The role of digital engagement in place-based projects

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Creative People and Places in Lockdown: responses and learning

Creative People and Places in Lockdown: responses and learning is a short series of Case Studies that explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on CPP projects and how they responded. Each of the five Case Studies will explore a different theme and we will publish an accompanying reflective blog on our website, www.creativepeopleplaces.org, in December 2020.

As COVID-19 - and the resultant lockdown - forced us into physical distance from one another, digital tools and online engagement became key to maintaining connection, communication and friendship. For many CPP Places, what followed was a steep learning curve - an intense live experiment in the online delivery of creative projects. The urgent drive to move engagement online has been an opportunity to investigate the role that digital engagement can play in place-based projects, and to explore the factors that can best enable effective online delivery. We've been looking back on what's been learned through this intense period for digital engagement:

Cubes Example - Small Contentments - 6 Million+

1 Moving projects online brought new opportunities for reach and engagement

Creative Scene (CPP for the West Yorkshire towns of Dewsbury, Batley, Mirfield, Cleckheaton and Heckmondwike), supported Small Contentments, a project by local organisation 6 Million+ to mark the 25th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide. In place of meeting in person, project participants used a Whatsapp group, supplemented by hand-delivered creative packs and socially distanced artist visits in gardens. The Whatsapp group was conceived to support the project participants to share their experiences and check-in with one another. However, it quickly developed into a trusting, intimate and supportive space that the group could actively shape to meet their needs. The Whatsapp format was embraced by people of all ages (including one holocaust survivor aged 96, and those for whom English was not a first language), and enabled group members to support each other in ways - such as throughout the night - that would have been very difficult to realise without a digital element to the project.

"I've found out that we're all keen gardeners, and some people cook the most wonderful food. I've been able to enjoy the process, enjoy the conversations on WhatsApp, and see what everyone else is doing"

Karen, Small Contentments participant

Project participants in Small Contentments already had a longstanding connection with 6 Million+, so came to the project with trust and relationships already in place. This is likely to have made the move to a digital environment considerably more straightforward. The creation of a film at the end of the project offered a further opportunity for participants to share, reflect and celebrate the connections forged via the project - especially important in marking the project's conclusion in a time when the participants could not come together in person.

"For three months to stay in the house, it's very, very hard. Hopefully, it will come day when we can meet each other face to face"

Jasmina, Small Contentments participant

For East Durham Creates, the Fishes and Wishes project combined a Facebook-based project with public art installations in the local environment. The art installations attracted public interest and intrigue (*"Can you go viral if you're just in one place? We went locally viral"*), drawing people into a Facebook group where they were supported to make and share their own creations, and to interact with a story as it developed. The digital element was key in engaging with the community in a socially-distant manner, and it enabled those who were shielding - and some people from beyond the local area - to participate.

2 Digital engagement has shaped community consultation and co-production

Community consultation and local co-production are inherent to the structure of CPP Places, and the move to digital spaces has shaped that element of delivery too. Whilst some CPPs found that their regular community participants and decision-makers were less available during lockdown, others found that digital events helped them to connect with new people. In some cases, for example, online meetings have been found to be more accessible than their real-world equivalents, enabling participation to be more easily juggled around work, caring commitments, disability or shielding:

"Decision making meetings have shifted very successfully online with no obvious barriers to participation, although we are very much aware of digital exclusion in the borough. We must continue to offer this as an option long term as it enables the involvement of a range of people who struggle to leave home for meetings"
Creative People & Places Hounslow

As lockdown progressed, a gap was observed in some cases between those who quickly became familiar (and then increasingly fatigued by) Zoom calls, and those who were new to the technology and took longer to develop a familiarity with online meetings. In those cases, managing

Top: Artists with King of Fishes.
Above: Fishes and Wishes

the very different skills and energy of individuals added a challenging additional layer to the successful facilitation of online meetings. Whilst Places are looking forward to being able to reconnect in person for decision-making meetings, where it can be easier to create deeper or more personal connections, many will be looking to incorporate digital elements into their planning and

community engagement processes for the future.

"It think what it [lockdown] has given us is a range of options, so that people can be part of things in future in a way that best suits them"
Creative Scene

3 Digital exclusion was a key concern

The move to digital engagement was not always straightforward. As delivery across a range of sectors (including schooling) rushed online, CPPs were extremely sensitive to the likelihood of digital exclusion for many of their community members. The demand on many families' limited digital capacity was high, and many CPPs were conscious of not adding to that burden, nor of reinforcing the exclusion already experienced by families with limited resources. In those cases, a mixed delivery model - with physical elements running alongside the virtual - were key.

"We've never relied solely on digital because as an area we have a higher than average level of digital exclusion as well as issues such as data poverty or in many households lack of access and/or shared devices. I think it's all about adjusting and working across lots of different platforms and particularly in places where there are high levels of digital exclusion and/or data poverty/ limited access then you have to consider digital as one output but not the be all and end all"

East Durham Creates

Digital exclusion is understood by many Places as a complex and nuanced issue - not simply a case of whether or not internet access is available, but also encompassing issues around digital literacy, access (or not) to different types of device, concerns around personal safety, confidence to show what your home looks like, and access issues for people who struggle with their speech or have English as a second language.

"[There are] some people with issues feeling safe online and being able to have the camera off, or being self conscious about people seeing them and seeing where they live or seeing themselves on screen"

Ideas Test

Above: Creative Scene. Above right: Small Contentments - 6 Million+. Top centre and right: Fishes and Wishes.

4 Attracting (and maintaining) public interest can be challenging

In East Durham Creates, one project encouraged local families to create a model village from recycled materials - offering a series of 30 online videos to coach families through the creative process in their own homes. The videos were distributed by email and are now hosted on the CPP website, where they are an attractive and high-quality collection. However, the Project Lead noted that the series asked a lot of participants' commitment at a time when lives were unpredictable and demands on energy felt high. The email distribution format (chosen to target local families) offered very few opportunities for two-way engagement, interaction or community-building. This echoes the experience of Museums Northumberland bait, who observed that this format *"can feel like 'one-way traffic' with limited feedback on how people have used video step by step guides"*.

At Creative Scene, the Batley and Spen Youth Theatre company moved their summer school online. The young participants benefited from access to West End Theatre professionals - who were able to contribute a digital offer more easily than an in-person summer school. However, the Project Leads also noticed that it was harder to reach those young people who may have tagged along with a friend to an in-person event (*"the value of positive peer pressure"*) but who lacked the confidence, motivation or inclination to join a digital offer.

5 Real-live creative activity often brings unexpected positive impacts

The move to digital during lockdown also offered an opportunity to consider the indirect impacts of creative activity when it is delivered live in communities, and to question what may have been missing as these events moved online.

In Creative People & Places Hounslow, a popular series of creative activity takes place regularly on Hounslow High Street and in Felton Town Centre. During lockdown, these dance classes moved online to Facebook Live - attracting very high numbers of participants, some international attendance, and a diverse audience. In contrast to the live events, however, there was relatively little opportunity for the team to understand the nuance of engagement (who came along, what brought them there, and what they got out of it) when compared to the opportunity simply to stand at the outskirts of a physical event and observe. The energy and excitement of public events can attract passers-by and spark conversations with those who wouldn't typically choose to attend a creative event. Equally, the energy and fun of these events can enliven an area, influence people's perceptions of their area, and bring joy and cheer to those who are simply passing by.

As some lockdown restrictions begin to be lifted, Creative Scene have recently returned to in-person creative events on Dewsbury Market - noticing the impromptu

Artist Clare with her pack from 6 Million+

conversations, engagement with passers-by and chance encounters that deepen and widen connections with communities. These passing moments, that often happen on the sidelines of a creative event or with those who hadn't planned to participate in any formal way, can be absolutely at the heart of community creativity - but have proved enormously difficult to replicate online.

Similarly, Museums Northumberland bait noticed that it can be less easy, or simply not possible for facilitators to 'read the room' online in the same way as for live group activity. In one digital project led via a closed Facebook Group, they noted that whilst everyone in the group had watched posts, not everyone had chosen to share their own work.

"It takes a lot of confidence to share online, even in a closed group"
Museums Northumberland bait

6 Adapting delivery to suit new contexts is at the heart of the CPP model of delivery

A number of Project Leads observed that it is in the very nature of the CPP model to deliver creative activity wherever it needs to happen, and to adapt delivery to work wherever people are - whether in a car park, a town hall, an open field or - this year in particular - online. CPPs translated their experience - consciously or otherwise - of adapting their work to different contexts to focus their energy on creating safe, engaging, welcoming and inclusive online spaces.

"In many ways, CPPs are perfectly designed to meet a crisis like this. We adapt to changing circumstances, we're flexible, and we adapt to deliver what the community needs"
East Durham Creates

"CPPs always work outside of conventional arts infrastructure anyway - the work always happens where it needs to be. The town is our arts centre and we can take solace from that - we have expertise to bring and to share"
Heart of Glass, St Helens

"It's the safeness of the space that is the thing - whether digital or in person"
Creative Scene

COVID-19 and lockdown has stimulated a period of intense digital delivery, experimentation and learning in CPP Places this year. The accelerated pace of change has enabled progress in digital engagement that may have taken years to achieve under usual circumstances, and brought to the fore useful learning around in attracting and maintaining attention online, building deep and wide connections, and reaching those who may not consider creative activity to be for them.

In many cases, a hybrid model of delivery - where some elements were delivered safely in person, and supported by a digital platform for further engagement - was found to combine the best of both worlds. In-person activity offers deep personal connections and can better reach those who may not typically participate, including those with limited digital access. In tandem, a digital offer has been effectively used to help more people to get involved, to invite participants and artists to work collaboratively, and support new leaders to emerge. Looking ahead, Places will continue to explore how best to combine the flexibility of digital delivery with the very particular sparkle of real life delivery - supporting the CPP's distinctive approach to locally-led and place-based creative activity.

The action learning mindset that is at the heart of CPP delivery has helped Places to adapt nimbly to the intense digital learning that's taken place this year. Places have embraced the learning gathered from such an intense period online, and will use it to shape and inform their future delivery - both on and off line.

Kim Strickson of 6 Million+ with Holocaust Survivor Iby Knill

This Case Study was commissioned as part of the Creative People and Places National Peer Learning and Communications programme.

All Creative People and Places (CPP) projects work together as a network and participate in National Peer Learning & Communications Programme (NPL&C), funded by Arts Council England since 2013. Shaped by the needs and aspirations of the network, the NPL&C programme aims to share learning that comes out of all CPP projects throughout the network, and works in tandem with Arts Council England to share CPP learning both within the arts and cultural sector and beyond.

Arts Council England's Creative People and Places programme (CPP) is about more people taking the lead in choosing, creating and taking part in arts and culture experiences in the places where they live. There are 33 projects, each located in a place where people are least likely to engage with arts and culture. Arts Council England have committed £108 million to the programme so far, covering 33 Projects, 33 Places, 30 consortia and 45 local authorities. Since 2013, there have been 4.5 million engagements with the CPP programme[1] and 86% of people who participate in CPP[2] weren't previously engaging regularly with arts and culture[3].

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