



Weathering the storm

How communities respond to adversity: Bridging the gap between academic theory and community relevance.

Podcast Transcript

As part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council's Connected Communities Programme one project is discovering more about the stories and experiences of people who have faced adversity either through hard economic times or natural disaster. The work will help different types of communities deal with similar challenges in the future.

The Audio slide show begins with an extract from an oral history recording featuring a former Royal Doulton employee:

People felt loyalty to particular firms, there was definitely a loyalty from the management towards that particular workforce, so if jobs were available almost invariably they'd go to the sons and daughters of people that already worked there, it was an implicit part of the deal, I really felt a connection that you were in part of an enormous continuity.

Narrator:

Coal mining, ship building, steel making and the production of ceramics are just some of the many industrial areas in the UK that have been affected by economic, political and social change in recent decades. The closure of a factory, coal mine or shipyard can, of course, devastate a whole community. As part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council's *Connected Communities* Programme one project is discovering more about the stories and experiences of people who have faced such adversity. The work will help different types of communities deal with similar challenges in the future.

It also makes use of the philosophy of American Pragmatism, that there should be no division between academic knowledge and practical experience. Workshops include the use of a boat installation and creative activities.

Professor Mihaela Kelemen from Keele University explains more about the project which is called *Bridging the Gap between academic theory and community relevance*.

Mihaela Kelemen:

The starting point of the boat installation was the four elements; earth, water, fire, and air, and these elements really are the starting and the ending point of experience, of human experience, which is something that American Pragmatism, a philosophy that argues that theory and practice are the two sides of the same coin, that you can't really theorise unless you understand and immerse yourself in day-to-day experience. So, we kind of decided to build on these four elements, to create new worlds out of lost worlds, and of course, in our area in Stoke-on-Trent, we have lost important industries, steel, mining, ceramics, and people feel a deep loss about even how the landscape would have changed or, you know, it's a different place altogether. So, we felt that by taking some elements like this, we could recreate worlds that would bring hope, and would allow us to tell our stories and to make artefacts together, and perhaps have a journey from the past to the present into the future with the help of the boat.

Narrator:

Mihaela says cultural animation is a focal point of this approach. It puts people from all walks of life into an environment where they feel comfortable enough to open up about their experiences.

Mihaela Kelemen:

Cultural animation is part of the counter-culture movement, but really it's sort of - instead of saying there is high art and low art, we're basically saying that you can animate communities through various cultural mechanisms. So, for example, by making certain artefacts and writing stories, poems, composing songs about something that you deeply care about, different ways of theorising emerge. And what cultural animation does is create a very safe space in which status doesn't matter, nobody's privileged, we all bring to it our experiences of day-to-day life, of being theorists, policy makers, whatever we are, and we come together and, in a very democratic way, we work with a problem to find a solution.

Narrator:

The New Vic Theatre in Stoke-On-Trent is one of the partners involved in the project. *Borderlines* is the Theatre's community outreach initiative. Rachel Reddihough is their Technical and Stage Manager and is involved in the workshop aspect of the project.

Rachel Reddihough:

The boat is basically a seven foot barge. It's a big wooden beastly. It's got no bottom but it is on wheels and we can split it into two, so that we can transport it to different places. It is really quite lovely. The sails were made out of images that we'd collected on the workshop days. When you walk in what you hear first of all is a storm that we used initially to get people from the main auditorium over to the workshop area. You could listen to stories of people in the industries that had been lost over the economic downturn over the years. Then, we had an area where you could just record your own stories. You could use the voice recorders to talk about whatever you wanted to talk about whether it be your own experience or the experience of someone else or the people you work with or even how you felt about the exhibition that you were involved in right now. We also had areas where you could make little clay boats and you could write on those your own stories or thoughts or ideas. We had areas where you could go and croche and knit, where you could make the bridge even longer and also you can add your poems and stories to that. There were areas where you could just sit back and take it all in. It's such a nice way of getting people's stories.

Narrator:

Here are just two examples of people whose memories have been captured as part of the project. First of all a man who worked at Silverdale Colliery, which closed in 1998, and then a former Royal Doulton worker:

Former Silverdale Colliery employee:

Me father had worked at the pit, and me grandfather, he were in there like, you know, and that was a trade where you're training was involving all the basics of face work, you know putting the props up, supports and stuff like that and me father was, he be about forty eight when he got dust and he was, he was bad me father, killed him in the end like. They went all the different pits where the bigger penny was, you know, years ago.

Former Royal Doulton worker:

It was when Royal Doulton was something in Stoke-on-Trent, fifteen factories and six thousand people worked there, I really liked it, I was an enthusiast for ceramics and being an historian I was interested in all that past and understood where it had all come from and the fact that Stoke-on-Trent had been doing it for two hundred years and their weight had given a character to the town and to the people and a language that loads of

people had in common and common experiences, so I really liked it and was excited by it.

Narrator:

Stories of communities facing adversity do not of course just come from difficult economic times. The natural world can also wreak devastation with catastrophic events such as a tsunami not only taking lives but changing forever, for those who survive, the structure of their communities, physically and emotionally. Mihaela explains how the project was taken out to Japan, this time instead of using the metaphor of a boat, a symbolic tree of life was used on whose branches people were able to hang their stories and hopes for the future.

Mihaela Kelemen:

It was just very interesting to see that the communities in Japan, where the devastation had been sudden, in ten minutes, the tsunami wiped out the entire area in Minamisanriku, and, but people were still able to engage, to smile, to tell stories despite the language translation difficulties, and despite being in an area where people were still in temporary accommodation after two and a half years. The atmosphere, the joy of being together, of making things together, and telling stories around these artefacts was exactly like in the New Vic. We worked on this particular grant with a Japanese partner, Professor Toru Kiyomiya from Seinan Gakuin University in Japan, and his interest in research was to do with the communities affected by the tsunami but, in particular, in the way in which local businesses decided to cooperate rather than compete in order to regenerate the area. The human spirit was unbelievable. I learnt in a week more than I've learnt as an academic in a lifetime. It's changed me fundamentally in terms of what I want to research and what I count as important as a human being.

Narrator:

So whether we are talking about hard economic times or the devastating consequences of a natural disaster, this research is furthering our understanding of the way that communities work and respond to adversity. It's clear that when communities face difficult times priorities change. For instance, people who may have previously worked in economic or social competition with each other start to work together for the benefit of all. The practical activities involved in the cultural animation approach of the project show how people can be encouraged to open up about their experiences so that they and others can learn from them. This in turn is feeding into future research on the way that communities work and connect with each other and helping with areas such as

outreach work. The project is showing how we can improve communication with each other on every level.

Rachel Reddihough:

The nicest thing about it is that everybody sort of feels like they can aspire to be something else. When you have heads of companies working with people who've maybe come from a young offenders background, they probably never ever thought for one second that they would ever be able to talk to someone who was a professor or who was a head of a company or anything else, but actually, when you all come together and you put yourself on the same level, you can see that everyone's the same, and everyone somewhere along the line has something in common no matter how small or how big it is. When you have to work together to create a new world what was really interesting was how, no matter where you were from, or what background you're from, how everyone interacted so well.

Mihaela Kelemen:

If we understand what makes communities tick we probably can take a lot of lessons and apply them to the world of corporations and organisations. Whether it's long term economic unemployment in Stoke-on-Trent or the quick tsunami that hit people within minutes and destroyed their taken-for-granted way of being in the world. How do these communities manage? What keeps them alive, resilient? How do they find hope? I think it's very much about here and now, and what we can do, sometimes with very limited resources, can be amazing if we just learn to value what we have as opposed to just chase up corporate dreams that may never come true.