, always operate ethically, and inject glamour where at all possible.

You also need adaptable communication skills. It's easier if you are someone who happily talks to most people. Some days I go from working with wordy academics to non-verbal artists with learning disabilities and all the communication styles and varieties in-between and often in the same room. It can fry ones brain a bit! I talk to the learning disabled Rocket Artists about the same subjects and with the same respect as I talk to my university colleagues because we are all just people working to achieve something together. So you don't change the content, you just change the language.

Philosophy

My arts projects provide rich practice-based learning environments: such community-university engagement has a strong vocational and professional basis that is underpinned by academic study. My core philosophy of community-university engagement is of mutual benefit, knowledge exchange rather than knowledge transfer, and this does not sit well with the notion of *'service'*. I think a big

mistake when you are working with vulnerable people is to come across as worthy, or in your mind be a 'rescuer'. Committed to employing the arts for positive social change and instilling a spirit of socially purposeful activity within students, colleagues and the wider higher education community, I believe that it is possible and desirable to deliver mutually beneficial, inclusive community-university engagement within HE arts education.

When I'm setting up a project, I enlist the people I want to work with first then we develop the project. If I meet someone who shares the same philosophy as me, who I know I can work with, who I know is very good at what they do – I will say 'what can we do together?' I am clear that projects should be needs led and I know from experience that if you employ good people you can deliver successful projects. This work is complicated enough and it would be detrimental to the participant and staff experience if there were problems within the team. Problematic relationships in teams can be energy draining and may sabotage a project, especially in the fragile early stages. A fundamental principle is when you are working with marginalised or vulnerable people, they come first, and they have a positive experience. You endanger their experiences and their subsequent sense of self if your project team collapses so you must work to ensure that won't happen.

I had an experience where a team wasn't working well together for a while. I learnt I should have done something about it sooner. Not doing so put me in a compromised position between the community group and

the university and so the partnership and the project eventually had to end. The problem was a philosophical issue it wasn't a practical issue, it was a difference in working processes and approaches to conflict. The detail of how to work with participants is always very important and sometimes emotive issues can be personally challenging to overcome. Don't forget team building activities and supervision – look after yourselves.

What I enjoy about being in the university is that it is a learning environment, very simply everyone can and is expected to learn. The language used in community-university partnership is much more around '*finding ways of doing things*', looking at what works and what doesn't work, it's such a healthy and productive way of thinking for this type of project development and research.

Learning and Teaching

Making the study and debate of Inclusive Arts Practice sustainable is key and developing the new MA has been an effective platform for this. I think if as a university we want community-university engagement to become part of our identity, we need to create more new accredited, learning opportunities. The MA is a substantial supported research environment for students giving the staff the opportunity to embed findings from the practical projects directly into the curriculum. Building the learning into the academic structure in this way means that the project reach has moved beyond my ideas and me and entered an arena of national debate, which is what motivates me.

Conclusion

I believe that inclusion is not about marginalised communities fitting into current educational provision but about educational institutions taking responsibility and changing the way that education is delivered. I have enjoyed teaching a wide range of diverse students to make beautiful, poignant and impressive works of art. I have delivered high profile public platforms for their artwork as, for example, the Tate Modern exhibition and performance. I have contributed to pedagogical theory and implemented this to improve student learning experiences. My passion for developing new learning environments and expertise has helped me to build positive community-university partnerships, enthusing artists, educationalists and community/health professionals to work together, exchanging knowledge and practices. My work clearly demonstrates that mutually beneficial community-university projects are possible and have clear economic, social and commercial value. All this has been achieved with substantial support from the Cupp team brilliantly lead by Dave Wolff.

I've learnt many lessons over the last five years and am happy to share these with anyone starting out because it can get tough at times. In an increasingly homogenised global society I have enjoyed the challenge of equipping my students with the knowledge, skills and enthusiasm for appreciating human difference and a desire to use the arts for positive social change.

The myths of Community University Partnerships:
An Academic Partner Perspective

Kath Browne



In writing the academics perspective on a community university partnership project there is a danger in romanticising the project, the partnership and the relationship. This false linear narrative oft makes particular assumptions and celebrations that can render community partners served by a benevolent university partner who is able to solve (or help them solve) particular problems, leading to a Hollywood conclusion. These narratives imply that academics hold elite competence in research practice, and that they grant support and guidance to community partners who aspire to engage with this exclusive process, which is otherwise impenetrable and inaccessible to non-academic community partners who lack capacity, unlike large statutory bodies, to establish '*research units*' (notwithstanding that such research units may be perceived as second rate compared with university based research). These narrow assumptions make for a false reading of any partnership and it can render the community partners as passive actors who are served and their '*voices heard*' but without any real participation, the latter requiring conflict, humblings and compromises. Partnership in the context of this paper then is not a one-off collaboration but a long term engagement and investment in this relationship between University and Community partners. Such relationships are necessarily messy, unstable and unsure processes, where they are fixed and stable they may be being guided by one party or another and can no longer be described as a '*partnership*'.

This paper is written from the perspective of a University academic who works on the Count Me In Too Project in a partnership that can be

described as a '*success*' (including internal and external evaluations, project outputs, policy effects, community engagement and buy-in etc – see www.countmeintoo.co.uk for project details and outputs). It is a success because, and in spite of, increasingly bureaucratic university structures such as Cupp, helpful heads of school and other university support mechanisms. But it is also a success because it challenges binaries between university/community that requires a '*dirty hands*' approach to working with communities. It has in many measurable ways progressed positive social change for Lesbian Gay, Bisexual and Trans people, as was its aim. Consequently, as I am confident that other projects will paint a rosy picture of community-university partnership working, this paper will instead focus on what academics (and perhaps others) need to be aware of when embarking on a community university partnership project (recognising that such a paper could be usefully complemented by community partners asserting their views on what academics need to be aware of!). It will do this by a series of myths, which address the questions we were posed when asked to write this piece.

These myths will be assessed quite critically, yet from the outset it should be noted that, whilst difficult, I have enjoyed, learned from and changed due to, working with Spectrum (the community partners on the Count Me In Too project), and that this reading comes not only from local community-university partnerships but also broader discussions of Participatory Action Research. I would argue that whilst it is necessary at times to promote the use of this form of research methodologies amongst what can be a hostile and '*objective*' academy,

this approach is not justified when speaking to those who are already engaging or thinking of engaging with this form of research. In this context it is necessary to explore the processes, relationships and research with a much more honest approach that exposes conflicts, flaws and failings. A focus on *'shared passion'* and common or complementary agendas can obscure disparate or conflicting viewpoints and values. This can subvert useful discussion and negotiation of these issues which, while potentially uncomfortable and disruptive in the short term, can ultimately build stronger and more productive working partnerships. I do this tentatively and with less examples that would ordinarily be used in order to protect the research and partnerships that are key for the continuation of this important research.

MYTH: You are doing the community a favour/'giving back'.

I started this project because I naïvely wanted to *'give back'* to the community, to create relevant research that would have an effect. This was not only a patronising story from which to begin (assuming my all-knowing and very generous self), it was disingenuous. Whilst I was very much involved in the LGBT community personally, I felt like a minority in my department, and I also wanted to pursue this research because it is my (at times selfish) passion.

Good university partnership projects should be equal processes whereby both partners benefit from the involvement. That means that as much as you are *'helping'* the (often passive) community groups, they are advancing your

career and helping you attain high quality data that would otherwise be impossible. However, this form of research, for me and others can be hugely personally rewarding in ensuring that our research is *'doing something'*, that is, such research can have immediate practical applications to the work of community partners, and is conceived with reference to strategic agendas as well as to progressing (theoretical? academic?) understandings. The danger is of course that this becomes a *'me helping them'* narrative. However, it is important to examine the personal benefits of the research, the *'me helping me'* narrative. In this research I have *'helped myself'*, or at least the research has helped me in terms of status both in the LGBT communities of Brighton & Hove, as well as within university structures. I have also had the tremendous benefits of working with people I admire and respect and have learnt a lot from them. Finally I feel that not only am I a better and more considerate researcher, but the processes of Count Me In Too have taught me about what partnership and equalities should mean and feel like for an academic.

MYTH: You will get a number of high quality publications and be able to keep up with pre-partnership publication outputs. (Describe how this has enhanced/developed your teaching and research).

A real engagement with community groups and broader communities means late and weekend meetings, exhausting discussions as well as slowing down, halting and at times steps backward in order to keep everyone comfortable and to undertake good research, rather than rushed consultation. For example during the

Count Me In Too steering group meeting where the focus group questions were to be finalised before Christmas 2005 with a group arranged to undertake the pilot focus group just after Christmas, it became clear that members of the group had not had a say. It also became obvious through the discussion that there were more areas that needed to be addressed. Consequently, a further steering group meeting was arranged with input obtained over the Christmas break in order to ensure the focus groups addressed all of the aspects they needed to. This was necessary to achieve equitable partnership working and maintain confidence in the process. At this stage, the academic partner could have legitimately argued necessity of progressing the workplan in line with deadlines to coincide with the availability of the academic researcher. To have pursued this standpoint might have at worst lead to loss of confidence and subsequent dissolution of the partnership, and would certainly have lead to disaffection of those involved who at that stage had not contributed or had their views discussed.

In not pursuing a strict workplan data will take longer to gather than is anticipated and often planned for. There is less time for reading and keeping up to date with current academic debates and less time for writing, even at the *'conclusion'* of research as you will (and should) be expected to produce useable outputs for the community. In other words, investing time and energy in establishing, maintaining and negotiating partnership working with a community organisation will take up time when you could be reading, keeping up to date with current academic debates and writing. One could argue then, that community involvement

in all stages of this project – design, data collection, analysis and write up – can lead to a lack of academic outputs and potentially holding back career progression. This continues beyond the *'conclusion'* of the research programme as an expectation persists that the academic partner will participate in initiatives arising from this research- delivering this conserves the working partnership and potential for further partnership work. This could potentially all be addressed with a rushed approach where a report is produced and then papers follow. I would argue this is not a good partnership. It probably means that those who have been involved in the design and implementation of the project have not been involved in the write up.

There's a tension here too when community partners do not value the currency of academia, with comments reflecting a perception that academic outputs do not progress the so-called shared agenda of *'progressing social change'* (e.g. theoretical papers describing conceptualisations, process of peer review, incorporating learning from the project into teaching). While there is potential learning in the process of examining each other's conceptualisation of *'progressing social change'*, such debates are perceived by community partners as appropriate to have in the pub but not in *'working time'*. Community partners are often interested in *'winning prizes'* to achieve the status of *'award winning research'* but commendation of the research in academic circles remains unimpressive to the community partners who lack familiarity with these hierarchies.

I have been involved in this project since 2005, in that time I have published one book chapter (with significant input from Leela Baksi and Arthur Law) and have two journal articles under review (which were only possible as co-authored papers with a research fellow). I use some of the research as part of my undergraduate teaching, but as I teach Geographies I need to focus on broader issues for the bulk of my teaching. However, this is not the whole story; recently the project was asked about *'peer reviewed'* outputs as a measure of good research. This is a usual move for both academics and (informed) service providers and, for me, demonstrates a fear of this research as existing outside of academic conventions and therefore questioning its worth and usefulness. What it also illustrates is the usefulness of a friendly academic who has an understanding of the peer review system and a need to demystify this policing of knowledge.

Forcing research through a subjective system such as peer review in order to *'prove'* it strikes me as one of the most traditional returns to the *'ivory tower'* of knowledge creation. This system is also weighted against recognising and disseminating alternative perspectives of community partners unless these are *'packaged'* in a way that demonstrates their relevance to current academic conceptualisation and debate. Yet in submitting articles for peer review, it is anticipated that the kudos of the project will be enhanced by academic publications. However, I have recently been told of academic publications that are then used as the basis for *'partnership'* working. Such a practice should be roundly critiqued in assuming that academic knowledge is better and should be known by *'the community'*.

MYTH: *Obstacles can be 'overcome'.*
(*How did you overcome any obstacles?*)

Although in reports and other outputs from the project you will undoubtedly tell of obstacles *'overcome'*, such obstacles are rarely *'overcome'*. Rather, they are either teaching tools or meandered around and left as uncomfortable parts/histories of the project. This is not the failing of the project or the partnership. It is just the bit that is rarely talked about, presents on or engages with. It will hopefully bring the partnerships closer, although it may involve the dissolution of some relationships. The latter is not a failing, if research like this is not working, then there should be no pressure to continue, it may cause more harm than good. On the other hand, if it's not working because of a lack of expertise in negotiating tensions, then discontinuing the partnership would constitute a lost opportunity and reflect a failure in partnership working.

The *'obstacles'* that we have *'overcome'* (as in, a temporary problem) include *'running out of money leading to reduced capacity'*; overcome by securing further funding. *'Obstacles'* that continue to challenge and remain as tensions include working together with differing values, priorities and understandings that the university and community partner bring to the project alongside the *'shared passion'* and *'complementary agendas'*. This includes how the project is endorsed and particularly academic structures (academic outputs, peer review, opportunities to present at conferences) versus community and statutory sector endorsements. These are different currencies and there is no agreement on exchange rates. This risk is that

each partner overvalues the currency that they use. The practice of the research itself needs to be constantly negotiated to determine what is *'good enough'* in relation to academic practice and with respect to research participants.

Many of the obstacles encountered in this form of working could be summed up as what one of our community partners calls *'cultural differences'*. She has suggested that these are to be negotiated rather than overcome. Cultural differences are inherent to the relationship when two different communities come together, given that these communities (including academic communities) can be defined by their distinctive patterns of interaction.

MYTH: *Your community partners are 'the community' and you are primarily placed externally to the community.*

(What are your main links with the community sector?)

From the outset Spectrum made it very clear that as an LGBT forum, they would be facilitating engagement with the LGBT community,; not assuming the position of *'LGBT community'* but acting as a conduit to representation of LGBT individuals. This was an important lesson to learn and questions the use of a group as representative.

In our project, we have formed three *'steering groups'*. The first helped design the research and the questions, the second helped analyse the initial data and the third is a more loosely formed community analysis group that engages with the further analysis along with statutory partners. Individuals who have joined these

groups have connected with the project through participation in other LGBT community groups, but at all stages have been invited to participate as individuals rather than representatives of these groups. This recognises that these groups do not exist in order to aid other interested parties to contact *'marginalised'* individuals (although both statutory and community and voluntary services, as well as academics, attempt to use social and support groups in this way). This also reflects the limited capacity and governance structures of these organisations such that individuals cannot consult with *'their'* groups in a robust and consistent manner. Linking with existing LGBT groups in the local community has secured initial contact with individuals who have a broad range of identities, and involvement of activists in the local LGBT community. It also ensures a broad sample that can create robust research beyond the individual capacities of one group/organisation.

Picking a community partner is key, not only for the networks they can access, but also for the further partnerships they can develop. Count Me In Too is renowned in Brighton & Hove, because it has statutory as well as community and voluntary partners who are all signed up to the process and actioning the findings. These partners had a good working relationship with Spectrum who brought them to the table on a positive and supportive footing. Of course, such partners can also be available and brought by university academics, and may not be desired or needed.

MYTH: *Failure is not an option.*

(Were there any crucial skills you developed in order to succeed in this type of research?)

Discussing openly failures, compromises and losses is often not appropriate in academic discourses where the emphasis is on achievement, overcoming and eventual success. Speaking about messy conflicts have the potential to taint *'strong'* data. Yet negotiations and compromise are key for good partnership based research. Skills in negotiation and brokering engagement are often perceived as inferior to skills in academic research, yet these are just the essential skills that the community partner brought to this project.

A narrative of *'overcoming'*, *'personal skills'* etc. fails researchers, reiterating a masculinist discussion of conquering. It subverts useful discussion and documentation of effective ways of addressing *'taboo'* conflicts. Such open and honest discussions could usefully progress the broader practice of community-university partnerships. Yet simultaneously they risk alienation, and as this paper has done stepping out of line with the dominant voice, narrative, discourse and rhetoric that surrounds this type of research.

MYTH: *There are rules you can and should follow in order to engage in this form of research. (From your perspective, what are the main principles underpinning this engagement?)*

This is a messy way to undertake research, compromises have to be reached and challenges to academic ways of thinking and doing are key to creating innovative research practices, as well as ensuring partnership working. More than this there are elements of luck, chance and simply *'getting on'* that are important to creating lasting partnerships and good research.

The key principles are not about how research/ partnerships can and should be undertaken, rather they are about listening and refusing to take control. Being a partner means engaging in the practice of partnership in the context of a unique union of two equals, not taking on a role that can be defined by specified practices.

MYTH: *This is an easy way to get good research and I am good at research.*

(Any advice for emergent community-university practitioners?)

The best piece of advice I would give is that there is a need for university researchers to be humble. You will not be considered an *'expert'* nor should you be. Your decisions should be questioned, challenged and justified, you should have to explain and account for every move you make. I get uncomfortable when I am making decisions that have yet to be approved, as not only will they usually require some revision, but they will also not have buy in. In addition, you will and should explain the nuances and contradictions of working in the academy and how that serves to disempower your partners and others from entering. You will and should justify all publications, seeking their approval for the data used (which where possible should be owned jointly).

I am commonly known as *'Dr. Kath'*, I am aware that this status can cause exclusions as well as develop relationships. Allowing the project to become aligned or closer to any faction within the community will compromise the credibility of the project to the community, and the researchers/my ability to engage with the community (although you may be offered

short term gains by competing factions that they have identified as means to buy prestige arising from their relationship with you). It's therefore necessary to continually examine the extent to which you engage in non-discriminatory practice and ask, 'Where is everyone else and why aren't I speaking to them?'.

There is a need for me to maintain a level of respect in order for the project to maintain this level of respect. We commonly deploy the University of Brighton status in order to achieve particular things. However at other times this is described as Spectrum's project.

MYTH: You can do this on your own and against the structures of the institution.

(What do you need from your Department to engage in this type of practice? What do you need from structures like Cupp?)

There can be no doubt that this research would not exist in a context without the institutional support and validity that the internal structures at the University of Brighton offer. Local engagement is a strategic objective in the university and this has opened a number of structural avenues that enable research such as this. The focus on individual projects can often render invisible the structures necessary to undertake good research and engage in meaningful partnerships. For Count Me In Too, a supportive head of school and head of human geography research, combined with broader institutional financial support and recognition enabled this project to take place. Without such structures (even with an organisation like Cupp), this project and the research relationships that were developed would have been impossible.

However, alongside such support, there are also bureaucratic structures to deal with, particularly at this moment where community university partnerships and socially engaged research has to 'prove its place' with funding bodies, as well as local institutions. This can, and has, meant redoing, recreating and revising procedures, monitoring and evaluation. The positive side of this is that in a good structure the community partnerships themselves would decide the method that this would take. However, in an era of regulation 'top down' approaches are more likely (which ironically contest the very basis of the community-university partnerships). Such procedures are likely to come from universities (where the money for research usually lies or is transferred to), rendering community partners disempowered. In the Count Me In Too context, there was a difficult negotiation with finance for the charging of certain additional findings analyses and reports. Entering the bureaucratic university systems and the question of overheads caused much angst, and amounts charged are, to community partners, staggering. This negotiation was aided by a supportive head of school who accepted minimal overheads, such that the project was able to offer the same 'overheads' to Spectrum. Other contestations, disempowerments and bureaucracy surround evaluation, with its attendant pressures and compromises, but this is a complex and sensitive discussion that cannot be addressed here.

MYTH: This will take place during work time and work contexts!

(How is this different to your day to day academy work? e.g. what kind of hours are needed? What

environments do you work in? How have you built relationships? etc...)

I am not sure anyone will believe this myth! However, it is important to note that community partnerships often (and should) involve people in a voluntary capacity. Refusing to work outside of these hours is exclusionary and can lead to only gaining contacts with those privileged enough not to work or have time to take off. This is particularly problematic when the community group is read as *'the community'* and those outside of these networks are excluded, potentially creating further marginalisation and almost certainly instigating hierarchies that usually replicate the charges of *'ivory tower'* research. Yet, it is unlikely that university researchers will be given credit, sympathy or maybe even not acknowledgment of *'over and above'* hours worked at evenings and weekends from volunteers or from community partners/workers who do this all the time. Conversely when working with statutory partners or those involved in the research as part of their paid work, meetings outside of working hours can be refused and looked down upon.

Personal relationships between researchers have seen the project through its most rocky times and acts of friendships, such as remembering a birthday and favourite cake have maintained the possibility of working together when the project has been at an impasse. These personal investments can be costly in a different way. Although most academics are used to working long hours and over weekends – working in this form of research can be emotionally and physically

draining, in ways that are not supported in institutional academic settings. This, for me, results in a reliance on community partners for support in ways that illustrate fallibility and mutual interdependency.

What was the worst mistake you made?

Believing that this was a one year project!

MYTH: *You can/should 'move on'.*

(What would you do differently in a future project?)

Working on this research and developing long term partnerships is the future for my career for the time being. All of the learning and mistakes I have made have enabled me to do this project but have also facilitated a humbling to the process, a desire to do it right rather than do it to (academic) deadlines and the development of relationships that require mistakes.

However, I have also taken on other projects that seek to develop and use the community partnership model. Whilst one of these came from a *'community group'* (rather than the people directly involved in the issue), the other seeks to build a group around the key issues. These both pose challenges and in some ways move away from the Count Me In Too model. This is key as no community based partnership research can/should look the same. Rather, evolving with individuals, political, social, personal and institutional demands, climates and priorities, such research serves a similar purpose, namely to progress social change for the most marginalised people in contemporary societies.

BEST PIECES OF WORK

This piece could be read as *'negative'*. This is deliberate to balance the too often celebratory narratives that are reproduced regarding this type of work, which do specific things relating to questioning the *'consultation'* approach to undertaking socially progressive research.

Not only are these hiding particular pitfalls, they also fail to grasp the power of community partners in the research. The stories of *'helping'* that have a happy ending always strike me not only as disingenuous but also as potentially not *'partnership'*.

In Count Me In Too partnership has involved periods of agreement and easy engagements (these are the periods you find in research narratives), it has also contained fights, disagreements, tension and threats of dissolution. The latter is as productive as the former, it questions engrained ways of working, shows that those involved in the project feel not only empowered, but involved and owners of the

process. Moreover, it means that consistently questions are asked, decisions justified and norms re-evaluated.

The project has a number of *'best pieces'* of work, which can be found on the website www.countmeintoo.co.uk, the *'best piece'* will of course depend on your positionality.

Here, I want to outline some of the *'best moments'*.

In a dissemination event, presenting the long hours of work and seeing people visibly moved from both hearing and being heard.

The laughter and celebration afterwards, are all noteworthy and have a feeling of *'moving forward'*. The surprise of seeing Count Me In Too used and quoted is always satisfying in meetings, documents and general discussion. Yet, some of my best *'feel'* good moments have been outside of undertaking the project itself.

When immersed in the project, and particularly because of its long term

nature, it can be difficult to see what has been achieved and how.

I used to look forward to BSCKE monitoring group meetings where reflection and a level of satisfaction were encouraged, and celebrated, by Dana Cohen (the person who linked Cupp to our project) who was both part of both the community and the university. We felt she was able to reflect on and appreciate the achievements because she has a cross cultural perspective.

Similarly, at a conference in 2008 I was asked by a woman from the global south if this research had any *'real world'* implications.

Having given quite a theoretical paper it was satisfying to reply *'yes'* and outline only a small proportion of what this form of research can achieve.

Such moments highlight for me the possibilities for, and processes of, change.

Early promise?

Angie Hart



Intellectual rigour and a moral commitment to social justice from an early age? A precocious spectrum of activity to back up these values and ideas? Sadly when I scour my primary school years' memorabilia for evidence of an early aptitude for engagement, there is little to impress. Two ten-metre breast stroke sponsored swims for 'Africa' and the 'village hall roof'. A three page essay on 'Why me and me mates shouldn't moan about picking up litter'. Even worse, I can find some counter evidence. A list of rules – in my handwriting – on why kids wearing grey hotpants shouldn't be allowed in my Black Dominoes Club. Secondary school looks little better – a faded invitation to an egg-cosy knitting event in aid of our Guide pack. Not much for a 12 year school career.

My interest in, and commitment to, working for social justice, even when it wasn't the obvious route to academic fame and glory, came slowly. In essence my commitment – vocation even – is ego driven. I was an asthmatic council house kid who was brainy in a school environment where you got beaten up for coming top, even in home economics. Our house had no books except for Bellings Cookery Guide (it came free with the cooker) and the ones I borrowed from the library. Helping my mum clean, cook and child mind for Oxford dons before she returned home to care for her own 5 children and do her own housework, and then later, in early adulthood, being in a same sex partnership and co-parenting three children with special needs adopted from the care system were formative experiences. These various experiences and identities converged to make me the kind of academic I am. Living and breathing inequalities at the sharp end fed into the issues for which

I have sustained energy; these are using my academic skills and role to address inequalities and maintain an applied focus to my work.

Getting experience under my belt

Let me sum up my pre-Cupp academic years in a few paragraphs. My postgraduate research studies were first motivated by feminist concerns when in 1989 I undertook my DPhil research at the University of Oxford, on issues relating to sex workers, one of the most stigmatised groups in modern society. The previous year, as part of an MPhil in Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, my analysis of the social scientific literature revealed that the relations between male clients and sex workers had received almost no attention. On the basis of that work, I received a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council to undertake a DPhil. This resulted in my first published monograph with the catchy title '*Buying and Selling Power: Anthropological contributions to prostitution in Spain*'. I was very young and naïve, and doing this research was little more than an empirical social science training programme. But I suppose I did find some things out. Academically speaking, the main originality of this ethnography lay in increasing understanding of how gendered power and inequality was produced and performed in prostitution. My success in paying as much attention to male clients as to female prostitutes, both analytically and through data collection, was groundbreaking. However, I smart now when I think of how very unequal, and somewhat arrogant my work was then – I was an anthropologist doing ethnographic fieldwork in Spain, with half-baked Spanish, and I had no

personal experience of the world of sex work, nor any real sense of whether my work would serve any useful purpose. And yet, off I went to study my topic, receiving a substantial grant from the tax payer to do so. Still, I did have some very good influences in my life that enabled me to carry out my DPhil in as reflective, and sensitive way as possible. For example, one of my DPhil supervisors, Judith Ennew was a role model for me, and looking back I can see that I was attracted to being mentored by academics whose work addressed social justice issues. I met Judith whilst I was at Cambridge and her quirky political approach inspired me. She agreed to co-supervise me, so I travelled between supervisors in Oxford and Cambridge. Judith soon left conventional academia and she has since dedicated her career to working with street children in Kuala Lumpur.

Looking back, I can see that I did try to work in a participatory way as a DPhil student, but I didn't have the knowledge, experience or authority to do this in anything more than a token way. Nevertheless, this work stimulated my interest in health-care delivery and nurtured my passion for working with health and social-care professionals and with community members themselves. Through collaboration with epidemiologists and doctors at the Institut València d'Estudis en Salut Pública, gendered inequalities and HIV/AIDs became a focus of my prostitution studies. Alternative ethnographies and user-involvement were unheard of in the privileged corridors of University of Oxford, where I did my DPhil studies. And yet, putting a more positive spin on my research training, in my own small way, I made close collaboration

and mutual benefit a guiding principle for my work. For example, ferrying sex workers to and from the local supermarket for their weekly shop was a role I eagerly took on. And I recall many other experiences during my fieldwork in which I did try to give something back to the community; for example I supported, and advocated for, a sex worker whose baby was taken into care moments after being born, and I befriended a number of sex workers with HIV/AIDS, doing practical tasks like shopping, accompanying them to the doctor etc... This was tough stuff for a student in their mid 20s, living in a foreign country. Building on my DPhil studies, in 1992 I accepted an invitation to undertake a research-based needs assessment of services to female sex workers within the UK. This was my first taste of actually doing something useful – it was influential in changing the culture and organisation of local service delivery, and it fed into commissioning decisions.

There followed a series of research studies exploring gendered inequalities in various guises, a time when I was, as is often the experience of young academics, on short-term contracts. I was lucky eventually to secure a permanent post – albeit part-time for many years. Eventually though, I did secure a full-time permanent position which has given me more opportunity to pursue the kind of research I want to do, rather than chasing grants. So, in 2001, I enthusiastically took up a request to lead a local evaluation of specialist services to adoptive and foster families, and this set me on the road to my current research, practice and publication interests – social and therapeutic support services to disadvantaged children and

their families. My specialism here is in improving services for children experiencing constellations of disadvantage such as abuse, neglect and disability, and in helping parents to cope with the demands of family life. I am particularly proud that through a creative synergy of my professional/academic work and my family life I made a direct contribution to changing the law on same-sex adoption by influencing the voting decisions of members of parliament. As a consequence the United Kingdom now has one of the most liberal adoption laws in the world.

Cupp and beyond

It's hard to believe it now that I am Cupp's academic director and have been heavily involved since 2004, but I was once a Cupp outsider, dying to break in. When Cupp came on the scene, in 2003, I was an academic researcher managing a range of service-user involved projects on aspects of child and family health. I was also working part-time as a practitioner in child mental health in the local NHS and, having three young children with complex needs, was a member of a *'10-professional-appointments-a-week-family'* myself. When I attended one of the first Cupp events I recall feeling an intense wish to belong to the group of people working to fulfil Cupp's agenda (however vague it then was). I remember feeling affronted that I wasn't part of Cupp, and also remember a clumsy conversation in the lunch queue where I was aggressively challenging of Cupp's director, David Wolff, about what I saw as Cupp's somewhat weak practice in involving community partners. Dave very generously forgave me for my clumsy challenge, and we soon began to work together.

Progressive conversations with Dave and the then academic director Sue Balloch, led me to become involved in a specific area of project work, alongside contributing to conversations about the strategic direction and organisational form of Cupp. I joined a group of Senior Researchers staffing the Cupp Helpdesk, and eventually become one of Cupp's academic directors, with an increasingly large part of my week devoted to furthering Cupp's mission. I use the term *'devoted'* deliberately. Because I am. Whatever the tensions and complexities, I am devoted to Cupp and the values we try to live up to. So this piece is written from that perspective.

I could deconstruct Cupp, the University bureaucracy, power relations between academics and the community, etc. I have spent a large part of my early academic career doing that and 20 years ago would have defined myself as a postmodernist, deconstructing everything that moved. These days I'm a pragmatist. My interest now lies in the spaces that can always be found to work differently, to work collaboratively and to develop a passion for a shared interest with community partners. The work of Etienne Wenger and colleagues has been enormously influential for me in developing my Cupp work, and I have found their idea of communities of practice very useful in both describing, and cultivating the structures and processes through which I work.

Reflecting back over my 4 years involvement in Cupp I am struck by how much I have learnt, how much Cupp has given to me as much as I have given to Cupp, and how much I have crammed in. Some of my work has been as an academic practitioner working in child and

family health (for example Hart, Blincow with Thomas 2007; Aumann & Hart 2009). The rest has been broader work with Cupp and other colleagues (for example Hart, Maddison & Wolff 2007). The two strands overlap of course, and my thoughts and writing about community university partnerships at the meta level have been fuelled by my experience as a Cupp academic, as a community practitioner and indeed as a parent and a service user. Etienne Wenger and colleagues talk about the value of *'boundary spanners'* in communities of practice. These are people who have simultaneous identities crossing different stakeholder groups – in my case meta level academic practice in community engagement, an identity as an engaged academic through my subject specialism and also as a community practitioner, service user and parent. These multiple identities have been valuable for Cupp in terms of negotiating access, understanding and influencing different agendas, and have helped me demonstrate the authenticity of my engagement as an academic. On the down side, they are sometimes quite hard to manage, and I struggle to keep on top of key conceptual debates in both my academic discipline and the community university partnership literature, whilst also maintaining my community practitioner status. Still, on balance I think boundary spanners are useful people to have around in community university engagement – just perhaps not too many of them in one place!

Being a Cupp academic

There are various elements of this work I could write about, but I will pick out three – developing my inequalities research work,

co-editing a book about Cupp, and disseminating the work of Cupp beyond East Sussex.

For the past four years I have been championing a community of practice – statutory and voluntary sector partners, academics and a group of parents of children with special needs – in developing Resilient Therapy. This is an innovative therapeutic methodology that a psychiatrist and I conceived of. It is born of my cumulative inequalities work, and integrates routine child and adolescent mental health practice and personal experiences with the substantial research base on resilience. It emphasises ameliorating health inequalities and pursuing positive outcomes for the most disadvantaged children and families by working beyond narrow disciplinary boundaries. Inspired by Ann Masten's idea of resilience as *'ordinary magic'*, we have used this metaphor to assemble a Resilient Therapy box of tricks, using both text and illustrative artwork. The approach strategically focuses on *'scaffolding'* resilience for these children through the imaginative and creative therapeutic work of resilient promoters such as mental health practitioners, social workers, teachers and parents. An enthusiastic community of practice including parents, young people and practitioners is working with the support of Cupp, within the South East Coastal Communities Programme (see www.coastalcommunities.org.uk) to develop the idea and trial it in practice. A local community group supporting parents of children with special needs (Amaze) has become involved as a long term partner in the development of RT. We have also made a film about this work. By taking Resilient Therapy into our Faculty's curriculum, my colleagues and I are able to trial the

approach with students. Most recently, students from the School of Art are using RT as a real life case for developing design products, and my adoptive son is planning to make a film about his life experiences with media students.

RT is a really good example of how, with a little creativity and vision, partnerships can have spin offs for many different partners, within the university and beyond. And despite that this kind of applied research is often thought of as hard to find funding for; our work has attracted a portfolio of funding opportunities. We have received income as part of a broad programme of Cupp work, by knowledge exchange grants via the Higher Education

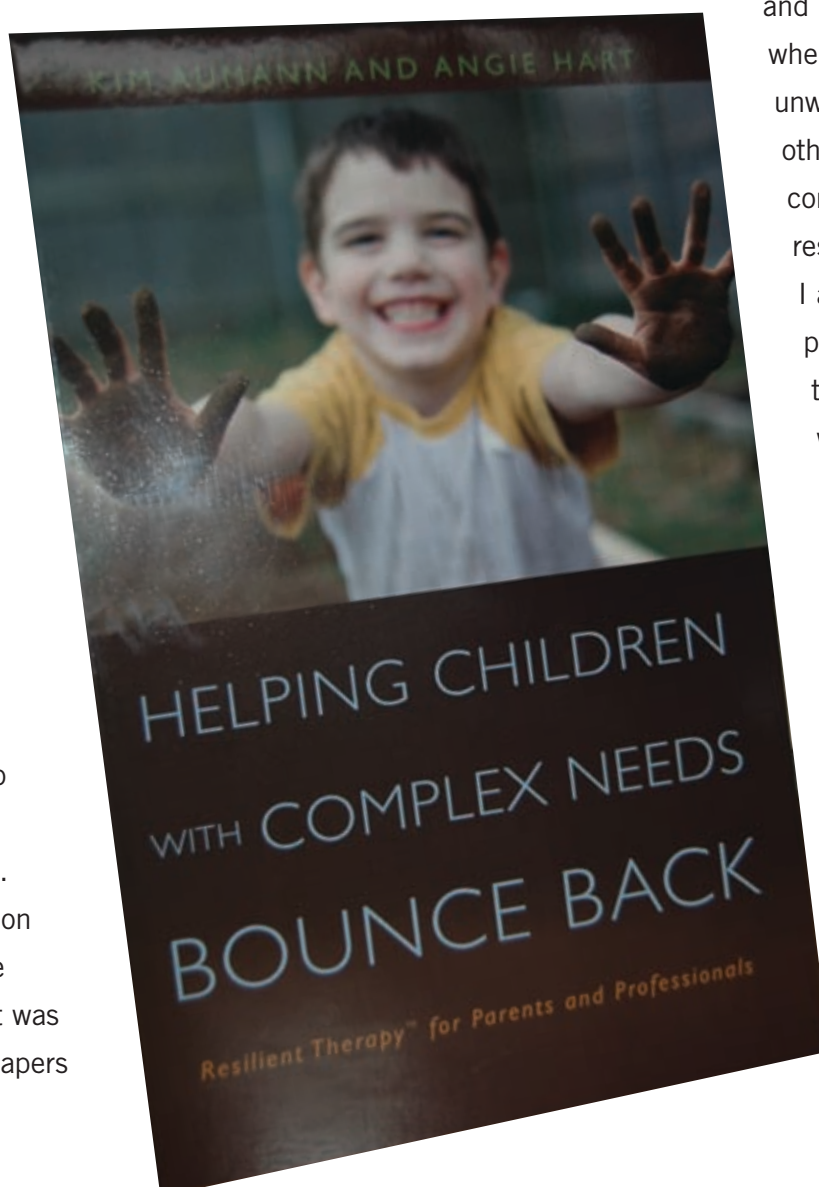
Innovation Fund (HEIF), via the South East Coastal Communities Programme, from the local PCT, internal awards at the University of Brighton, and more recently via the Economic and Social Research Council.

This work has also resulted in seven academic outputs. The original book on RT that I co-wrote with a psychiatrist was followed by four papers

and more recently a book for parents and professionals, co-written with the former director of Amaze.

Successively over the years, I have set myself the task of finding ways to practice the inequalities philosophy that I preach, and to ensure that my research and teaching efforts consistently link to statutory, community and voluntary sector practice. For example, the framing and conduct of my research studies has challenged relations of inequality between academic researchers and their research 'subjects'. I have tried to use my personal authority and persuasion to pioneer inclusive

research frameworks and processes in areas where they were at first unwelcome, or where others have lacked confidence to develop research in this way. I am particularly proud of the fact that my research work has achieved genuine inclusion for participants who are conventionally seen as too hard to reach even to be included as 'research subjects'. Demonstrating the benefits to scholarship, and to the research participants themselves,



to show that their inclusion is not simply ‘a *technology of legitimisation*’ has been a key contribution to participatory models of working and to demonstrating effective community university engagement.

Over the past decade my challenges to professional systems and boundaries have brought my personal, professional and academic identities closer than ever. For example, I am former service user of the CAMHS. For three years my then partner and I attended the service for help with settling our three adopted children. I have strategically used my status as a CAMHS practitioner and senior academic juxtaposed with a mental health service user identity to disrupt conventional discourses around the constitution of patient identities.

Furthermore, my personal and professional experiences have directly fed into the academic ideas I have developed on challenging relations of power between service users and professionals that are not conducive to clients’ good health. This has occurred through my formulation (with Barry Luckock) of the concept ‘*communities of adoptive and fostering practice*’. The two collaborative empirical research studies I directed into service user experiences of CAMHS, social services, education and voluntary sector support and therapy have also been instrumental in challenging conventional relations of power.

It is through this synthesis of my personal, political and academic understandings and experiences of inequality that I make the most impact. Making partnership working a reality, rather than simply academic rhetoric, has

become something of a mission for me. For the past 14 years I have beaten a path that really personalizes, politicises and applies my academic work directly. My work has contributed to that of others who problematise the external, ‘*objective*’, academic gaze in the area of inequalities research.

Beyond my involvement in a community of practice on the ground, I have a broader, more strategic role in promoting community university partnerships in my capacity as academic director of Cupp. This involves playing a leading role in community engagement within the university and encouraging other academics to get involved, applying for project funds for Cupp, championing Cupp both internally and externally, serving as a member of the Senior’ Researcher’s group which supports the Cupp Helpdesk in responding to enquiries from community groups, disseminating the work through conference presentations, consultancies and publications. Of course, maintaining a credible research presence at both the disciplinary level (my resilience work) and developing Cupp at the meta-level pulls me in different directions, and is often hard to manage. Furthermore, some people may think that there are too many boundary overlaps for this type of role – sometimes it has felt a little too much for me, however, boundary overlaps have been a feature of my career to date, and I find these overlaps personally rewarding, intellectually stimulating and, I hope, beneficial in helping to set the direction we are taking in Cupp. My work at the project level feeds into my broader Cupp role. It gives me an intricate understanding of what it means to work closely, in a sustained relationship



(notwithstanding my own multiple identities) with community partners, to work through complex power differences, and to come out the other side with a better result. It also gives me personal experiences of coping with

the need to publish academic outputs or perish, and yet undertaken work that is seen as beneficial by community partners. All of this is quite a lot to juggle, but at the same time, is immensely rewarding.

Parting thoughts

There is a strong narrative in community university partnership discourse that becoming involved in this work can stifle academic careers and burn people out. Reading back over this piece I am struck by the fact that I have written very little about such issues. Astonishingly for some perhaps, but I can claim that both my career and academic kudos have been enhanced by practising community university partnership scholarship, and the degree to which my identities and boundaries have overlapped have, I think, resulted in more benefit than harm. It seems fair to say that community engagement slows down an academic's publication rate (co-editing a collection of community-university partnership papers into what has become known as *'The Cupp book'*, took far longer than writing a series of journal articles would have for sure). But given all my roles and identities I haven't done too bad for outputs that are deemed worthy by academic standards. I suppose I do work fairly hard and have some capacity to write in different ways for different audiences. But community engagement has brought prestigious outputs of its own. For example, I am regularly invited to give key note conference presentations on any number of variations on a Cupp theme. My Cupp work was submitted as part of a recent successful Research Assessment Exercise Submission, and I am hopeful for a respectable performance in the Research Excellence Framework. I know I am, to some extent lucky - my institution supports this kind of work to a degree that few others in the UK seem to. But I am proud to say that I have

been part of making that happen. Working with Cupp has certainly taught me a lot about the way complex bureaucracies work, how people and organisations change, and about the role of personal authority and vision in realising organisational change. I have been a key player in raising funds for community university partnership work. And crucially, doing this work has enriched both my personal, and my working life. In a recent paper discussing community university engagement in the Australian and US contexts, Barbara Holland and Judith Ramaley highlight the way in which effective engagement work often draws in our personal and professional selves – a new slant on the personal as political perhaps? This certainly resonates for me. They suggest that for this kind of authenticity to be possible, the entire scholarly and learning environment must expand and open up, and engaged institutions must provide a safe and supportive environment for the scholarship of engagement.

I hope that in a small way, the work that I have been doing over the past 15 years, whilst not always easy, has enabled me to be part of a process of providing positive experiences of engagement to other academics coming on stream so that they might dare to commit to a career in it. In my case it has given me the kind of rewarding life that I would never have predicted in those early years of deep-rooted personal social and economic inequality, when nevertheless, I tried to do something for others by performing my half-hearted sponsored swims and knitting those egg cosy's...

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Learning By Doing

Dee MacDonald



I was a Research Officer in the Health & Social Policy Research Centre (now Social Science Policy and Research Centre: SSPARC) when a bid was being put together to access funding to begin the Community University Partnership Programme (Cupp). I was involved in community based research and I believe it was due to this experience that I was asked to be part of the process. The majority of my research focuses on engagement/empowerment, participatory practice, community development and neighbourhood renewal. I am regularly asked to contribute to a variety of Social Science courses as these topics crop up. I have an interest in and conviction about social justice which forms the basis of much of my interest in the research I choose to be involved in. I am particularly interested in the practical application of knowledge, for me, it's not just about the debate and discussion, it's about where that debate and discussion get us. I am interested in why issues such as poverty and initiatives such as regeneration exist in the first place, measures taken to address them and the reasons underlying the success or failure of these. This personal interest is important to me as a researcher. To have the motivation, time and energy to put into understanding the context of your area through reading and talking to people is an important stage in designing the research that will provide meaningful outcomes. I am passionate about how we can strive to ensure that knowledge that is developed and grown in the academy can become useful in some way and embedded outside of the university. Working in the School of Applied Social Science (SASS) is right for me, because of the the 'applied'

element. The work of Cupp develops this idea and allows continual exploration of mechanisms for achieving this which is why I enjoy my links with Cupp.

I've been involved in community engaged research for 9 years which includes projects funded by Cupp, and in that time, I have seen the relationships I have with the voluntary and community sector (VCS), statutory sector and individual activists deepen. As these relationships develop, demand for this type of work has increased partly, I believe, in relation to the rounded offer available through Cupp. Cupp has enabled access to funding for very diverse projects and has the capacity to be responsive to people and organisations with a wide range of interests and organisational status.

My approach

When I am designing or delivering on a piece of research I am increasingly mindful of how I am perceived by research participants and what being a university researcher means to people I am coming into contact with. As my awareness of participatory research methods grew, so I reflected on how, in the past, I had focussed primarily on ensuring relevant data was collected to address the research question, without necessarily considering the work from the perspective of research participants. I failed to consider what assumptions research participants might have about the reasons for the research taking place and my own personal reasons for being involved. As such awareness grew, and through working with community organisations as partners in research, I became utterly convinced of the benefit that dialogue

in the early stages of a research project (i.e. building relationships) can bring. There is a definite need for people to have the space to say *'yep, I want to be involved in this because...'* and establishing some kind of understanding for all the collaborators as people – because we are people – we are not just researchers, we are not just research participants, we are all people. This is the type of engagement that I'm interested in.

I would not want to think that the emphasis I lay upon relationship building and involvement of research participants (in as much of the process as they want to be involved in) compromises a commitment to research rigour. Conducting engaged or participatory research can, by its very nature, lead to complexities and complications and does require considerable time and energy to address issues such as bias etc, possibly to a greater degree than other methods but, when done well, produces robust evidence which is supplemented by the endorsement of the very people to which the research relates. The space for dialogue mentioned above serves as a mechanism for raising issues such as research ethics. Researchers are able to share their knowledge and encourage those with whom they are working of the benefits of considering such issues in relation to strengthening the potential impact of research findings. In addition, this space for dialogue is, for me, about creating some kind of understanding of equality in the research design and delivery process. The early stages of a project can highlight that there is value being attached to everybody's knowledge; everybody's input. This is not to underplay the importance of knowledge brought from the

Academy but rather to emphasise that it is only one form of knowledge contributing to a broad process. I think a commitment to constructing dialogue for these purposes with researchers and research participants is part of the difference in the Cupp approach.

The involvement of the research participants at the beginning of a research process is valuable for a number of reasons, not least in informing timescales. You can design the most wonderful looking research outline and say its going to be delivered in a certain timeframe, and then you involve research participants and you find out you are only going to be able to access a certain group on every second Tuesday of every month. So that changes things – completely changes what you proposed. This illustration reflects the issue of the academic assuming that they can design a piece of work with a given community/organisation without their involvement and highlights how that can be problematic. The more knowledge of and relationships you have built with research participants, the more informed (and therefore realistic) that research proposal is going to be. Participatory research requires a commitment from the researcher and the university to pay due attention to the need to fit in with other people's lives and agendas. Inevitably, compromises will be needed from all of those involved in the process.

To be able to write down my reflections on my research practice requires me to consider not just what principles underpin it but the skills I have developed and used over the last 9 years. The key skill, central to achieving robust, inclusive research findings in a community context is listening. Without this, none of the

rest of what I am going to mention are even possible. I didn't realise until I began to get involved in this type of work, quite the extent to which I didn't actually listen properly, and I became aware of the extent to which I had preconceived ideas and brought those to the research process. The space for dialogue and exchange of beliefs/understandings is critical for enabling preconceived ideas to be surfaced and, where necessary, challenged or changed.

In order to achieve dialogue at the start of a project facilitation skills are helpful. The extent to which you use them will depend on the given group that is together and therefore should be used responsively. You may select your sample on criteria which dictates you invite certain people to be involved. At the point of inviting those people, you may or may not have an understanding of relationships between them in the past. The past history of those people's relationships with each other is useful to try to uncover and talk about and surface at the beginning of the process. Histories can exist not just within the VCS and with activists but also with service providers and researchers. Output can sometimes be affected by some of this stuff and it's better to try to be open and honest about it from the beginning, if you can. This almost always provides useful context for analysis of findings at a later stage. It's a tricky one and I would imagine some academics might argue it's not our job to engage in the complexities of partners' relationships. However, I would argue it is my job if I'm trying to do a meaningful piece of research.

Negotiation skills are also a useful tool in the community researcher's toolkit. I would say

from my own experience, that negotiation skills support you in doing this sort of work both within and outside the academy. Within the academy they are necessary to try to ensure that the work can be done using appropriate methods. At the time of writing, my own experience, and that of other researchers engaged in community research, is that the Academy does not necessarily value such research to the same extent as other, perhaps more traditional, methods. This is a challenge I believe Cupp's work addresses. In addition, the Cupp approach has allowed for issues such as cost to be addressed, recognising that access to research can be restricted for some organisations due to prohibitive costs associated with university research. Through working collaboratively with community members and researchers, Cupp recognised the need to work on reducing overheads, via lobbying and negotiating, which has been very useful. Negotiation skills are equally useful when working with research participants. They can enable the research process undertaken to be constructively explored and developed, identifying areas where support could be useful, and ultimately underpinning agreement on the way forward for the project.

The final two skills are the ability to compromise where appropriate and the ability to deal with frustration. Inevitably if you are doing participatory research you may very well have to compromise on some of the approaches, methodologies and outcomes that you would ideally like and would fit your portfolio of research in order to make it truly participatory and valuable to everybody. The likelihood is that everybody is going to have to compromise.

Compromise can lead to frustration, but you must be able to accept that in most cases there will be limits to what you are aiming to achieve. You can go into something with a very idealistic approach and I have, as my research career has matured, become better at accepting certain limits. The key is to be aware that compromise and frustration may be part of the process at an early stage and working together to accept those and make the best of the situation you are all in. Clearly outlining to research partners / participants any professional or organisational constraints you may have no option but to work within is usually understood and appreciated. Again, the importance of communication and the surfacing of issues that may affect the process is crucial

As the examples above illustrate, there is always something to learn from engaging in community research. The following are, for me, qualities which enable this type of activity: Persistence; Politeness (keeping things calm); Persuasion and Perseverance.

As participatory work doesn't follow traditional patterns of research project management; in part because it is predicated on the idea that it is not about 'us' managing it, it poses challenges. The overarching phrase that came out for me in relation to overcoming obstacles is '*keep chipping away*'. You may not come to the most ideal answer but if you are not persistent and you don't keep chipping away at obstacles or at preconceived ideas of various people then the process will be in danger.

Creativity is often a core approach to overcoming, sidestepping or outright ignoring obstacles. Having said that, I don't tend to be a

side-stepper. For all I think we need to go about work in different and innovative ways, at the same time I worry that if you do ignore or sidestep issues it's not always the best way to go. My experience is that issues that were side stepped have a nasty tendency to re-emerge at a later date, by which time the scope for addressing them may have reduced. Ethics clearance is a definite example that springs to mind. My feeling is that it is better to deal with things as and when they come up.

As I look forward to projects in the future I have an increasing commitment to push harder for genuine partnership building from the beginning. In other words for genuine support and recognition of the importance of thinking out who is going to be involved and who has some say in the development of those projects and how and why they are shaped in a particular way. All voices need to be heard, there needs to be the dialogue to ensure equal opportunity for input – and then decisions around methodologies etc are informed. It doesn't mean the researcher acquiescing to the views of research participants, my knowledge is as valuable as other participants, it just isn't necessarily *more* valuable.

Developing teaching and research

I have run a post graduate module in the past which provided students with the opportunity of gaining research experience within organisations. I am asked on a regular basis to contribute seminars and workshops to a variety of courses, often involving a community partner. At times my contribution will be to present the research that I've been working on as a real life case

THREE BEST PIECES OF WORK

I found it very difficult to pick some of my best pieces of work to share. Mainly because I couldn't decide what 'best' meant – 'best' as in best outcomes / outputs or best in that I and others involved enjoyed them but the outcomes weren't necessarily as anticipated? The three I've chosen hopefully demonstrate interesting learning.

1 / ALTogether programme

This was a training programme developed with Learning and Skills Funding. The programme centred on self-managed action learning sets and was run within the context of Neighbourhood Renewal (NR). Each participant brought with them a project which involved making changes within their organisation or working practices with the idea of using the action learning set as a supportive mechanism. My role was Programme Co-ordinator. In my opinion, as a training programme it achieved mixed success. It ran for three cohorts. The main challenge (and ultimately the greatest weakness) was

recruitment of suitably mixed groups. The programme was promoted on the basis that it would involve a range of people and organisations who had a stake in the NR agenda but unfortunately we failed to recruit the diversity of people anticipated.

However, despite this I personally enjoyed my involvement a great deal. It gave me the opportunity to develop training skills which later were helpful to the community research training that I developed with a colleague. It also really helped me deepen my understanding of the interaction between community activists, voluntary and community organisations and statutory organisations by being able to observe and join in certain kinds of group work that went on within that programme.

I began to deepen my knowledge of the dynamics, of the politics and the kinds of issues that inevitably I've come across again in later research. In essence it really laid a foundation for me in my understanding of the types of organisations that I would go on to work with.

2 / Neighbourhood Renewal Research Project

This centred around six case studies selected from participants in the ALTogether programme. As the name suggests we worked intensively with six organisations to try to understand what the change project was that they were trying to implement and what the issues were for them in trying to do that. The reason I enjoyed it was because we tried, as far as we could within the resources and the constraints that we had, to ensure it was 'action research'. We deliberately set it up to work very closely with the case study organisations. Researchers collaborated with key personnel within the organisations (which included statutory and voluntary) in order to design research questions and ensure appropriate methods were used. We maintained regular contact in order to feed back findings which could then be used to inform their practice. Because we were working with them over a long enough timescale, the impact of changes made throughout the research period could be observed. The process was

satisfying as relationships were built allowing the researchers to reach a deeper level of knowledge and understanding of the issues that the organisations were facing which ultimately led to the outputs being useful from both a policy perspective but also, importantly, from a very practical, practice based perspective also.

3 / Moulsecoomb: Being Heard! (M: BH)

This was a collaborative research project, funded via the Brighton and Sussex Community Knowledge Exchange. The research centred on exploring residents' opportunities for and experiences of participation in a variety of organisations including a major regeneration partnership and local community groups. This has probably been the most interesting project for me as the community – residents of Moulsecoomb (a local neighbourhood) in this case – were involved in a steering group to shape and deliver the project. This created opportunities to influence the research as it went along. On reflection, the

level of influence open to the residents involved was restricted due to the fact that the research design had, necessarily, been developed prior to their involvement.

Although they had a clear role in the delivery of the work, due to the types of constraints that we have mentioned before about resources and time, their scope to influence was restricted to a research design that had already been agreed. It was an interesting process for me to go through to have to explain why I worked in a certain way and to understand why different organisations and residents worked in the way they did and for us to attempt to understand each others' expectations and limits.

The fact that I was a university researcher clearly carried certain connotations for some, for example that I would take the lead and that voices would not be heard. It was through reflection on the process we went through during this project that it really dawned on me that we hadn't done enough work at the beginning of the process to achieve the equality and mutuality we were aiming for.

I think the stage at which we involve residents in the M: BH project was a mistake. There were all sorts of valid reasons why it was difficult to get their input at the proposal development stage, however, on reflection, I think that those involved in the proposal development (two universities and two community organisations) did not give sufficient thought and time to the issue of early inclusion.

At the point at which we did seek to involve residents (when funding was secured), those we approached voiced their concerns and made it clear that should such a project be considered again in the future, earlier involvement should be sought. For me, talking about that piece of work ever since, that's always been a bit of a stumbling block. We almost went against what we were saying about participation. Again, on reflection, I wish I had pushed for more consideration of early involvement and sought ways of addressing the perceived barriers, it remained something about which I was uncomfortable throughout the process.

study. I find I get a really positive response from students because they really welcome the opportunity of hearing about current, often local, projects. The tutors tend to teach the theory about participation, involvement – whatever it is, they teach it and then they ask me and others like me to describe a real life case. Obviously that really brings it alive for the students and they are able to apply the theory. I really enjoy that. I'm happy to do that.

Describe how this has been of strategic importance to your school or discipline

I think it opens up opportunities for developing exciting collaborative research proposals and that has certainly been the case for me now. I'm very excited and pleased that SASS and SSPARC are recognising the value of developing the relationships with a range of organisations. There is scope within my current role for me to meet with organisations, explore potential research interests and potentially input time into developing research proposals. I think that is an indication of how the Cupp work is becoming embedded – and I'm really happy that it happens to be through me. I think its very positive.

What do you need from your department to stay involved in this type of work?

Support to put in time to building relationships and developing ideas. Recognition of the enormous amount of time that needs to go into this work: relationship building, looking for connections, making sure you have the right people involved. I have a feeling that will be the key thing – the allowance of time.

What do you need from a structure like Cupp?

Most useful is to support someone like me in seeking support from my school/faculty for the type of work that I am interested in doing. Which does seem to have worked within SASS. In this way, Cupp's work becomes embedded within departments. That's what I feel I get from Cupp – that back up in arguing within the school 'this is worthwhile', 'this is worth doing', look at your corporate plan, you say you are going to do it, this is how you can do it, Cupp plays a key role in having those discussions.

Advice?

Clearly, the best bit of advice would be to pay attention to the evaluation of this type of work that is being carried out already at UoB and perhaps wider. It would be really helpful if Cupp could provide a resource (on the website) of evaluations, flagging up people's experiences allowing others to learn from them. Of course you can never beat face to face. I think if somebody in a faculty or school is interested in developing this type of work, obviously being enabled to make the contact with the people already doing it would be beneficial. Perhaps staff new to this type of work could be 'buddied' with someone with experience. Perhaps time could be spent observing them, how they go about their interactions with communities or different types of organisations and give themselves that build up time before they dive in to a funded project. Just so that they begin to get an understanding – which it has taken me 8 or 9 years to develop; that kind of knowledge and understanding and there will be plenty of us around the university that they can tap in to.

From laboratory rats to community psychology:
Two and a bit years of community research in Brighton

Carl Walker



Why bother with community research?

Okay to be fair the title is a little disingenuous. I never actually worked with labrats in my former guise as a mainstream psychologist (at least not of the four legged variety). I did however work in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Sciences in UCL where peoples' lived experiences of mental health tended to exist behind a barrage of increasingly exclusive statistical operations like multiple logistic regression and bootstrapping. At UCL I became incredibly adept at working with numbers, making these numbers do things and then drawing tenuous conclusions from what

"I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the community, and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can."

George Bernard Shaw

my numbers had told me. As part of the mental health sciences' long term mission to justify its superiority to lay knowledge, we hid inside the nice, comfy nooks and crannies provided by the world of epidemiology. And make no mistake it was comfortable. But there was also a sense that something was missing. I knew from my own past that there was an awful lot more to mental health than Bayesian statistics but that we in that particular Ivory Tower weren't doing a huge amount to let people know this.

Following a great many interviews with mental health service users (in order to gain information that could be turned into numbers. It often struck me that maybe it would be more useful if

service users could just speak in numbers and then we could cut out the pretence at human engagement) a number of things began to slowly dawn on me.

In no particular order they were:

- There must be better ways of using people's experiences of despair and tragedy than this;
- These individualised models of mental health ignored the systematic political, economic and social neglect and marginalisation that many people with mental health problems were experiencing;
- Should we be speaking for service users and if so were we actually doing it very well?
- London was too busy.

So with the self righteous piety of the moral convert I embraced a series of changes. Granted my contract also happened to be running out and the thought of not eating also helped me reach the conclusion that changes were afoot. I realised that I needed to work in a different context, to work in a place that encouraged critical reflection; to embrace the idea of working with people rather than on them, and to gain a freedom not to convert every living experience into a number. So like Dick Whittington in reverse I made my journey away from London and down to the University of Brighton.

Who did I get involved with?

At this stage it feels like it might be easier to discuss who I didn't get involved with. I'm not sure that my procedure to become involved with community organisations was ideal but through the ever helpful Polly Rodriguez in Cupp, I

obtained a list of all of the local mental health organisations and contacted almost all of them. Firstly I wanted to find out what they did and second to find out whether I could be of any use to them. This felt more useful than your standard *'I have a research project, can you give me some participants for it'*. If I couldn't be of any practical use to them then I would be on my merry way. After a slow start, and some false starts, I became involved in some capacity with a number of organisations.

I became a trustee at Brighton and Hove Mind and started a research sub-committee since they were keen to develop some evaluative research. I also took the lead on three projects with Mind, one on a local suicide awareness campaign for men over 40 (together with Brighton and Hove council and a number of other local stakeholders), an evaluation of their LGBT mental health support groups and a mentoring service in West Sussex. I worked with Retain, a Brighton-based organisation helping people with mental health difficulties with their employment and on a project called the *'Revolving Door'*, which involved exploring the difficulties of homeless people in Brighton. I am also currently working with the Sussex Partnership Trust and Newhaven Community Development Association in developing community-oriented mental health services in Newhaven. We have worked together on an ESRC Case studentship application, results of which are pending. In truth once you start working with community mental health organisations my experience is that there tends not to be a shortage of people interested in having academics work with them on their projects. And while this may seem like an unusually large number of projects for one

academic to be involved in within this time frame I should stress two things. First of all, like Zammo from Grange Hill I was never very good at *'just saying no'*. Indeed once you start to be involved in community-university research this is actually a useful skill that took me some time to develop. Actually on reflection I'm still not very good at it. Secondly what became obvious was that different projects required different degrees of involvement and at different times. Some projects took off and others stalled and my concern was not to throw all my energies into one project that did not take off. So instead I threw all my energies into a number and decided to play chicken with a nervous breakdown.

So how does one be a good community-focussed academic?

Now this question is tricky, primarily because I have probably failed as often as I have succeeded in the projects I have worked on but then I suppose, on reflection, that failure is a relative term. I have listed a couple of key points below that I have slowly and sometimes painfully come to realise as key elements in the process. They may not make the most encouraging reading for everyone but in my experience they are fundamental and not uncommon.

Be prepared to be flexible in the way that you work. Just as you will, service users and community service managers come to projects with expectations for how the project will proceed. Your previous ways of working may have included a very carefully regulated construction of what research looks like. I have never started a project that ended up looking like I thought it would. As academics we carry

so much implicit information about how to work, how to do research and how to be an academic and quite often these implicit ways of being an academic researcher are not challenged. Perhaps the one big difference on these types of projects was working with someone who does not have this implicit knowledge. This is good because it brings into the foreground exactly what these implicit assumptions are and whether they are actually worthwhile in practice, rather than just robotically moving from stage to stage.

Listen to what people say. Academics are used to talking a lot to people and more importantly at people but that is a model of communication that needs to change. That means listening rather than waiting to talk (another bad habit of mine). In my field of mental health my experience is that many service users have long histories of not being listened to by various different professionals that they encounter and they don't need another to add to the list. I would fight to keep this at the back of your mind during all encounters. I took to writing the words '*listen Carl*' in big letters in some of my meeting notes following previous meetings where I blatantly wasn't listening as much as I would have liked. The key is to be willing to not be the expert. Relationships with community organisations are not about how much you know or how many models of mental illness you are familiar with. I learned very quickly that my knowledge of the lived experiences of people only took me so far. As an academic you spend so long actively striving for expertise in a given area but I think it is healthy to put this to the side and start again when working with new people in new organisations with new experiences. In fact assume they know

more than you. Firstly because it places you in the position to listen properly and secondly because it is probably true. Be prepared to be a novice. As obvious as this sounds, it is crucial to treat people with respect, as equals and not to patronise them. Again service users and to a lesser degree community service managers often have plentiful histories of being patronised by people positioning themselves as experts. In some cases you have to deconstruct the stigma of academics and universities being unapproachable havens of elitism (which they usually are). The fact that I wear shorts wherever possible seems to help people realise, quite correctly, that they are not dealing with a great thinker. I am not suggesting that wearing shorts is the key to success, rather that we need to be aware of the baggage that we carry into these relationships as a result of who we are and where we are affiliated to.

Treat organisations you work with differently. I have had hugely different experiences with different organisations and you cannot superimpose previous working models and relationships on new relationships because they simply don't fit in many cases. Be prepared to start afresh with each new relationship you encounter.

In my case most of my community-university engagements have involved research projects of some type or at least a research element to the relationship. Sometimes at certain times you will have to be prepared to drive and to push the project in places (as they will with you). Not because your partners are disinterested, lazy or want to catch '*Neighbours*' rather than answer your call. Rather they are usually extremely busy

and trying to undertake multiple tasks on very limited budgets. This is the reality of working in the voluntary sector and so you will often find yourself on the proverbial backburner unless you keep up a degree of visibility. Sometimes this scenario will be reversed if you are entering one of the frequent teaching minefields characterised by multiple lectures and seminars in a short period and your community partner needs to meet you or for you to undertake a piece of work. Just be prepared to take up the reins at some points and to be reigned in at others. An unanswered telephone call or email isn't a slight (well, not usually).

Finally if it is collaborative research you are doing, be prepared to do it on the cheap. In an ideal world we could meet with interested community partners, discuss possible projects and then work up combined bids for grants. We would receive these lovely fat grants 12-18 months later and carry out a cracking project from a specially chosen locale in Barbados. While being mindful of the growing importance of bringing money into the university, the bottom line is that community partners often need work doing fast and cheap. But this tension is not fatal because you can carry out good work with little or no budget. Research, and specifically community-university collaborative research, does not need a whopping £100,000 budget and 12 month gestation period to get going. Good work can be carried out ad-hoc. This might mean bringing in Masters' students to integrate work into their dissertations or research practice modules. I have had experience of this with School of Applied Social Science (SASS) students and it can work really well. One Masters' student worked with me on the Mind

project on suicide awareness in men over 40. She helped Mind with the distribution of the material and with the interviews and analysis. Mind were extremely impressed with her involvement (as was I) and we are now working up a paper for publication together. This kind of relationship ticks everyone's box and should be encouraged wherever possible. You might also have to do certain elements of the research yourself; that is, doing work that an RA or student might be expected to do. Its your call, you can spend a long time preparing a joint bid that may be successful or may not or you can go out and do some of it yourself or with students.

It makes sense where possible to use the partnership to enhance teaching. In the context of community psychology, which I organise in SASS, it is crucial that students get an opportunity to hear from community partners. In both undergraduate and post graduate modules my service user and service manager partners have visited to talk about their experiences of community psychology partnerships and their experiences of working with universities. This allows us to contribute to the process of disseminating our work but also brings their work to a new audience who may engage in such partnerships in the future. It has been a really positive experience for the students and partners although not always comfortable from my own perspective. I ask the partners to be candid about the benefits and drawbacks and strengths and weaknesses of these collaborative relationships and of course this includes their relationship with me. Now normally I am a big subscriber to the '*ignorance is bliss*' school of thought and content myself with the assumption that partners were overawed by my academic

charisma, democratic nature and technical know-how. These fragile myths are shattered but this is probably not a bad thing.

On reflection, the advice above is far from groundbreaking and the Nobel committees won't be contacting me in the near future as a result of my issuing it. It can probably be summed up by saying be nice and respectful to the people you work with. There can, in many cases, be a power differential between the community organisation and the academic and this can be felt keenly by some community partners. The

key is to try to be aware of this. However even by doing so there are likely to be problems and I have listed a few difficult experiences that I had at different stages on some of the projects.

Difficult experiences

Be prepared to turn up at meetings and not have a single clue why you are there

On more than one occasion my involvement with an organisation has led to my being invited to various meetings that might as well have

The Mind trustee meeting

As a trustee with Mind I thought I might contribute to a worthwhile organisation doing excellent work with a group of vulnerable service users in the community. As a result of my undertaking this on a voluntary basis I suspected that at the very least I would be treated with respect and courtesy and indeed a little admiration for my selfless sacrifice of time that might otherwise be spent watching Hollyoaks. And this is exactly how I was treated both by Mind workers and service users. Well generally speaking. I say this because I was invited as a trustee to the AGM where all trustees sat at the front of a hall and where service users and members had the opportunity to ask trustees questions about the organisation. Since I was quite a new trustee and I had mainly been involved in the organisations' research I figured that this would be a cosmetic exercise for me. Sure enough the other more senior trustees were grilled on a number of topics and I sat there looking serious and studious. Then from nowhere one of the members pointed at me and said *"Who's he? Has he got a tongue in his head, can he actually speak? What have you got to say for yourself?"* Now this came as quite a surprise. Possibly as a result of nerves or due to the harsh nature of the question I started laughing. Luckily this seemed to break the tension (which had been growing steadily at the meeting) and there was some more laughter in the room. I then stammered and stuttered some half answer on why I was there and that I did actually have a tongue. It was not a performance to threaten the world's premier orators. Anyway the point was that as soon as you affiliate to an organisation you might be drawn into some of the internal tensions within that organisation which means that you might end up in someone's cross-hairs.

been conducted in Chinese for all that I was able to offer. As a result of community partners themselves being unsure of my role in projects (and my expertise or lack of) I found myself frequently *'over invited'* to meetings. This meant being asked or invited to come along to meetings that had absolutely no relevance to me or my involvement with their organisation. I found myself at a number of these meetings and falling into the age-old trap of feeling conscious that I was the only person in the room not to contribute to this meeting. Instead of thinking *'well, after all, I should not be at this meeting since it is not relevant to me'* I decided to start contributing. By contributing I mean talk nonsense about a completely unknown subject and while this is par for the course for a professional lecturer it doesn't play out quite so well in the community and voluntary sector. The key learning was to turn down invites to irrelevant meetings and if you do find yourself at one then keep your own counsel.

Bloody acronyms

Anyone working in mental health has to learn the language of acronyms. In academic research you have your classic DSM's and ICD's or PTSD's but the statutory and hence community and voluntary sector takes things to another level. I have never heard so many acronyms in my life and my first Mind trustee meeting was a swirl of CSIPs and SEEDA's and NIMHEs and a whole host of others. I made the schoolboy error of not stopping to question acronyms as they came up but instead choosing to nod sagely as they flew around the room. I found it difficult to ask about the acronyms as it went against my every instinct to not publicly reveal

myself to be ignorant (at least not obviously). My advice is not to do this. It will only lead to folly as you are asked your opinion on a topic that seemed to wholly consist of capital lettered words. Instead rejoice in your ignorance and stop people for every one used. Most people are most happy to explain and indeed take apologetic responsibility for using exclusive language with a novice. There is no glory to be had in successfully bluffing these encounters. I learned this the hard way on a number of occasions.

Lack of money

Undertaking work with community organisations means that you often find that money is not always at a premium. As I mentioned above this does not always have to be critical and there are ways to work around it in certain instances but it always has to be kept in mind. I was fortunate to receive a couple of small grants from Cupp and these have helped hugely, whether it was payment for transcribing interviews or for attending a conference.

What also happened was that a couple of the organisations I was working with had some money put aside for the evaluation of a service that they were running and contacted me about either undertaking paid evaluation or facilitating a researcher from the university to undertake this. This can be set up on a bespoke basis but I recommend setting up a system for this to be organised between organisations and departments because otherwise it can lead to long administrative delays which push the timelines beyond that which are useful for the community project.

“Yippee another bloody academic”

I have been fortunate to engage with some fantastic, warm, driven, passionate and intelligent service users and managers who are committed to using academic relationships to advance the interests of their users wherever possible. If you are an academic working with an organisation make sure you appreciate that some people will think your involvement a better idea than others and that this difference in your usefulness carries both within organisations as well as between them. It is often not a uniform organisational decision to become involved with an academic and some people are not always thrilled to be faced with your presence, either as a result of previous work with academics who did not embrace participatory community models of working or just because it can seem like another expert coming on board to tell them why they are not doing their jobs properly. A good example is my involvement on a project with a community organisation last year. I was asked by a service manager to help her design and undertake an evaluation in order that they could present this to their funders and secure further funding. She reasoned that having external professional involvement would improve her case for showing how useful the service was.

To the right (and below) are two conversations I had regarding my involvement with the organisation. The first one was the conversation I had with the service manager who thought it was a good idea to have me involved and the second was with a service worker with whom I had to liaise to organise the evaluation. They are not stated exactly but have been dredged from the depths of my memory. Although this is

Conversation 1

Academic as potential service saviour (names changed in the interests of anonymity)

“

S Hi Troy, thanks so much for coming to meet with us. I'm Sarah the service manager.

T No problem, I'm really glad to be involved, this looks like a really worthwhile service for people in the area.

S I have sent the information through on email regarding what we need for the evaluation and analysis.

T Okay well great.

S The best thing to do is to contact Bill. Bill is the project worker and he has all the details of the service users and organise rooms for the interviews. Perhaps you can come and meet him in early May and organise the project from there?

T Okay will do.

”

not a traditionally strong area for me (memory that is), I think they illustrate the point that you will probably encounter different people with different opinions of academics.

Final reflections

In recent years there has been a considerable literature on the different ways of working in the area of community based research (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005, Stickley, 2006). My own recent interests have tended to follow

Conversation 2

Academic as pain in the arse

“

T Hi there Bill, my name is Troy –
I am a ment...

S I know who you are.
(studiously ignoring my presence)

Profoundly uncomfortable silence

T Er, okay, Sarah mentioned
contacting you to organise the
interviews for the research.

S Yeah well I'm too busy at the
moment. (Still looking at anything
but me)

T So how would you like to do this?

Silence

”

Thus began a process of having to work like the proverbial carthorse just to get Bill to respond to emails and telephone calls. Eventually I was able to move my relationship with Bill from pure hatred to mild disinterest. I considered this a personal victory. It turned out that he had a pretty poor opinion of outside experts doing research on people and places that he thought they knew nothing about. To be fair he had a point. Now I don't provide this example to take cheap pot shots at a project worker who was doing a good job on a worthwhile project. That is below the belt even for me. Rather it is to point out that the experiences that we have can differ widely within the organisations that we agree to work with.

It turned out that, as well as a suspicious attitude to academics, I had stumbled into some fractious office politics between the manager and worker and my presence slotted neatly into this tension.

In the end we did manage to work on an evaluation which led to further funding so there was undoubtedly a degree of success to the collaboration but the path to get there was not always straightforward.

participatory and action oriented approaches and these approaches tend to coalesce around modes of inquiry that have been developed with the intention to devolve to community groups the power inherent in the research process. The idea is that relevant community stakeholders are positioned in such a way as to determine research goals and outcomes (Savan & Sider, 2003).

There is a popular notion that being able to *'ask the question'* is one of the most powerful positions in the research process since it is here that the ideological direction of our work is chosen. It is at this stage that any individual or transformative sense of empowerment for the people that our research affects will be realised. The questions we ask, who we ask them to, how we ask them and the reason that we ask them determines the political utility of any piece of research and participatory research and community psychology approaches have sought to make this process an explicit and transparent exercise in personal values (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005).

My experiences above show that the empowering process of participation with community colleagues does not always go the way that we, as academics, might expect and I am not the first bureaucrat or academic to express surprise at the direction that some of these collaborations take. However, emergent contexts for change that position service users and community groups as central to the inception and development of research are essential for service users to grasp power that does not come with caveats and conditions, even when previously liberal service providers

and academics find that the results of this process conflict with their service provision or research agendas.

What have I learned from my work with community groups? Unfortunately not any Waltons-esque platitudes regarding participatory research. I have learned that it can be a messy and difficult business to negotiate, that it is often challenging and that it contains many more and varied obstructions than more traditional mainstream academic approaches to undertaking research. However this hasn't remotely dimmed my enthusiasm or belief that it is absolutely worth doing. Working with community groups and service users on mental health research is the only way to truly understand the lived experiences of mental health. They allow us to collaborate on generating notions of mental well-being and social justice that are almost always considered an irrelevance in *'ivory tower'* models of working.

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