

Beyond Project : Community Media and Sustainability **Mapping Territory, Part Two**

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Synopsis

The aim of this phd research is to find ways which can help community media education projects have a meaningful impact* on the participant groups involved. Much media and arts community level activity is specifically tied to specific funding streams, with short project life spans, and tend to be reactionary (according to what funding opportunities are available at the time) and fragmented. (needs Ref:) The financial constraints on small organisations running community based projects is a key factor in understanding the levels of impact any one project can have on the participant group. Coupled with these important financial considerations is the often ignored issue of why and how these projects are devised in the first place, and how influential and decisive are those elements in the subsequent impact of the activity on the groups involved. This research then will attempt to shed light on this complex set of issues, and highlight tried and tested methods which will assist organisations, community groups and facilitators looking to embark on community based media education activity how to maximise the impact of the work they plan to undertake.

This particular paper is a continuation of the 'mapping territory' process to help me focus the gaze of this research, and also a continuation of the task of defining the key terms and phrases which are important to the understanding of my arguments.

*The word *Impact* is used throughout the Synopsis and Introduction of this paper, but for an in-depth analysis of what this word actually means in context with community media education, see chapter one on page 3.

Introduction: Why 'Beyond Project'?

The title *Beyond Project* has been chosen for the title of my thesis, as I feel it suitably captures the central agenda which is the motivating force behind this research: namely, trying to find out what happens after a project has finished, and attempting to enhance its [project] legacy. (N.B. I am not proposing the sub heading for this paper, *Community Media and Sustainability*, would also be used as the final title for my thesis, but it is added here as it is particularly appropriate for the scope of this particular paper.) Also, this title hints at the need to look beyond the formal structure of the project, to look into the 'gaps' to see what else is taking place as a result of the interaction.

In my opinion the word *project* has become slightly problematic in the community media & arts sectors when discussing issues of sustainability and impact. It implies the notion of a limited shelf life of an activity. It implies the lifespan of an 'idea'

which has been conceived, but is not timeless as it expires after a given period and evaporates into the air. Then, a new idea is born, a new project is formed, and it is only a matter of time before the end has again been reached. Ad infinitum.

However, I am not suggesting the abandonment of the use of the word *Project*. It is far better than *Workshop(s)*, which suggests an even more limiting experience, conjuring an image of fragmented, one-off, self-contained activity. *Scheme* sounds a bit too un-dynamic and un-spontaneous, (also conjures images of ‘employment schemes’, and other ‘non-fun’ activity). *Initiative* is quite corporate, business-like and also a government buzz word. That said, I use these words frequently and have no suitable suggestions of what to replace them with, but I firmly believe there needs to be a subtle shift in our concept and mentality to how we relate to the word *project*, and not take it for granted.

For example, one crude analogy is the building of the new Wembley Stadium, which to the architects and builders involved, it is a project, which is obviously correct. To those companies that work on it, it would be one of many projects on their books, with a beginning, middle and end, likewise with facilitators running media projects. The key difference is that in the minds and mouths of the public, the building of Wembley Stadium is not a mere project; but rather the building of a national facility where football and other sports and activities will take place for many generations to come.

Thus, a project could be;

- the building of a new structure which remains, to allow things to happen.

It is my challenge with the research to suggest this thinking is applied to informal education in community settings, (principally media education). I am not too concerned however with how ‘spectators’ view the *project*, but rather that the groups involved know that this new structure (the media project model), has the potential to remain in some shape or form, to allow and encourage further things to happen.

A question that many readers may now be asking, will be, “that is all well and good, but how will these new ambitious, deep and meaningful projects be funded, in addition to what we already deliver?” The answer to that is simple; think simple. I am not suggesting every project now turn into a media centre, but rather that a consideration is given to what the participant groups actually take away with them as a legacy. For example, if the community leaders are trained how to use video cameras and edit software by the facilitator alongside the young people taking part in the core activity, when that project has finished, the community leaders are then able to continue some of that work without having to hire back the facilitator each time, and thus a loose but tangible structure remains which can allow *further things to happen* in that community setting. (*Here there is the concern that the artist/facilitator could be organising themselves out of a job, which is a real concern for freelance facilitators. This issue will not be tackled in this paper, but explored in future essay at a later stage.*)

The final *Beyond Project* thesis will hint at ways of evaluating and monitoring levels of impact for those interested in carrying out longitudinal evaluation on community

based projects, but the prime emphasis will be on questions and approaches to consider when actually setting up projects in the first instance, to *ensure* a greater level of impact. Suggesting evaluation methods as an outcome of this research is all well and good, but they are passive in the sense that they only look for results, but have no impact on the actual levels. By placing the emphasis of this research on highlighting the key elements to consider when setting up projects means there is a greater chance that the impact levels (when measured by evaluators) will be higher, but whether they are measured or not, at least they [*the positive impacts*] will be there. It is acknowledged though, to unearth these findings in the first place, a certain amount of evaluation will have to be undertaken, to be able to make a meaningful judgement of what project models are effective.

Impact, Effect and Sustainability

What is meant by 'impact' in this context? It could be said that any contact and communication with another person has had some kind of impact, no matter how deep or shallow that impact might be. (needs Ref: psychology book) My research will unearth the different types of impact that commonly occurs during community based projects, and suggest ways which will enable the facilitator to anticipate, encourage and harness these occurrences before they even happen.

The common way in which any levels of impact are currently measured is by internal or external evaluation of a project, against its' aims and objectives. Evaluation can take on many forms, and can be both formal and informal, though in the common uses of the term it is taken to mean some kind of formal evaluation has taken place, whether formal or informal, usually resulting in an written report or other accessible documentation. Informal evaluation is often less documented, and can be as casual as members of an organisation discussing the pros and cons of a project, and using that discussion to judge whether or not to undertake that line of work again in future. As mentioned though, evaluation now is assumed to mean that of a more formal kind, and can be very influential in determining future funding of an organisation.

“Evaluation, in its original Latin sense, meant to strengthen. In recent years, evaluation has often come to mean something else. It has become a tool of funders wanting to judge what is 'successful', what 'works' and what should or should not be invested in. Rather than being an integral part of educating, this type of evaluation is more concerned with counting and comparing. Such approaches are usually enforced from outside. Their implementation is entrusted to imported consultants – men and women employed to tell others what they are doing right or wrong. It is a method that takes little or no account of the ongoing evaluation that is intrinsic to conversation. It also changes the nature of the questions, and usually appeals to different values and interests. This is why we must ask whose values and judgements shape the questions being asked?”

Without the important consideration of the varying agendas of project evaluation as outlined here by Jeffs and Smith, this *Beyond Project* research could very easily have gone down the road of (re)assessing existing evaluation reports from a wide variety of projects, and make a judgement on what types of projects were most effective as a model of best practice. Whilst reports that result from this type of formal evaluation can be very useful for all parties concerned, they can also quite limited in scope. One of the prime concerns central to this research, which I have to keep focused on, is what happens after the project has finished?

- What happens to the knowledge transferred during the lifespan of the project?
- What happens to the work produced?
- What is left with participant communities to allow them to continue the work once the facilitators have left and the funding runs out?
- How does one project continue and learn from the preceding project, or is each project essentially a discreet island with no informed historical references?

In classic adventure books discreet islands have a habit of being abandoned, and everyone who works in community based arts and media project knows (even if they don't like to admit it), that likewise, participant groups can also be castaway when the funding dries up.

The prime concerns of this *Beyond Project* research echoes comments made in the conclusion of a Barnardos report titled, "Do community-based arts project result in social gains? A review of literature."

"[By] identifying what communities want and expect from the arts, rather than subordinating community based arts programmes to objectives formulated outside communities, offers a way forward that is more sensitive to the unique texture of artistic encounters. Useful – as opposed to accurate – evaluation reports need to consider not just the aggregated impact of arts programmes on individuals, but also their effect, and the extent to which it can be and is sustained, on the communities in which individuals live.....[It] is clear that a broader range of evaluative techniques are necessary to capture the depth, as well as the breadth, of the encounter between communities and the creative arts."

"Do community-based arts projects result in social gains?
A review of literature", Tony Newman, Katherine Curtis and Jo Stephens
report for Barnardos, 2001

It is important then, to discuss the 'effect' a project has had on the participant group, and not just the 'impact', and to highlight how this effect "can be and is sustained on the communities in which the individuals live (dwell)".

What then, is the difference between 'impact' and 'effect', and what exactly is meant by the term 'sustained' (sustainability) in this context?

I admit, when I am describing this research project to other people I usually say something like, “I’m looking at ways that projects can have more *impact* on the participant groups, and how they can be made more sustainable.” Rather, should I be using the word “effect” instead? It is important to differentiate these two terms to be clear for myself exactly what the emphasis of this research is. Dictionary.com give the first 4 definitions of these words as follows;

im·pact

1. The striking of one body against another; collision. See Synonyms at collision.
2. The force or impetus transmitted by a collision.
3. The effect or impression of one thing on another: *still gauging the impact of automation on the lives of factory workers.*
4. The power of making a strong, immediate impression: *a speech that lacked impact.*

ef·fect

1. Something brought about by a cause or agent; a result.
2. The power to produce an outcome or achieve a result; influence: *The drug had an immediate effect on the pain. The government's action had no effect on the trade imbalance.*
3. A scientific law, hypothesis, or phenomenon: *the photovoltaic effect.*
4. Advantage; avail: *used her words to great effect in influencing the jury.*

Interestingly, the usage notes for ‘impact’ reads:

im·pac¹·tion *n.*

Usage Note: The use of *impact* as a verb meaning “to have an effect” often has a big impact on readers. Eighty-four percent of the Usage Panel disapproves of the construction *to impact on*, as in the phrase *social pathologies, common to the inner city, that impact heavily on such a community*; fully 95 percent disapproves of the use of *impact* as a transitive verb in the sentence *Companies have used disposable techniques that have a potential for impacting our health*. It is unclear why this usage provokes such a strong response, but it cannot be because of novelty.

Judging by these definitions, the problem with using ‘impact’ to imply ‘effect’ is due to the notion that impact is an event, and effect is the subsequent result of that event.

According to Dictionary.com, over time - due to slang and colloquialisms - these words have become confused and synonymous with each other, and soon will be indistinguishable without any problems arising, but acknowledge the differences in their traditional contexts. Although Dictionary.com is willing to be flexible, I feel it is important that the differences in these terms which is highlighted in the Barnardos report are taken on board when considering the evaluation of community based projects.

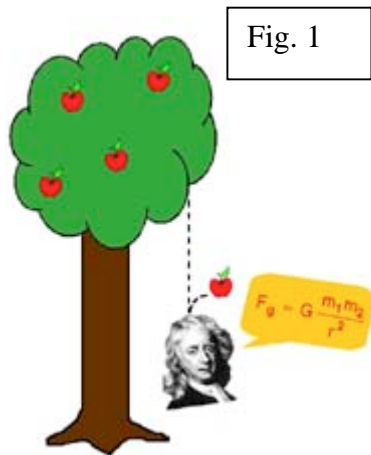


Fig. 1

“Example of how an idea from a project had a sustainable effect on an individual.”

The cause of the apple (*an idea*) dropping from the tree (*the project*) is gravity (*the project in process*).

When the apple (*idea*) fell (*an event*) on Newton’s (*the participant group’s*) head (*point of impact - event*), the effect was considerable, in that it inspired him to discover and develop revolutionary scientific thinking (*legacy of the project and the process of interaction*).

image taken from:
<http://www.jadetower.org/muses/archives/000094.html>

In this diagram, the narrative for ‘cause and effect’ can be interrupted in two different ways (or more), depending on the agenda of ones perspective.

KEY #1:

- Causes** = Project in process
- Event** = Point of impact of idea(s) with participant group. (*e.g. Transference of knowledge and ideas – project activity*).
- Requirements** = Process of inter-action.
- Effects** = Legacy of project.

Or it could be;

KEY#2

- Causes** = Funding, culmination of ideas, identified need.
- Event** = The project in process and point of impact.
- Requirements** = Aims of project.
- Effects** = Levels of impact on participant group. (Legacy of project)

Fig. 2

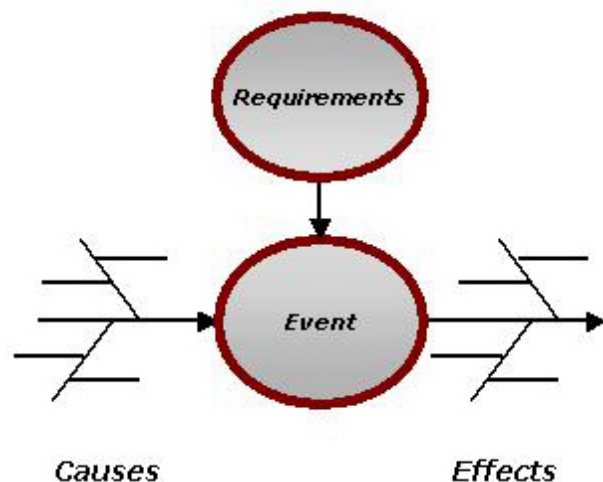


image taken from:
<http://www.aworldofquality.com/content/Complex%20Systems.asp>

The notion of sustainability in relation to ‘impact and effectiveness’ is a complex one. Take figure #1 for example. Because we know the story of Newton and apple, we can safely say that the event had a significant effect due to what he then went on to discover, and he credited that event as being the point of inspiration. (*Whether this event actually happened or not is irrelevant in this current discussion*). If Newton’s scenario was an isolated project and was evaluated, how would it have scored?

- If the evaluation was of the formal rigid kind and ended at the conclusion of the event, (which most evaluation of projects seem to do), then Newton’s apple scenario would not have been judged a great success, as undoubtedly it took some time for Newton to be able to articulate the findings of his inspiration, (namely, the “discovery” of gravity).
- If the evaluation was more longitudinal, then hopefully the legacy of the project would have been identified by Newton’s articulation of his findings. **But**, could the project take the credit for what Newton did with ideas from the project? It was not the aim of the apple falling to help the discovery of gravity – it was an accidental and indirect consequence of the proceedings and interactions. Would Newton’s discovery then become an interesting, (but proud) footnote in the evaluation report?
- Although an unintentional impact as a result of the project was sustained to a magnificent level by one individual, (Newton), it could hardly be said that the project itself was sustainable, (even if the discovery of gravity was its original aim and intention), as for that same level of effectiveness to happen again would be a one in a million chance.

Whilst impact and effect can be judged by a direct or indirect result of the project, sustainability has more to do with how the structure of the project can deal with the maintenance of those impacts and effects.

Whenever I mention the notion of sustainability to people who are not intimately involved with community-based projects, they usually assume I am referring only to economic sustainability, with the primary concerns of how the projects, organisations and companies stay in existence and access funding, to continue the work and become less fragmented. All of these concerns are important to me, and the fragmented nature of these activities is my central concern. I am at pains to always point out to them though that my principle focus for this research is not to analyse financial structures and funding streams, but rather to explore how the whole culture of the community media education can be approached from an organisational standpoint to aid sustainability, but I acknowledge that financial considerations cannot be ignored or omitted from this equation. At times I have admittedly thrown out the baby with the bath water and said I am not interested in financial structures, but this is an overstatement as of course I can not ignore how projects have been funded, as that affects everything, including the capacity to run a project satisfactorily, which could directly influence the project’s effectiveness. I am reluctant though to give the impression that I will be researching different funding streams in any in-depth way, or undertaking deep analysis on how organisations are funded and how their finances could be managed in a more sustainable way. Deep financial analysis is not

something that inspirers or will be a big part of this research, but it may form a chapter of the final *Beyond Project* thesis. To try and avoid any confusion, I started to use the term ‘*cultural sustainability*’, to mean how the knowledge, skills, ideas and other elements transferred or inspired during the project - whether directly or indirectly – are retained and ‘used’ by the participant group, whether short or long term. Thus, the scenario of Newton’s discovery of the concept of gravity as a result of the apple falling on his head, would be a shining example of the cultural sustainability of that project, if it was interpreted as such. I now realise though - as a consequence of the deliberations of this particular paper - that the notion of ‘effectiveness’ probably captures everything I was asking of term I tried to invent: ‘cultural sustainability’.

Effectiveness concerns itself with the legacy of knowledge, skills and inspirations, etc, transferred directly, or inferred indirectly as a result of the process of the project that has taken place.

Sustainability is concerned with how the structure of the project relates to overarching framework and principles of the company/group, and how the organisation of said project has taken into account considerations of the project’s longevity, as a means of prolonging its effectiveness as a meaningful event.

From Dictionary.com

sus·tain

tr. v. sus·tained, sus·tain·ing, sus·tains

1. To keep in existence; maintain.
2. To supply with necessities or nourishment; provide for.
3. To support from below; keep from falling or sinking; prop.
4. To support the spirits, vitality, or resolution of; encourage.

Besides in financial deliberations, the most time the word sustainable (and its’ variants) gets used is generally in the areas of environmental concerns and ecology. This analogy is entirely apt, as in that field it usually refers to how different types of energy can be stored, made more effective and not wasted. (needs Reference)

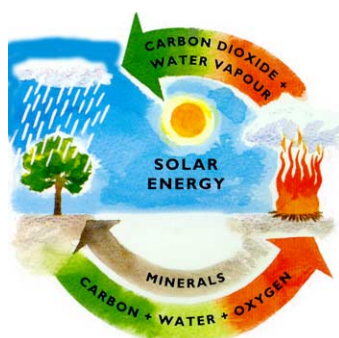
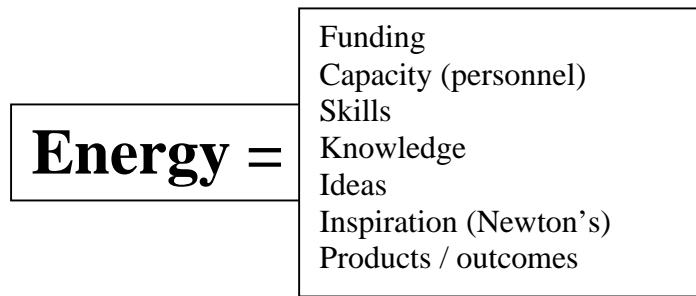


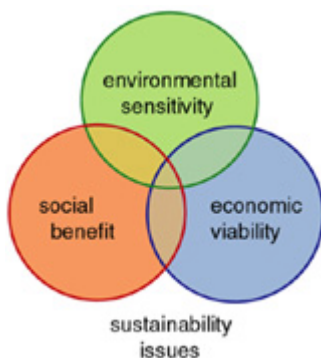
Image taken from: <http://users.aber.ac.uk/ane2/biogenic.htm>

Relating this thinking to community activities then, energy can mean many things.



A thorough (but potentially impossible) evaluation of a project would highlight and track all of these interpretations of *energy*, and more. But for a true enquiry of sustainability to be achieved, it is not enough to simply identify different forms of energy. Environmental science has taught us we need to find ways, means and methods of how those energies can be stored, harnessed and even re-cycled. (*With $E=MC^2$, Einstein discovered how a tiny amount of energy can be transferred into a huge amount of energy. He was appalled when he realised it was this equation which led other scientists to develop the nuclear bomb, from miniscule atoms.*)

The image below was taken from an environmental science source, but still accurately describes the considerations for sustainability for a community based arts & media project.



KEY:

Environmental Sensitivity = cultural concerns, organisational structures of communities, participant groups, organisations and individuals involved. Also, the motivation from all groups involved to keep the “energy” alive.

Social Benefit = How the specific needs of the community are met by the project, and how relevant those skills, etc are to the participant group long-term.

Economic Viability = A certain amount of sustainability can be achieved without funding, but if any positive effects of a project are to be harnessed in a meaningful way, then some kind of funding would need to be secured to allow that sustainability to continue long-term and be managed correctly.

I assume that where these ‘sustainability issues’ overlap, are the moments when the actual projects are taking place.

Image taken from:
<http://www.perkinsdesign.com/mission.html>

Conclusions

I have no conclusions at this stage, as these investigations need to be ongoing and it would be premature and presumptuous of me to try and finalise anything at the moment.

I think drawing analogies across other disciplines, such as science, will continue to be beneficial for my research.

In future papers I will aim to tackle issues concerning:

- The notion that facilitators are being asked to train themselves out of a job / future work, essentially making themselves redundant.
- A case study of one organisation and its projects, highlighting fragmentary activity and sustained activity.
- Asking the question, why try and make these community projects sustained at all? Why not let the participant groups just have fun and play, and let formal education worry about impact, effect and sustainability?
