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# **‘My two words? Creative Energy.’ Engaging students in a participatory story-making research project with disadvantaged young people**

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## **Abstract**

A UK Research Council-funded research project involving story-making by, with and for disadvantaged young people in the community became an opportunity to engage students. At each stage of the project, from getting to know the young people and supporting those with disabilities, through to turning their stories into fictionalised animations and narrated videos, students participated, adding their own individual interests, passions, expertise and creativity. In the process, the project touched on a range of initiatives and values espoused by the wider university. Reflections from students, tutors and the community members with whom they worked, present an evaluation of the experience from their perspectives. The article provides testament from those directly involved in the project, to examine in detail the value of the *process* and the *product* of their engagement, thereby shedding light on its *purpose*. Outcomes for students, who hailed from a wide range of courses beyond creative arts, included raised awareness of social injustices and an enhancement of confidence in their own abilities and skills, some but not all of which related to their taught courses. The significance of creativity in this project lies not only in students’ uses of creative arts in the story-making process, but also in the creative processes involved in participatory research.

**Keywords:** Story-making; student engagement; participatory research; creativity

## **Introduction and Context**

When a group of academics and community partners came together to design a research project about collecting stories of resilience and transformation with marginalised children and young people, we considered carefully the relationships between stakeholders. We paid particular attention to building and maintaining relationships between the university and the disadvantaged and disabled young people we would work with. Even though the academics all taught students as part of our regular work, in the writing of the research proposal we did not initially consider the contributions that students might make. Looking back, this seems a remarkable oversight, although Marsh and Hattie (1996; 2002) may not have been surprised. Their meta-analysis of articles relating to the ‘teaching-research nexus’ led them to claim: “the common belief that research and teaching are inextricably entwined is an enduring myth. At best, research and teaching are very loosely coupled” (2002, p. 606). Nevertheless, once we had received the funding and the project got under way, students became involved in our work to the extent that they became crucial to the success of the project.

Creativity was an important element in two main ways: firstly the project involved creative arts including creative writing, art and design, illustration, animation and film production, and was reliant on these forms of creativity as a means of engaging audiences and disseminating the findings of the project in the form of stories.

Secondly, ways of involving students became a creative organic process, evolving through the different phases of the project and including students and staff from a range of disciplines not all of which were creative arts, as our network of relationships became more far-reaching.

Kleiman (2008) discusses academics' experiences of creativity in Higher Education, and uses a phenomenographic approach to categorise his findings into four 'pools of meaning': process-focused, product-focused, transformation-focused and fulfilment-focused experiences of creativity. Interestingly, all of these conceptualisations appeared to be relevant at different stages of the project under discussion, but from the perspective of the students rather than the academics. Instead of being part of the 'creativity agenda' (Kleiman 2008, p. 216) of the academics, the involvement of the students was introduced as a pragmatic means to a tangible end. Therefore in our case, the students (rather than the staff) had a certain amount of agency and a 'personal commitment or investment' (ibid.), which increased the value of the student outcomes. For us, as Livingston (2010) concludes in his examination of teaching creativity in HE, the aim was not 'how to teach creativity, but rather how to understand, harvest, and build up the very creativity that every student already possesses and uses' (Livingston, 2010, p. 61).

As stated, despite a latent belief in the teaching-research nexus and in the benefits of creative approaches in both pedagogy and research, neither constituted our main rationale for the inclusion of students. And although there were fundamental differences in priorities between the institution and the researchers, inadvertently the project met several criteria currently promoted by universities in the UK, as discussed below.

Engaging students in 'authentic' or 'live' projects is known to have an influence on student motivation and performance, and ultimately on achievement (Dewey 1938; Harland 2003, p.268). The opportunity for students to apply the skills they have learned on their courses in a workplace setting is also of benefit for students' employability, both as a CV item and as work experience, while also consolidating learning. If such engagement translates into better retention, progression, achievement, and satisfaction for students, the institution benefits in terms of league tables and reputation.

In addition, universities claim to do 'research-informed teaching' in various guises (Trowler & Wareham 2008), arguing that this improves the credibility of the teaching, engages students, and enhances their knowledge and skills. Also, interdisciplinarity (discussed by Woods 2007), and/or transdisciplinarity, whereby new kinds of knowledge are created through combining disciplinary approaches, are deemed attractive to students and to funders of research, albeit with mixed understanding of how such transdisciplinarity can be embedded in the curriculum (McClam & Flores-Scott, 2012; Aneas, 2015; McWilliam et al., 2008). The project under discussion combines academics from health, design, social work, literature, education and linguistics and therefore can be seen as an interdisciplinary project with the potential for transdisciplinary outputs. Providing opportunities for students to engage with such work can in fact increase its claim to be interdisciplinary: the students in this project were from wider ranging areas than those mentioned, such as history, social work, nursing, and literature. Therefore, such involvement of students with academics

doing interdisciplinary research may be seen by the institution as an excellent means of evidencing linking new forms of research with teaching, and thereby enhancing the reputation of the university (Tight, 2016).

Further, in an age where the purpose of the university – particularly the ‘local university’ - is in some question, there is a benefit in linking universities with communities, providing positive input to local culture and economy, and strengthening the university’s stronghold as a key beneficiary in the locality (Lebeau and Bennion, 2014). The impact of research on the general public is becoming increasingly important to funders, as demonstrated in the requirement for extensive impact statements to be included with bids; while Research England attributes increased importance to impact case studies in the Research Excellence Framework. Hence, (non-academic) impact also becomes a priority for the management systems of universities. Evidence of strong links between universities and communities, and evidence of the positive impact of the institution’s engagement in the local area, is essential to harmony between town and gown, while also increasing the standing of the university nationally and internationally.

Another factor, particularly relevant to the research project in question, is that currently creative subjects are increasingly under threat (see, for example, Adams, 2017), with more funding and resources allocated to STEM subjects and demands for quantifiable outputs in both research and education. Creative subjects are not always seen as ‘useful’ in either academic or community contexts, and it is therefore ever more important to demonstrate the significance of the creative arts in improving social and economic outcomes, as well as the student experience. Seeing the creative arts being ‘put to good use’ for the benefit of the community is a means of presenting an alternative narrative, drawing attention to the wider social benefits of studying creative arts subjects at university level.

All of these factors – student achievement and satisfaction; employability skills and experience; university-community links; research funding; and promotion of arts subjects – contribute to the reputation, sustainability, and financial security of the university. Kleiman (2008) similarly describes creativity as ‘the means to an essentially productive (and profitable) end’ for both institutions ‘and even the government’ (p. 216). The creativity in the project under discussion manifested in various ways, and this article explores the actual ‘practices and relationships’ involved in instances of connecting teaching and research (Tight, 2016) which are sometimes obscure, and therefore worthy of exposition.

### **The Stories to Connect project**

The project which is the focus of this article was developed by a group of researchers dedicated to participatory research with disadvantaged young people, and a firm belief in the power of story-telling to create and share emotional understanding, thereby leading to social change. This arguably naïve approach resulted, as it happens, in inadvertently addressing several of the factors described above, possibly due in part to the ‘value-orientations’ (Coate, Barnett and Williams, 2002) of the academic staff involved. A core aim was to promote understanding and empathy in a range of audiences of all ages, from children in schools and families in the community, to trainee teachers and social workers in universities, through the use of co-constructed fictionalised narratives.

Entitled 'Stories to Connect', the project was funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council from 2015-2018. Academic researchers from three neighbouring universities aimed to work in a participatory paradigm with disadvantaged young people associated with a children's charity in the local community, to tell their stories and get their voices heard. As part of this process the project engaged young people with disabilities, learning difficulties, in care, or having experienced other significant challenges in their lives, to create fictionalised 'assemblages' of stories to represent their perspectives on challenges, barriers, and achievements in their lives. (See below for students' contributions to these assemblages, as well as Satchwell, 2018; Satchwell & Davidge, 2018). In addition we drew on the skills and enthusiasms of a regional group of children's book writers and illustrators. The project in total thus incorporated a range of different community members as well as members of four universities.

The project built on existing links between the lead university and disadvantaged young people associated with a children's charity in the local area. Using a range of methods, including arts-based methods of enquiry, and producing creative outputs, the project embraced a wide range of different university-taught subjects. So, for example, postgraduate social work, nursing and health students helped facilitate the meetings with the young people; undergraduate and postgraduate creative writing students helped to write stories; illustration and design students worked on illustrating and formatting the stories; music production students helped to record narrations and sound effects; and so on. With the students', young people's and community writers' and illustrators' input, both digital and print versions of the 48 stories were produced, along with a series of videos with bespoke images and sound effects. Story-telling machines, such as a suitcase of stories, a rabbit in a hat, and an interactive story-telling map, were co-designed and produced with the young people to tell these stories in the community. In total approximately 45 students were involved in a range of different ways. Many students were able to use the project work as coursework, but they all contributed voluntarily and, importantly, most also saw it as a piece of work that was relevant and meaningful to them as individuals.

At each stage of the project, there were opportunities to include students. Our decisions to do so were partly driven by the necessity to access a wide variety of supportive and creative individuals; but also we recognised that the project could provide enhancement of their learning and employability, using their skills with disadvantaged members of the community near to the university. Given that the institution in question has many students from the local area, the linking of university and community was particularly pertinent, with the potential for creating strong and meaningful links that would not be lost when the students graduated.

### **Methodology and methods**

The project purposefully engaged in a participatory methodological approach to research, which is necessarily inclusive and draws on the different expertise's of different partners. The young people who are participants in our research project are located in the community rather than in the academy, and the project can further be described to some extent as 'community-based participatory research' (CBPR), defined by Israel et al. (1998) as:

*[A] collaborative process that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings. CBPR begins with a research topic of importance to the community with the aim of combining knowledge and action for social change (Israel et al.1998).*

We might argue that the specific knowledge of the students and their lecturers contributed not only to the completion of the project, but also to the ethos of the methodological approach. The collaborative nature of the research, and the determination of the research team to work coherently together as far as possible, was one way of creating 'something new and valuable together':

*The synergy that partners seek to achieve through collaboration is more than a mere exchange of resources. By combining the individual perspectives, resources, and skills of the partners, the group creates something new and valuable together – something that is greater than the sum of its parts.*  
(Lasker et al., 2001)

These characteristics are also relevant to co-production and co-produced research: 'a process whereby people from different settings and backgrounds work together ... [and where] different skill sets and levels of expertise are valued equally' (Banks, Hart, Pahl & Ward, 2019, p. 58). Further, co-production 'reflects a fusion of research and participant roles and a convergence of differing types of knowledge (Stuttaford et al., 2010) [...] to broaden the knowledge base that is brought to understand a research issue' (Banks et al., 2019, p. 70).

The students' involvement tended to be somewhat fleeting in comparison to the university academics, charity workers, and young people from the community who were our co-researchers throughout the three years of the project, including its inception. To this extent we might not classify the students as 'partners' in the research in the same way, yet we might claim that they were co-producers in the research process. However, recent publications on student engagement suggest the importance of the notion of 'students as partners', rather than as consumers or recipients. The involvement of the students in this project could indeed be seen to fulfil the values espoused by Healey, Flint & Harrington (2014) for students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education: authenticity, inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, trust, challenge, community, and responsibility. While these authors and others such as Bryson (2014) and Mercer-Mapstone, Marquis & McConnell (2018) are referring to partnership in learning and teaching, leading to 'a more authentic engagement with the nature of learning itself and the possibility for genuinely transformative learning experiences' (Healey et al., 2014, p. 55), our project might be seen as transcending the curriculum. The students' skillsets were crucial to the completion of the research project, and they were engaged on this premise rather than a pedagogical one. Without the students, the story outputs would have been undeniably different, and almost certainly diminished.

The method involved in producing this paper involved contacting as many students as possible who had been involved in the Stories to Connect project by email which included the request:

Please answer the following questions with as many or as few words as you like. We are interested in anything you have to say.

1. Why did you want to help on the project?
2. What did you learn? (e.g. About disadvantaged young people? About your area of expertise? About yourself? About work? About the local community? About what academics do all day?)
3. How did it benefit you?
4. How do you think it benefited the young people in the project?
5. What was difficult or surprising about your involvement in the project?
6. Anything else you would like to add?

Please return your responses to me by email, or in an attachment. If you prefer to speak on the phone, please use the number below my name.

For those students that responded, I followed up with a thank you email, and requested their permission to use quotations. Those students and community group young researchers who are named in this article have provided written permission for their words to be attributed to them.

### **Recruitment of students to the project**

The recruitment of students was largely ad hoc, and relied on personal connections, word-of-mouth, and goodwill. As the course leader for the Professional Doctorate in Education, I had regular contact with several members of staff in different disciplines, who had access to their own undergraduate and postgraduate students. Other academics who were co-investigators on the project had their own contacts. Such a haphazard approach is by no means ideal, but itself was a product of not having 'built in' the student involvement. Often I was passed from one person to another to another before landing on the most relevant contact: for example, a senior lecturer in film production gave me the names of lecturers in sound production, one of whom invited me to talk to a group of his undergraduates, three of whom subsequently came forward to help with recording narrations. When I needed someone to embed interactivity into a video, my quest eventually led to two students who had access to appropriate software at the university and were able to take this on as a project. When my initial attempt to recruit student illustrators was less productive than I hoped, my enquiries eventually led, via a personal contact, to engaging students from Falmouth University, at the other end of the country. These students undertook the work purely out of interest in the research and without their tutors even knowing – until I contacted them after the work was completed. Although serendipity played a part in this process, it might be construed as a *creative* approach to student involvement, in that it required a certain amount of inventiveness and imagination, alongside some persistence and doggedness on my part. My firm belief in the value of the project and its aims sustained my desire to see it through, and I suggest that this belief was also embodied by the students themselves, as the Falmouth students demonstrated.

Another source of student talent was the Undergraduate Research Internship Programme (URIP), which has run at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan)

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since 2008. This was inspired by initiatives in the US in the 1960s and has been successfully implemented at UCLan to create opportunities for work experience and to improve employment prospects. Amy, a first year undergraduate who attended some URIP sessions as part of her student research internship, wrote about her initial reactions:

*My first week was busy with inductions, introductions and getting organised. I first attended an induction event. Gathered in one lecture theatre were all of the undergraduate research interns at UCLan for 2016. There was a lot of mention about 'research aims', 'setting goals' and 'advancing human knowledge'. There was also talk about 'career aspirations' and it was the first time that I began to fully understand what a research internship actually was and the great – and slightly scary – opportunity I had been given.*

She also refers to the difficulty of defining what kind of research she was becoming involved in:

*Research for me still meant numbers, statistics and charts. It was hard to classify [the project's] research area as it seemed to encompass so much, but I placed it in the 'community arts' sector and felt quite proud (...). But in terms of understanding the 'research' side of the project I was still a little lost.*

As can be seen in her account above, there were some assumptions about research embedded in the URIP scheme, including that it was a means of identifying or furthering a career. The freedom to allow our research to evolve according to the agenda of the young people with whom we were collaborating was an important factor, often not accommodated in more 'conventional' research. As will be seen below, the fluidity of the Stories to Connect project was arguably one of its strengths, particularly in relation to the creation of opportunities for student and community involvement.

When presenting to staff and students the chance to engage in the project, we echoed the aims of the internship scheme, emphasising the advantages in terms of improving students' employability, and the opportunity to complete coursework projects at the same time as gaining work experience. I also assumed that students may have perceived it as a way to curry favour with lecturers, or with the university more generally. Despite these possible motivations relating to self-improvement or individual gain, the reflections we received from students on why they wanted to engage, and what benefits they experienced, surprised us with their focus not on self but on other. For example, in response to the emailed questions about their experience, students' comments on why they became involved included:

*I have a friend who has Autism and I know that they really struggle to communicate how they feel to others.*

*So much of writing is done alone and I craved the experience of being part of a team to add to my work experience. I have interests in community work, in particular creative work with disadvantaged groups. I'm hoping to work in the area of therapeutic writing and so was keen to see how this project benefited the group members in celebrating their stories.*



Others learnt along the way, for example one of the sound recording students who recorded the narrations commented on how much he had learned about young people's lives from listening to the stories. Another, who contributed illustrations for a story, reflected on what she had learned about a work environment as well as the plights of disadvantaged others:

*I realised how much work goes into every tiny aspect of a project like this, and the time it takes. It also kind of opened my eyes to some of the struggles some young people go through, and how important it is to raise awareness of that.*

### **Students' expertises and hidden talents**

Students' own passions and talents are often seen as subordinate to the requirements of their courses. Ivanic et al. (2009) discuss the importance of seeing positively the "abundance of literacies" that have proliferated as a result of new technologies, and at which students often excel. Rather than decrying the demise of standard literacy, lecturers should embrace and celebrate the creativity and diversity of new literacies, and ultimately encourage students to draw on their own preferred practices in their coursework. I extend this approach here, by suggesting that a project harnessing students' own creative talents and skills is an excellent way of encouraging students' development.

James and Brookfield (2015) highlight the importance of imagination in learning and particularly for reflective thinking. They claim that heightened aesthetic experiences become memorable, lifting one out of the everydayness of classroom life. They also stress the importance of making learning personally meaningful to students, which happens when students make creative connections with and applications to other areas of their lives. Creativity is clearly linked with imagination, and the nature of our project – working with groups of young people and involving the creation of fictional stories – was highly conducive to both these concepts.

Amy described attending one of our workshops with the young people, and appears to encapsulate the characteristics of the "three axioms of student engagement" as defined by James and Brookfield (2015, p. 5): personal meaning; multiple modes and media for communication; and new or unexpected tasks. Amy wrote:

*At the end of the meeting each person was asked to describe the meeting in a word or two. Everyone contributed, everyone listened to each other and most struggled to choose just one or two words as they had much more to say. Words such as 'fantastic' and 'amazing' were used a lot around the room and there were many smiley faces, including my own. My two words? 'Creative energy'. 'Creative' because I had felt inspired by the conversations with the young people and the example of the story which one member had helped create (read out by Candice to the group). The story summed up for me perfectly the project's aims in action. 'Energy' because I felt energised by the group's respect for each other, openness and fast-paced-task-orientated energy. It seemed like the perfect group atmosphere for young people to join and feel safe enough to create, and also for a new intern like myself to feel welcomed.*

In this case Amy's previous experience as a counsellor was a hidden skill that no-one recognised until she became a valued member of the Stories to Connect team. As lecturers we tend to ignore students' previous experiences, along with their existing skills and passions, even when they might complement their studies. For example, an apparent disregard for students' existing knowledge is often a cause for complaint for first-year undergraduates who feel they are 'repeating what they did at A level', or conversely, assumptions are made that they know about referencing or VLEs (for example), which may not have been previously required. Further, the demand for specific forms of essay-writing or conventions associated with different disciplines can alienate and disorientate students who may feel they have lost their previous identities. Our students have suggested that engagement in a project which allows creative exploration and connections can counter these negative feelings. It was largely the trust we placed in our students as experts in their own fields that seemed to give them a sense of value and the confidence to fully utilise their own talents.

Gregory was an intern who joined us when he had just completed his course, and he apparently discovered his own talents at the same time as we did. In answer to the emailed questions he wrote:

1. ***"What did you learn?"*** - *While I did learn a lot about the young people whose stories I followed as I made them into accessible media, I also surprisingly learnt that I have a knack for video making/editing especially with the praise I was receiving for my first couple of videos.*
2. ***"How did it benefit you?"*** – *I learnt a lot about myself, about the people I worked with both directly and indirectly, and I learnt new skills that could greatly improve my prospects in the future. Overall I learnt a lot of stuff in the span of 3 months.*

Alban was a student in sound production, yet it was also his interpersonal skills that were invaluable in the context of this project. He explained his role:

*My knowledge and expertise contributed to this project by knowing how to capture the best recording, i.e. what equipment to use and how to edit the audio to deliver an audiobook recording. As well I had to make sure the readers were physically and emotionally comfortable to read the stories at the best quality, because you could feel the presence of the young people that wrote the stories and it was important to do a good job for them.*

The sensitivity and constant good humour that shines through in Alban's comments, in addition to the skills he had learnt on his course, were crucial to ensuring the narrations were recorded effectively, during late evenings when this was best for the participants, and to a tight deadline. Alban says that he did learn valuable lessons for the world of work from the experience:

*I benefited from this project by gaining a good insight into the work life of a recording engineer as this was my first time having to record a certain something in a certain amount of time to professional standard. The project has gotten me excited to get into the world of work and taught me how to treat*

*clients and make sure I get the best recording quality and reporting to my project superiors and how to deal with those types of work-place relationships.*

Significantly, he also expresses an affective side to his learning, and links its impact to other facets of life:

*Being a part of Stories2Connect was a real eye-opener and such a privilege, recording some tender moments in the young people's lives that will shape them forever. To bring that forward for the world to see must have been really brave for those who shared their stories and I'm just really glad that they have been able to overcome these emotional trials. Seeing them come out the other side better people was really humbling. For my future self it has been a reality check, being a young father of two small children has really made me appreciate my responsibilities as a father so my kids don't have to go through the heartache other people might face in the world.*

In the same way that we positioned our young people with disabilities as experts on their own lives, positioning students as experts in their own fields meant that they relaxed into showing us their best qualities, whether it was as a fiction-writer, animator, artist, or personal helper for a disabled young person. While students are often constructed – both by lecturers and the students themselves – as passive recipients of learning, a genuine need for their skills and personal attributes reconfigures them as active givers. This in itself goes some way to explaining why Gregory was 'surprised' by his own skills: when he was recognised as someone who had them, rather than as someone who needed to learn them, he came up with the goods as required.

### **Community members and students working together**

For the young people with disabilities and other challenges, the opportunity for being involved in the project and working with students had a clear impact on their sense of self-worth and well-being. Genuine connections were made as the young people, most of whom had significant difficulties in expressing themselves in speech and writing, worked with students to co-create their stories, and see them develop into works of art. The project (to date) has produced 43 storybooks and 18 videos, each of which carries the by-line: 'Co-created by the Stories2Connect team'. The pride and sense of achievement of the young people were palpable when their carers and family members were invited to an event where the outputs were displayed.

In the second year of the project one young man with autism travelled to Canada with two academics and the student who animated his story, and he presented the project to a large audience – an achievement that astounded his care-workers. Rosie, the animation student, was able to use the opportunity to showcase her work, and to visit an animation studio in Vancouver. For each of these two young people, the experience was life-changing. Their reflections are presented in blogs on the project website.

The young man wrote:

*During my three days at the conference I have been participating in many different workshops, events, and activities, as well as meeting a lot of new*

*people. I think the most memorable part of the Conference for me was when I did my speech during our Stories 2 Connect Presentation. The presentation explained what Stories 2 Connect is, played a video and showed 3 animated shorts, even one made by Rosie! Everyone loved the presentation and absolutely loved my speeches. I felt really proud of myself. I've never really done a speech in front of lots of people before so it was a big achievement for me and I enjoyed telling people all about the project! (full blog at <http://stories2connect.org/project-information/proud-moments-from-across-the-globe/>)*

Rosie explained how she was able to network while in Vancouver:

*After this I got a SkyTrain, as I went to visit Atomic Cartoons! I was able to visit this animation studios because [Name] used to study the MA at UCLan and has kept in contact with [Lecturer] so this was an amazing opportunity for me and I had such a fun time visiting! I got to see secret stuff and learnt more about a 2D/3D animation company, and again, everyone was so nice there! (full blog at <http://stories2connect.org/project-information/rosies-recount/>)*

The feedback from other students involved in all kinds of different ways – elicited by the simple email asking for their responses – has highlighted unexpected benefits of such engagement. I suggest these benefits are due in part to the ethos behind the project, and the spirit in which it has been conducted. My initial cynicism about institutional motivations for interdisciplinary, community-engaged, impactful research, resulting in research-informed teaching and employability skills, has to some extent been transformed by the genuine engagement of the students themselves. When presenting the project to students I had assumed a focus on coursework completion and future career would encourage them to take part. In hindsight, it seems that the representation of the project as ‘helping young people to have their voices heard’ was a more significant motivational factor than the potential addition to a student’s CV.

Students’ reflections on their perceptions of the benefits gained by the young participants included:

*I would think it must provide a strong sense of community for young people ... creatively engaging so many young people, disadvantaged or not, could really help them to engage with the arts and see what they can do/create for a community.*

*The biggest benefit is being part of a community of people that allow their stories to be heard, valued, celebrated. The workshop environment was positive and special – there aren’t many places in life where we get to be that supported whilst having fun and acceptance. The biggest gain was probably social and confidence building and a sense of achievement through creativity and producing fun things for others.*

The ‘situated knowledge’ of the ‘disadvantaged young people’ in the project (McGarry, 2015) was crucial to telling authentic stories; similarly I argue that the

expertise and the students' own situated knowledge was crucial to the ways in which those stories were told. Bringing their own interpretations through creative writing, film production, animation, illustration, and narration, the students (on the whole a generation younger than the academic research team) contributed a dimension that would otherwise have been absent. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari (1987/2013), the research academics have presented the stories as layered assemblages of interpretations. The stories were built in different ways, drawing to greater or lesser degrees on different narratives and experiences of the young people we worked with, in combination with writers' interpretations and imaginations. The students' perspectives as young people living in the north-west of England in the digital age have been an element of that assemblage, and, we might argue, contribute to the potential resonances of the stories. In this sense the students' contributions have been manifold, adding their perspectives, voices, and expertises in the creation of these unique stories. Conversely, outcomes for the students have been manifold in that they have learnt unexpected skills and developed in different ways, responding to the disadvantaged young people's stories with compassion and attention to detail. The result might be seen as a 'convergence of differing types of knowledge' (Stuttaford et al., 2010) alongside *all* the values espoused by Healey et al. (2014) in working in partnership with students: authenticity, inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, trust, challenge, community, and responsibility.

### **Conclusions: challenges, rewards and outcomes**

One might say that this kind of student engagement is all very well, but the opportunity to involve students in 'live' projects does not always present itself. I suggest that the creativity we seek in our students could also be of use to lecturers when considering how to harness students' remarkable skills, passions and talents (Ivanic et al., 2009). Opportunities to involve students are available if only we look for them. If we consider all elements of our work as academics, and all the possibilities residing in the abundance of our students' talents, we will find spaces where synergy can take place. This creative approach to engagement could also lead to ways of addressing the problems of embedding transdisciplinarity in the curriculum. Blurring the boundaries of what students do in different disciplines by engaging them in a research project with a social justice focus chimes with the findings of McClam and Flores-Scott (2012). Their research on academics' perspectives on transdisciplinarity in a project focused on sustainable development highlights the importance of celebrating 'the messiness of knowledge-making', and advocates 'Foucault-like deconstruction strategies which seek to reveal and question normalizing practices operating within the disciplines' (p. 241). In the Stories to Connect project, the students were engaged for what they could bring not just as members of their disciplines, but as individuals contributing to a common cause.

That said there are also challenges in this kind of work. I have found that there is an immense amount of coordination and liaison required to engage students through several layers of gatekeepers, and to keep students involved, on task, and able to meet deadlines. Staff time is short and they did not always have time to respond to a request for a meeting with them or their students. Students sometimes expressed that they did not have the time to become involved in the project, and indeed some who did begin to write or illustrate a story did not manage to complete their contribution due to overwhelming other commitments. But, in my experience, the interest and cooperation of the staff was extremely positive, especially when face-to-

face contact was made and I could talk directly to their students in a teaching session.

However, the fact that those students who did contribute found the experience so fulfilling brings us back to the *purpose* of our work. Having explored the process and the product of the creative activities involved in this example of student engagement, it is the shared purpose behind it that is perhaps the key to its success. Our aim of amplifying the voices of disadvantaged young people led to us simultaneously showcasing students' attributes. Those talents included not only being able to draw, paint, write, or programme, but also their drive for a just society and a meaningful future for themselves and others. In this sense, the researchers' passions concurred with the students' and led to a fruitful collaboration.

Outcomes for students therefore included not only opportunities to use their skills in a 'real life project', thereby adding to their work experience and CV. They also experienced increased confidence in their abilities, sometimes separate from those associated with their course of study, and sometimes surprising. An additional outcome in this case was an understanding of problems faced by disadvantaged young people, and a sense of fulfilment and achievement in working on a project with the local community, which they saw as worthwhile. Therefore, through involvement in 'messy, real-world problems' (McGlam and Flores-Scott, 2012, p. 241) the project has countered the effect of narrowing our view of what disciplines and their students have to offer, and instead found ways of exposing and looking for 'connections and equivalence between the social work that constitutes them' (ibid.). Further, returning to Kleiman's (2008) analysis of creativity in higher education, the students' experiences of creativity on this project concurred with his findings which related to staff experiences. These can be summarised as outcomes relating to (a) the project's *process*, which the students could see as leading to a tangible outcome, but one which was not necessarily curriculum-based; (b) the creation of something new and original as a *product*; (c) a sense of *transformation* in that they were sometimes disorientated while encountering chance occurrences and the unexpected; and (d) personal and/or professional fulfilment (Kleiman 2008, p. 211.) All of these are expressed in the students' quotations above.

Finally, I suggest we take note of our students' advice. Those who have been involved stated:

*"I've enjoyed exploring at bit more of the university and understanding more about what kind of research is happening. I think what you are doing is really valuable."*

*"I feel that you should definitely work with students again in the future, it was great experience for me to work and organise with my classmates and other university staff members. It gave me a sense of working with a client outside of university."*

*"I'm very proud of my part of the project and what I've achieved, and very, very proud of the whole project and everyone involved. It puts a smile on my face thinking of what has been done and the fun along the way. I hope it continues in some way or inspires similar projects as I think gains are there"*

*for anyone involved. It's just great seeing different expertise coming together to create something for the community. Would love to be involved somehow if it happened again."*

These, and many other reflections from students, staff, and community writers and artists involved in this project, have been overwhelmingly positive and reinforced our belief in the benefits of this kind of work. Although the project was designed as collaborative, the specific forms of engagement with students and staff evolved and grew during the course of the research project rather than being inherent to its original plans. While accepting the need for a discussion around ethics in relation to the potential exploitation of students, I argue that the genuine need for the students' talents and skills contributed to the authenticity of their experience, working on a real project with deadlines and required outputs. This authenticity in turn led to a sense of achievement and fulfilment, and a feeling of being part of something bigger, thereby increasing the positive outcomes for students involved. To return to the rationale for the original research project, I suggest that beginning from a commitment to empowering young people and facilitating social change, is a more sustainable way of ensuring the values of participation, partnership, and creativity are imbued in the work of student engagement.

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