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Creators	Satchwell, Candice and Tempest, Amy Lee

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Perspectives on student engagement and change in a collaborative community-based story-telling project

Amy Tempest, Candice Satchwell
University of Central Lancashire

Setting the scene

Involving university students in academics' research projects is not always seen as a viable pathway, partly because students are usually positioned as learners rather than as experts. This case study provides some insight into the opportunities provided by a research project which aimed to co-create stories by, with and for disadvantaged young people in the community. Although not envisaged at the start of the project, students' contributions became critical to its completion and success. Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council for three years, the project¹ involved three universities and a large children's charity. Disadvantaged children and young people, working with the research team, told their own stories, eventually producing a set of forty-eight fictionalised stories, many of which were illustrated, animated and housed in co-produced story-telling machines. Community writers and artists and forty-five undergraduate and postgraduate students were all involved in a variety of roles: as creative writers, animators, sound recordists, illustrators and support workers for disabled young people. Some of the students were working as paid interns during the summer, others contributing work which could be counted as coursework and yet others volunteering out of interest or empathy. All added their own expertise, creativity, interests and passions (James and Brookfield, 2015) to make a significant difference to the project outcomes.

The core of this case study is the experience on this project of one student who became involved as an intern and then continued as a volunteer. We examine the value of the process of student engagement in a community-based research project and suggest that this project is an example of co-production: *"a process whereby people from different settings and backgrounds work together ... [and where] different skill sets and levels of expertise are valued equally"* (Banks *et al.*, 2019, p.58).

Feedback from the students indicated that positioning them as experts rather than as learners led to an enhancement of confidence in their own abilities and skills, some but not all of which related to their taught courses. Dollinger *et al.* (2018) similarly consider students' resources, such as ability and personality, while Díaz-Méndez and Gummesson (2012) discuss the amalgamation of institutional and student resources in the co-creation of value in higher education (HE). Benefits for students in our study also included raised awareness of social injustice and an understanding of the creative processes involved in participatory research (Kleiman, 2008; McClam and Flores-Scott, 2012; Stuttaford *et al.*, 2012). Amy, co-author of this article and the student in this case study, was studying for an English Literature and Creative Writing degree and had a background in counselling and care work. She aspires to work as a writer and a therapeutic writing workshop facilitator and is now continuing her education in MA Arts Health. Her account demonstrates that the notion of change applied not only to the project itself, which aimed to change outcomes for young

¹ The project title is: *Stories to connect with: disadvantaged children creating 'phygital' community artefacts to share their life-narratives of resilience and transformation*. Grant ref: AH/M001539/1.

people with disabilities and/or experience of care, but also led to change in the lives of the students who became involved (Healey *et al.*, 2014; Bryson, 2014). Amy's account includes her experiences of disadvantages faced in education and her chosen career path as a working-class, disabled woman. Her experience is framed in terms of: personal and professional motivations for applying for the internship; her own expertise provided to the project; her further learning within the project; some moments of unexpected learning; and her further applications of learning since her involvement with the project.

Amy's story

My motivation to join Stories2Connect

It wasn't until I was twenty-eight that I decided to gain a BA (Hons) English Literature and Creative Writing degree at UCLan. Before that, I trained and worked as a counsellor before working as a residential care worker with the elderly. As a young, working-class, single parent, it was difficult to pursue a profession dominated by the middle class without caving in to the temptation of the many unskilled/semi-skilled jobs my hometown of Burnley offered. A regular income – albeit at minimum wage – and the ease of gaining employment had an allure often greater than pursuit of a career I was passionate about. A career of passion came second to paying my rent on time.

While I was working as a care assistant in a nursing home, I became unwell and was later diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. In search of a silver lining, I decided to go back into education to gain an English Literature and Creative Writing degree, in another attempt to move away from work that required physical labour and to move closer towards a career of passion. My intention was eventually to combine my counselling and creative writing skills and work on community arts health projects using writing as a therapeutic tool.

During the summer of my first year as a student, I was keen to find a paid internship to plug the gap in money from student finance loans/grants while allowing myself to keep learning, in line with my career aspirations. However, the internships offered to literature and creative writing students were as literature researchers, publishing house interns and teaching assistants and didn't support my aspirations. Searching through the other schools' internships, I found the Stories2Connect project, which brought together writing, community arts, health and a regular wage to see me through the summer break.

Without the exchange of my time/skills for money, I simply would not have been able to apply. Further opportunities afforded to students are often unpaid work, relying on the need of students to gain experience and exposure within their chosen field. However, experience and exposure alone do not cover the basic costs of student-living during the summer break. That not all students can afford to apply for such roles may, I suspect, help consolidate middle-class dominance of professional roles in our society – the creative industries, in particular, are notoriously elitist. Without its addition of a wage on top of experience and exposure, Stories2Connect would have been another opportunity knocking at a door I couldn't open.

Student expertise and further learning

Even at the interview stage, it was clear that the project would provide an internship with some freedom to shape my own learning experience, rather than mere menial tasks

dispensed by a boss figure. The project lead, Candice, was interested to hear about my past work experiences as well as my current learning in my degree. From conversations about that, we began to define what my role would be within the project and how I would become a project staff member, not just a student intern, even if only for a few months. I wouldn't be 'clocking in and out' of work: Candice confirmed that I'd be able to work flexible hours around my other commitments – a big consideration for a single parent commuting into university. Such a creative and flexible approach to my role helped to position me as someone with both something to contribute and much to gain from the experience. This change in expectations instilled a sense of responsibility and therefore a reason to become invested in the outcome of the project, even if I wouldn't be there to see it. I later went on to volunteer some of my time during the project's final stage because of the investment I had in the outcome. The sense of responsibility shifted to a sense of pride in the shared endeavour.

My earliest experiences were of seeing the project in action. I was invited along to the workshops with a group of young people and the multi-disciplinary staff members. I was struck by the feeling of creative energy within the room, as well as the fun and inclusivity. It did not feel how I had expected an academic research project to feel: a quiet studious space with a clear distinction between academic and young adult, with myself somewhere between. Instead, conversation with the young adults and staff members proved to be relaxed and welcoming, as we shared food, played creative games and worked on the project ideas together. It became obvious before I read its literature that the project was led predominantly by the community values of inclusivity, equal space for expression of ideas and a sense of working together towards a shared goal. That goal was to produce stories, to be distributed to the wider community via 'phygital' (physical-digital) objects, books and animations. However, my experience of the workshops confirmed that the act of moving towards the goal was just as valuable as the end products and had latent positive effects on wellbeing.

This introduction to the project through the workshops made much more enjoyable the lonely task of data entry and analysis, blogging and the audio transcription of interviews, for I could keep in view both the goal and all those who would benefit individually from participating in the project. Despite this, I did at first experience some frustration, ironically associated with my expectations (coloured by past work roles) of a working relationship between a project manager and an intern: at times, I felt unsure of the unstructured aspect of my daily tasks and the lack of clear instructions, short-term goals and leadership. In short, I was often self-managing and working alone. My way of compensating for what I saw as a lack of management or supervision was to create my own system for self-management (e.g. I kept a record of my working hours and detailed record of each task completed to send to Candice).

It was at first confusing to be trusted to this extent. How would Candice know I was earning my wage fairly? Why wasn't she checking the quality and quantity of my work output? Adjusting from – typically – being micro-managed in an outcome- or goal-orientated workplace to becoming part of an ever-evolving project took some time. However, soon enough, I was acting as a narrative researcher by interviewing some of the young people myself, transcribing the audio recordings and compiling thematic data from this. This process allowed me to combine my counselling skills with the analytical skills I had acquired as a literature student; it was also a proactive opportunity to develop self-management and self-motivation rather than simply reacting to the expectations of a boss figure. Overall, I

recognise that the project management style of encouraging autonomy promoted a shift of focus from individual performance to a collective, or community, outcome.

Later, I began to take an interest in organising and planning the workshops as this aligned with my career aspirations. After discussing this with Candice, I was soon entrusted with creating a group writing exercise and hosting part of a workshop. I was able to work closely with two of the young people involved and gain insight into how my own ideas worked in action alongside viewing and assisting in their story creation. I was able to offer my knowledge of writing techniques and the story-writing process while keeping in mind that the young people were the experts in their own life narratives. This gave me direct experience of working as a creative writer within a community group. The ethos of allowing individuals to be the experts on their own lives was complemented by my own person-centred counselling skills and knowledge. This has directly contributed to my learning in my own area of interest – how to facilitate writing as a therapeutic tool within community groups.

I was able to work closely with one of the young people throughout different stages of the project. We worked through the process of narrative enquiry, transcription of her interviews, data analysis and writing exercises for story creation ideas, before, finally, the writing of her story. This young person and I had shared input during the creation process, with the story going back and forth between us before arriving at the final version. This required a good deal of communication between us and a level of trust, both of which combined to promote a sense of respect and learning, each from the other. It seems that the relationship of mutual respect between myself and Candice was able to influence the relationships I had with the young people, in that there was no hierarchy of roles. The work was something we did together, deploying both our strengths and our ideas. This way of working was reminiscent of work I had done in the past, with clients of counselling. It allowed an embodiment of what the psychologist Carl Rogers considered the core conditions for a therapeutic relationship – unconditional positive regard, empathy and congruence (Rogers, 1961).

This collaborative authorship – co-authorship – was extremely valuable in developing skills that a professional writer might need – I learnt how to write for a particular outcome or to a brief, the importance of considering the readership and how to negotiate on the storytelling rather than having complete artistic freedom. It also allowed me space to explore the ethics concerning this way of working with others and consider what co-authorship meant in terms of the power balance between those involved. Co-authorship and the ethics of this were not taught on my course, but I have since found it to be a common and rewarding way for writers to work. I became further convinced of the potential for combining my counselling, literature and writing skills in a way that could benefit communities. With renewed confidence in my abilities, I was also sure that I'd be able to make that happen. It might have taken me longer to arrive at that conclusion, had I not been given these opportunities within a supportive project.

Unexpected learning moments

I also collaborated with two illustrators and a sound technician to turn two of the stories into YouTube videos: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AAG3vtixvlo>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTa0zVvRKFc&t=9s>. This experience offered further insight into working collaboratively within the creative industries, something for which my university course had not provided direct opportunity. I was able to explore how my writing

could transcend the traditional format of the printed page and become a part of the digital age. Having the chance of seeing further applications for a writer in the creative industries has broadened my outlook on creative writing within multimedia. There was also great satisfaction in being able to see the stories in print, alongside an artist's visual interpretation of them. I and two illustrators learned to work together without intervention by other project members. It was another good lesson in learning to let go of complete creative freedom and authorship in favour of community values, shared experience and expression.

I began to consider that collaborative work might be empowering for a writer. It challenged the notion of the working-class writer reliant on a middle-class-dominated publishing industry to validate and distribute her work. I could instead distribute my writing via free media by collaborating with other creatives in my community.

Further applications of learning experience

Though my internship ended after a few months, I have since had opportunities with Stories2Connect, such as presenting at an academic conference and writing for this journal. I have been able to do both alongside Candice. To be able to work this closely with a researcher and academic has been a unique opportunity for me to understand more about the world of academia. This has dispelled some of my earlier feelings of inadequacy in this area and led to an increase in confidence which can be seen in my conference presentation style and academic writing style. I attribute this to having autonomy over my own academic and creative output within the project. I also have reflected on the times Candice showed me her own vulnerability and openness to learn throughout the process. She sought my feedback on one of her short stories. This positioned us both as experts and as learners.

It was a proud moment, receiving copies in print of the two stories I had written. It was also great to see that the project and people I had become invested in had made it to their goal and that the project was a success for both the young people and the researchers. And, of course, seeing my name in print was very satisfying for an aspiring writer!

Since my involvement in the project, I have had my own success in graduating and later becoming an MA student of Arts Health. My prior knowledge of collaborative research, multi-disciplinary teams and the stages of a community project have been valuable in planning my own research project. I have hosted writing groups and projects within different sectors of my own community – for example, at a hospice and a women's centre, as well as with refugees.

With my own writing, I have moved into performance poetry and spoken word and have kept in mind the value of collaboration with other artists for future projects. I have used free media such as YouTube to distribute my poems. I have plans to collaborate with a filmmaker and musician for future writing projects.

Final thoughts

When applying for the internship role, I was looking for a regular wage to see me through summer. I also wanted the experience and exposure that had been talked about during my university course, but which is often unavailable to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In truth, the exposure and experience marked on my curriculum vitae hasn't helped all that much in terms of my career progression. What *has* helped me is learning some valuable life lessons that have no doubt moved me forward in my career of passion.

Perhaps the most significant way the internship has had positive impact on my work since has been through witnessing the positive effect on wellbeing that creating together, sharing knowledge and expertise and sharing stories can have on those involved.

I learnt that it is not only possible but desirable for academics and students to work on projects together to help demystify academia and reduce the intimidating effect it can have on some. It is less about exposure and experience but more about creating supportive working relationships. But, for this way of working to have the most impact, it has to be where each person is both expert and learner.

Academics learning from student engagement

Amy's account demonstrates the remarkable potential for creativity, empathy and engagement that we discovered in a wide range of students. While I expected students to come forward in order to further their careers or to complete their course, many gave up their time to help with a project that touched them emotionally and sparked their passions (Satchwell, 2019). While involving students in academics' research may not be an immediate choice (Tight, 2016; Trowler and Wareham, 2008), we suggest that opening up opportunities for students in ways that may not be directly linked to their courses may have surprising and uplifting results. In this case, the benefits have been felt by academics, individual students and young people in the community. This research project aimed to raise the aspirations of disadvantaged young people and to give them a means of expression not normally available to them. Through this collaborative project, our students have shown that they too benefit from the chance to express themselves in new and unexpected ways. Amy's learning from the project complemented and extended that of her course and has opened up possibilities for collaboration in her future career. Ultimately, it seems that working together for a common cause, with the principles of co-production firmly in place (Banks *et al.*, 2019), leads to the biggest rewards of all.

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