Impacts Between Academic Researchers and Community Partners: Some Critical Reflections on Impact Agendas in a "Visual Arts for Resilience" Research Project

Hannah Macpherson[1]
School of Environment and Technology
University of Brighton
Cockcroft Building
Lewes Road, Moulsecoomb
Brighton, BN2 4GJ
hm139@brighton.ac.uk

Angie Hart
School of Applied Social Science
University of Brighton
Mayfield House, Falmer
Brighton, BN1 9PH
A.Hart@brighton.ac.uk

Becky Heaver
School of Applied Social Science
University of Brighton
Mayfield House, Falmer
Brighton, BN1 9PH
b.heaver@brighton.ac.uk

At the moment we are working on an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) connected communities' research grant exploring the resilience benefits of visual arts practice. As we write this Hannah has a headache and keeps on thinking about budgets in the bath and Angie is tired after a night of writing the next bid for follow on funding! We are all involved in the complex process of engaged, impactful participatory research and at times suffer some of the symptoms of this labour intensive and contradictory process. Our current research project involves a scoping study with community partners and young people facing mental health complexity and / or learning difficulty.

There are all sorts of ways in which this work can be said to 'have impact' under the latest the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) impact criteria, where impact is defined as "an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia" (REF, 2011, paragraph 140). Initial qualitative evidence has begun to show how the project is enhancing the wellbeing of young people who regularly attend. The project is also enabling arts practitioners and their organizations to learn about the resilience literature and reflect on the resilience benefits of their work. However, the term impact itself remains problematic for us, for impact implies a one way process of knowledge transfer rather than a more subtle process of co-working and impact *between* participants which has occurred during this project.

Our research has been co-designed from the outset. It is a piece of participatory action research which has involved a process of sharing research agendas, aims, expertise and outputs rather than a simple 'one-way' transfer of expertise. This participatory approach to research conceptualizes community partners as collaborators rather than necessarily 'end users' (cf. Pain et al., 2011). It is not just community partners and young people who have been impacted 'on' by 'our' research, rather community partners have had an impact on us as academics, sharing expertise, skills and knowledge of the inclusive arts sector. In fact some of the community partners are academics.

As researchers concerned that our work goes beyond a narrowly defined academic audience we welcome an impact agenda in the REF and recent revisions to REF guidance. The latest list of possible understandings of research with impact is impressive (REF Panel Criteria and Working Methods, 2012; Manners, 2012). However, it remains to be seen how seriously the detailed new REF guidelines on impact case studies are taken when it comes to the complex process of assessing impact; and the relative weight given by assessors to participatory approaches compared to other more 'traditional' one-way approaches to impact. Another key concern is that despite revisions to REF criteria the sheer labour of participatory research (the head aches, the sleepless nights, the time spent on building relationships) will not be taken into account. There also remain significant barriers to realizing genuinely participatory and collaborative research with community partners. It is these barriers that we will discuss further here.

First, participatory research with impact is hard to achieve in practice due to a number of institutional and funding barriers. For example, the grant system is ring fenced and administered through Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and often the community partner element of the bid is allocated a lot less than the HEI. Furthermore, as academics our privileged knowledge of the grant system means that while grant writing involved shared meetings, the academic partners wrote and directed most of the grant because we have the skills and expertise at the moment in this field. The risk is that partners on a bid feel like 'second class citizens' within the research relationship before the research has even started.

Secondly, delivery pressures from United Kingdom Research Council timescales can limit impact and work against a genuine co-working agenda or an ability to explore a range of links with new partners. For example, a recent Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) call for 'connected communities' research went out in September 2012 and was due in in November 2012. Successful applicants were announced in February 2013 with a completion date of November 30th 2013. Such timescales minimize the potential for constructed shared agendas, academic research leave or reflecting on impact (an issue the research council is taking into account and allowing more time for in its latest connected community funding round). The only way we could achieve the timescales demanded of the study was through Angie Hart's established research contacts. The timescale also resulted in limited recruitment of participants and a need to reduce the workshops to half days because this was all that everyone could make. Grant time scales can also limit the assessment of impact after a grant has ended – often it is time to move onto the next grant rather than collect longitudinal data about long term impacts unless follow on funding is secured.

Thirdly, the sort of short termism that some of the Research Council UK (RCUK) grant systems tend to encourage is a particular ethical challenge when working with young people with complex needs – where trust needs to be established, research protocols need to go through university level ethics boards and impacts are often seen on varied timescales on an individual basis (cf Banks et al., 2012). We couldn't have done this research without the capacity we have developed already through existing resilience research initiatives and relationships.

Fourthly, there are certain geographies of impact that are hard to measure. The REF criteria for impact place an emphasis on reach and significance but how, for example, do we compare an exhibition seen by thousands to a project that significantly changes the lifecourse of five disadvantaged young people? There are also other impacts which are unlikely to leave a clear audit trail; such as tiny shifts in an individual young person's life which may ultimately turn out to have been a turning point or arts methodologies that have flattened power hierarchies and enabled communication between less verbal participants (cf. Wolf ,2010).

How to measure the impact of our interventions in the discourse of resilience is also unclear. In this project 'resilience' is understood as a capacity to do well

despite adverse experience (Gilchrist, 2009). However, resilience is a term that is finding increasing currency in UK policy discourse and research council circles – used in the context of diverse agendas including security, climate change and health. For example, the Department for Health well-being framework (2010) "Confident Communities, Brighter Futures" identifies resilience as a crucial component of well-being and it identifies the need for targeted evidence-based approaches aimed at socially excluded populations. There is concern amongst some commentators that certain resilience agendas maybe being rolled out as part of a big society rhetoric which uncritically 'transfers' responsibility from the state to the citizen (Davidson, 2011). However by speaking the language of resilience we hope to increase our chances of impact and of being listened to by key agencies (even if we choose not to always accept their definitions of resilience or the ideals which underpin their use of the term). Furthermore, there is a body of empirical research demonstrating the pragmatic value of well-designed resilience-based approaches for helping young people in adverse circumstances and the value of ensuring that research on resilience is informed by an 'inequalities imagination' (Hart and Blincow, 2007; Newman, 2004).

Finally, there was some hesitancy and difference in opinion around the extent to which we should be critically reflecting on this project in terms of impact in this paper. If we want this to be an impact case study for the REF in the future should we be critically reflecting on elements of the impact which didn't work so well in a public forum? Or just put a decent marketing spin on them for final reports? There appear to be plenty of positive impact outcomes from the bid and we do not wish to underplay these. Practitioners, community partners, young people and academics have been involved over the past year in an intense and rapid learning curve about each other and each other's areas of expertise. However what remains a central concern for us, and what we hope to have conveyed in this paper, is that only some of those impacts on and between participants and key agencies are easily captured and would be measurable under the current REF criteria for impact. Like Rogers et al. (this issue) we welcome the fact that REF criteria help provide an opportunity for academic activity beyond the written word to be recognised. However we fear the possible marketization of research that might also result.

Reviewers of this paper asked us how we would like to see the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) criteria for impact change. We had difficulty answering this question. Certainly it would still be nice to see depth of impact be taken as significantly as breadth, however whether this will happen won't be known until the results are published. Encouragingly, in our experience, interpretations of the guidelines have become more flexible in some subject submissions and now take into account participatory forms of research and the opportunity for them to demonstrate impact 'on the go', rather than after the event through knowledge translation. However at the heart of the problem is any attempt to measure impact through an over arching external agency such as HEFCE. For such attempts are bound to be flawed and require what others have referred to as "a

necessary false consciousness" (Decker and Hecker, 2002) in order for academics to participate in the process.

There is a political economy to the writing of impact case studies that also needs to be recognized. Angie has found that writing the impact case study and its iterative modes of impact has been a time-consuming research project in itself. This 'impact research' can differentially advantage academics at a later stage in their career and who are less concerned about producing impact factor papers for journals because they have already climbed to the top of the tree. This is not to belie the pressure to conform of course and the humiliation that may come with REF related failure. Russell Group universities (an association of 24 British public research universities established in 1994 to represent their members' interests and who receive the majority of research grant and contract income) are also advantaged here as they tend to have more organizational resources and a more facilitative culture for such 'impact-research on research'. Thus, in answer to the reviewer's question regarding how HEFCE impact criteria should change, if we had it our way, we wouldn't have a REF. That's not to say that HEFCE should shy away from resourcing impact. But we would prefer to see major investment in cultural change at the level of the university and the individuals working in them, than changes to HEFCE guidelines. Part of this change would involve reflection, appraisal and promotion strategies, which reward meaningful and sustainable community engagement and impactful research. This is generally something that is easier to get the measure of closer to home, and can be understood and promoted in relation to other research and broader organizational policy and practice within specific universities. It works against the culture of individualism that is so often at the heart of academic practice.

References

Askins, Kye and Rachel Pain. 2011. Contact zones: participation, materiality and the messiness of interaction. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, 803-821.

Banks, Sarah. 2012. *Community Based Participatory Research: Ethical Challenges*, AHRC Connected Communities Discussion Paper.

Decker, Peter and Konrad Hecker. 2002. *On the "Necessary False Consciousness" of the Proletariat* [Translated from P. Decker and K. Hecker. 2002. *Das Proletariat*. Munich, pp. 272-279. Available online at: http://www.ruthlesscriticism.com/falseconsciousness.htm (Accessed 5th June 2013).

Duggan, James. 2011. *Co-Producing Community Sustainability and Resilience in the Big Society*. Available online at: www.social-policy.org.uk/lincoln2011/Duggan%20P6%20Symposium.pdf (Accessed 4th May 2012).

Hart, Angie and Derek Blincow. 2007. *Resilient Therapy with Children and Families*. London: Brunner Routledge.

Higher Education Funding Council for England. 2013. *Recurrent Grants and Student Number Controls for 2013-2014*. Available online at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/2013/201305/Recurrent%20grant%20and%20student%20number%20controls%20for%202013-14.pdf .

Newman, Tony. 2004. *What Works in Building Resilience? A Review of the Evidence*. Barnardos.

Pain, Rachel, Mike Kesby and Kye Askins. 2011. Geographies of impact: power, participation and potential. *Area* 43, 183-188.

REF. 2011. *REF Assessment Framework and Guidance on Submissions*. Available online at: http://www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref/content/pub/assessmentframeworkandguidanceonsubmissions/02_11.pdf (Accessed 4th May 2012).

REF. 2012. *REF Panel Criteria and Working Methods*. Available online at: http://www.ref.ac.uk/pubs/2012-01/ (Accessed 4th May 2012).

Manners, Paul. 2012. Ripping yarns. *Times Higher*. Available online at: http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=419943 (Accessed 4th May 2012).

Wolf, Jonathan. 2010. The impact of research – so hard to pin down. *The Guardian*. Available online at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/feb/02/higher-education-research-grants .