

SKILLS & KNOWLEDGE FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES RESEARCH PROJECT SUMMARY

All participants noted some sort of change to their attitudes and thinking. There was a more pronounced effect on emotional, physical and cognitive engagement with rivers.

Imaginative engagement had varied impacts on participants with regard to some of their work practices, recreational activities and professional development. Changes included walking the river banks for the first time, with increased frequency; or engaging with environmental planning and with an environmental organisation.

Further evaluation by the researchers suggests that the use of creative writing as an imaginative engagement tool assisted people to learn more about and actively engage with complex issues such as river and catchment management.

Extract from 'Playing Truant' Audrey Barber-Hart

Then I caught up with another lad on the river bank. Ken was his name, he was also playing truant but from the 'proddy' school just down the road. So we knew each other but had never spoken before because of different schools, different faiths.

"What's that in thi pocket" I asked. "It's mi catapult" said Ken.

Oh let's have a go with it.

"Ok" he said, "we'll have a game to see who'll be the first to hit a fish in the water"

"Don't be daft there aren't any fish in this river it's too mucky."

"Well" said Ken "back there I saw on old chair somebody has thrown in't river we'll try to hit that."

Engaging with Rivers

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Photo by Clare Morgan

Professional & Personal Growth through Creative Engagement

Key Policy Implications

- Imaginative engagement through creative writing can be a positive and valued experience for all participants
- Such experiences can lead to changes in work practices, recreational activities and professional development
- There is a role for a programme of effectively evaluated, sustained and embedded use of imaginative engagement methods in expert-public engagement

Further research results at: <http://www.shef.ac.uk/landscape/staff/profiles/paulselman/research.html>

Key Words

- Generic Skills
- Sustainable Communities
- Community Cohesion

This research is one of 11 research projects commissioned from Universities across the UK, under the ESRC/HCA Academy Joint Targeted Initiative on Skills and Knowledge for Sustainable Communities.

To see how the HCA Academy is taking forward lessons from the research, visit:

<http://www.HCAAcademy.co.uk/>

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Further details of projects, contacts and associated briefing papers can be found at:

<http://gs.strath.ac.uk/suscoms>



Background

Flood risk, drainage and water quality have become major issues in some areas and it is increasingly clear that technology or 'hard engineering' is not always the best solution. Equally, rivers can generate enjoyment and pride, and assist renaissance of industrially damaged landscapes.

The EU Water Framework Directive requires River Basin Management Plans to be produced. This research aims to reconnect people with environmental systems and to equip them to contribute to solution planning.

Approach

With the enthusiastic support of the Environment Agency, the researchers recruited a local writing group through stakeholder networks and advertisements in community buildings. The creative writing programme included six two-hour workshops and additional masterclass tutorials at the request of the participants and concluded with an event which combined research dissemination with a celebration of the anthology produced by the writers.

The workshops were led by an expert in creative writing, who spent considerable time familiarising herself with the area beforehand. Practical investigation of the Dearne Valley from source to confluence was augmented by library research and discussions with an amateur local historian. The principles underlying the design and delivery of the workshops focused around active engagement, flexibility/responsiveness and development of the participants.

Each session was evaluated by the participants and supplemented with surveys to profile the lifestyle, behaviour and perceptions of participants, their general environmental and river-management knowledge and whether/how these changed.

The research was influenced by a literature review focusing on integrated river basin management, participation and imaginative engagement.

Research into integrated river basin management and its use of a holistic systems approach has been complemented by diverse mechanisms to promote community and citizen engagement in flood risk management, flood response and river basin management.

The literature review identified that when river basin management was based on a small circle of influential stakeholders it achieved only limited results and led to conflict avoidance rather than building trust and local identity. In comparison, adaptive management approaches reflected multidisciplinary and multistakeholder involvement, and an emphasis on collaborative or social learning.

A second important strand of the literature emphasised the differences in the ways human activities were viewed – whether institutions, procedures and structures treated people as 'disturbance factors', or whether they valued people's potential to explore issues and identify actions that contribute to effective river basin management.

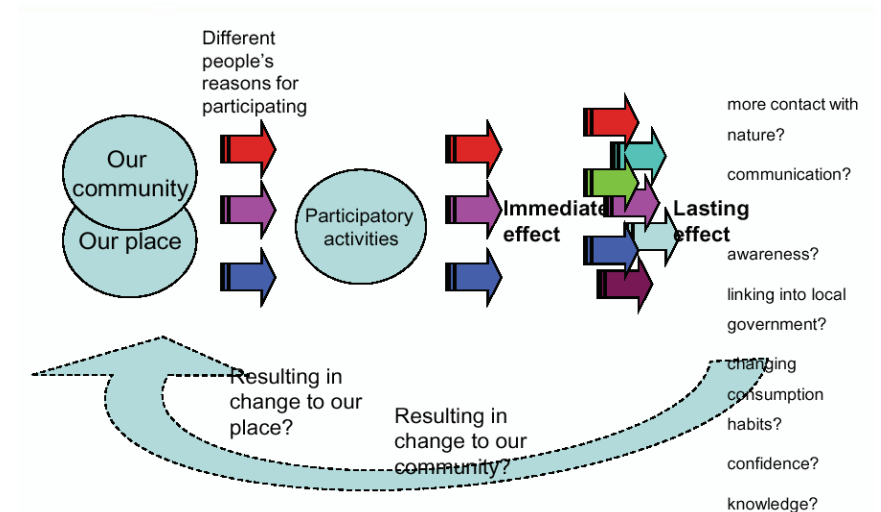
Imaginative engagement through the creative arts was identified as a way of achieving social learning and understanding complex sustainability problems. The practice of story-telling was identified as particularly relevant, particularly in exploring situations of uncertainty. Measurement of learning was adapted from Argyris and Schon's (1978) theory of 'double loop' learning, in which learners progress through Type 1 learning of scientifically derived facts, to Type 2 learning which generates behavioural change and a 'social rather than environmental basis for sustainable living'.

Findings

In order to retain enthusiasm and achieve forward momentum during the relatively extended period of the workshops, the writing process was used as the central motor, not as a mechanism to impart information to participants, but as the crux of the workshop experience.

Participants developed their own individual views of the Dearne catchment area – its characters, its society, its values, its physical/geographical disposition, where the area 'comes from' and where it is going', and the issues that face it.

The diagram below illustrates the approach by which participation in imaginative engagement was evaluated.



The evaluation showed that the experience was positive and enabled participants to learn about people, rivers and local history (both during events but also in between events through their raised interest).

Each participant stated at one point that it was interesting and important to hear, and realise the existence of, the different views and associations that each person has concerning rivers, and the environment more generally. Exploring this gave them insight into their own and other people's feelings, knowledge and personalities. In several cases this triggered changes such as an increased interest in and appreciation of the environment and environmental issues; greater evaluation of decisions, and greater awareness of opportunities for local participation.