Productive Margins

COMMUNITY FORUM

5th June 2013

Summary and Reflections

Preface

This report was written from field notes and photographs that I took over the course of the community forum in Gurnos, Merthyr Tydfil. Not having been involved in *Productive Margins* until that day, I understood that my role was to take note of the ways in which decisions were made and to observe how people took part in the forum. To be as transparent as possible, I should explain that I came to the forum with experience both as an academic and as a member of a community group; I am a researcher at Cardiff University but in my spare time I am chair of a grass-roots arts organisation in Adamsdown, Cardiff. My observations were therefore filtered through these two lenses and what follows is my specific interpretation (and memory) of what happened on the day. I have written the report in the first person to minimise any neutrality that may be inferred from writing in the third person, however I also tried to remain an observer rather than a participant in the discussions and activities.
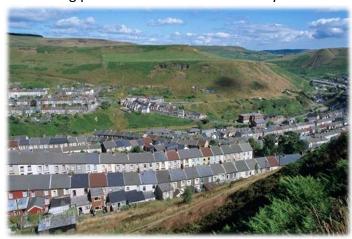
1. The Journey to Gurnos

The day began with a coach trip from Cardiff University with commentary from Martin O'Neill, an academic who grew up in Merthyr and is now Chair of the 3Gs Development Trust. 3Gs is a community regeneration organisation serving Gurnos, Galon Uchaf and Penydarren in Merthyr Tydfil. The community forum was held in the 3Gs community centre in Gurnos.

The road leading north of Cardiff and into the Valleys is the A470, a winding dual carriageway which took us past Castell Coch ('Red Castle' in English), a fairy tale castle built by the Marquis of Bute for his wife as their summer residence. We also passed Pontypridd, the home town of Tom Jones, and Quaker's Yard, a refuge for Quakers who were being persecuted in the 18th Century.

Valley towns tend to be long rows of terraced houses nestled in the hills and along the bottom of the valleys to shelter from the weather.

On the way up to Merthyr Martin pointed out the sites of several former coal and iron tips. These looked just like green hills and mountains, but he explained that they used to be on fire and smoking when the tips were in use.

Aberfan

We made our way to Aberfan where, in 1966, 116 children and 28 adults died when a coal tip slipped down a hill and demolished Pantglas Primary School. We stopped in Aberfan to visit the graves of those who had died. On the bus, Martin had told us that the disaster had left much bad feeling between the people of Aberfan and the government, particularly the Coal Board who used £150,000 of donations to the community on reclaiming the coal tip. This was repaid in 1997 by the Labour Government without interest, and in 2007 the Welsh Assembly paid £2m into the Aberfan Disaster Fund. Although I did not take any photographs in the cemetery, the sight of the gravestones from the edge of the cemetery is etched on my memory.

Source: BBC Website Source: BBC Website
http://bbc.in/14iKm3l

W walked along the row of graves and I turned to look out onto the valley below to collect myself before walking back along the next row. Some graves had photographs, and they all of course had the names and ages of the children who died. There was something restorative about the dramatic setting of the cemetery, which was enhanced by the brightness of the day although it was not particularly sunny. The cemetery was on a hill, in front of which was a valley and then a mountain the other side.

It was a sombre part of the day and, for me, produced a more embodied understanding of what this community had been through. It made me think of my own children and of my childhood and I had to resist thinking too much about what it would have been like in the days, weeks, months and years following the disaster, in case I burst into floods of tears.

Source: www.Flikr.com http://bit.ly/1at6LQf

2. Gurnos

In the 1950s, the slums which housed the ironworks employees were demolished. A new housing conurbation, which developed through the 1960s and 1970s, was built to house the workers and their families. Gurnos offered a more luxurious standard of living and a more

pleasant arrangement of houses, which were set back from the road with plenty of space between them. For the first time for many people, they had access to running water, an inside loo and a garden. Gurnos was viewed as an aspirational place to live, but contemporary perceptions of Gurnos, along with the Welsh Valleys in general, could not be more different. The BBC recently published a report which stated that Blaenau Gwent is the least attractive

place for investment in the whole of the UK (see http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-23028078 for the article).

3. The Forum

We were met by Gerald Powell from the 3Gs Development Trust and taken inside the

community centre to a large meeting space upstairs. We sat at desks arranged in a large circle, and introduced ourselves. Morag opened the forum by reminding everyone that the previous forum had been about regulation, and that people had brought artefacts with them to represent the places where they work. The theme of this forum was to be innovative methods.

Morag then spoke about my role as observer and note-taker, reflecting upon what one member of the previous forum had said about feeling uncomfortable with the level of detail contained in the notes. This made me think quite carefully about how to capture the details of the day in a way that would enable thorough documentation and

reflection, without causing people to feel that they were over-exposed during this process. I hope that the inclusion of images will help achieve this by prompting the reader to remember the conversations and activities without the need for lengthy sections of descriptive text. However, I did not take photographs of every single person who spoke and it was inappropriate for me to photograph some of the more tense conversations, so these have been captured with words alone.

4. Maps

Eva introduced this part of the forum which focused upon maps that members of the forum had brought with them to share with the group. This began whilst we were still seated at the circle of desks, and continued in the open space later in the day. Maps, GIS technology and data are all crucial aspects of regulation, and this part of the day was to explore how maps speak to regulation.

A number of people took it in turns to show the group their maps and to talk about their significance. At first it was not anticipated that people would talk at length about their maps otherwise the exercise would take too long, however it was apparent that people *did* want to talk about them, so they did:

Wendy's map

Wendy brought with her a map of New Zealand's South Island, which she described as "*hand on heart the most beautiful place in the world*". She said "*this is where my heart is*", and explained how she had rummaged through all of her maps the night before in order to have one to bring with her.
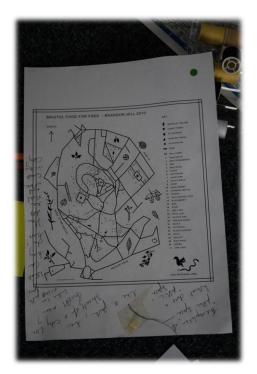

Tim's maps

Tim had printed three maps from the internet ("*they lack the 'beauty' of other maps*") which depict foraging places in Bristol. At this point Ben asked if South Bristol was shown on the map. There was clearly some emotion surrounding this issue. Tim said that an online map had been created, which does show South Bristol, although the foraging maps that he had brought

with him did not. Tim talked about his interests as a geographer in dispossession and the displacement of peoples, as well as studying the history of fauna and flora alongside the histories of people in an area. It was noted that the red spaces on the maps were highly regulated spaces, in this case Ministry of Defence land. In terms of dispossession, National Theatre Wales had done a production on part of the MoD site which represented an act of reclamation and 'giving back' of the land for public use, albeit temporarily.

Jamie's map

Jamie brought his phone as his map, and explained that it contained maps of people, places, networks and concepts. His phone could tell him how to get somewhere (with its satnav), how to get in touch with someone (with the phone book) and how to get into places (with saved door codes).

Tove's map

Tove had not brought a physical map with her, but told the group about an Art History day that SPAN had run with its members. Children and parents who were not from Bristol but who had moved there brought in artefacts to signify their journeys to Bristol. Each person wrote a message or drew a picture which depicted where they had come from, and they were brought together to create a piece of art.

Ben's maps

Ben started by talking about how 'official' maps are primarily about guiding drivers and therefore prioritise roads. Ben's maps subvert this by prioritising green space and pushing roads into the background. He explained that his organisation gets support from UWE design students who often do the research involved in producing a map as well as the design work. He had a map of public loos (for older people, who may be too scared to go out in case they cannot find a loo); a map of an arts trail (which included sites within universities and schools but predominantly the homes of professional and amateur artists); a map of Upfest (an urban painting / graffiti festival which has been met with both outrage and support) and a tourist map. Hence the same town is depicted very differently through maps with diverse priorities. A point which Ben felt strongly about was the exclusion of South Bristol from some maps, including the maps that Tim had brought with him. Ben poignantly said: *"You don't fall off the end of the world when you get to South Bristol"*.

5. Curating the maps

Tim suggested that the group took their maps over to some open space in the room and place them on the floor and walls in some kind of relation to each other. He encouraged people to 'attack the maps' with scissors, and to create an alternative notion of landscape by making connections with string, words and drawings. Two maps of the South West and South Wales was placed on the floor, and the group began to place their own maps around these maps.

There was a sense of trepidation at first, especially at the thought of cutting up a map. It seemed that not everyone felt happy to deconstruct and reconstruct the maps, at least not at first. I heard someone say "*I'm not attacking a map*" whilst walking away from the scene, but they actually spoke more positively about the exercise towards the end of the day. Another member of the group was concerned with the symbolic meaning of the maps and asked quietly "*what if it's sacred?*" when it was suggested that the group 'attack' the maps.

Nevertheless, the first cut was made. Some people got very close to the maps and to each other during the task, and the room was filled with sounds of talking, scissors cutting and paper rustling. I got absorbed in photo-taking; the task was very visual, collaborative and organic, and nobody knew what the final 'map' would look like – in this way the task mirrored the project as a whole. These images show Gwyn cutting up the Severn Estuary between Cardiff and Bristol, separating the two cities but then moving one side of the map so the two cities were side-by-side.
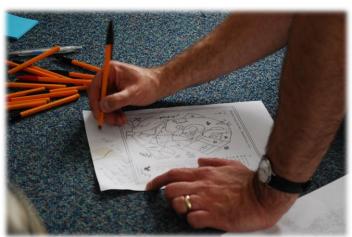
There was a sense of individual consideration and creation and then the communicating of ideas and concepts through the maps. The group seemed to find an effective way of working together on the task and did not encounter any dilemmas that could not be overcome (e.g. *"how do we link to New Zealand?!"*). The extent to which everybody took part in the task varied: some got straight into cutting up the maps, making links with string and writing on post-its, while others preferred to observe what was happening and listen to people speak about their maps. From a relative 'outsider' perspective, the conversations seemed relaxed and friendly; the activity did not seem to create or reinforce any divisions within the group. However, it is absolutely inevitable that some processes and dynamics were not picked up through my observations or photographs. People may have felt under pressure to 'perform' as members of the community forum, regardless of how they felt about the task or about the other members of the group. Certainly I got the sense at the start of the task that not everybody was comfortable with it, but the degree to which this discomfort continued throughout the entire task is unknown. As dialogue and activity developed, it appeared that all members of the group were engaged and, at one point, I turned and took a photograph of the empty circle of seats (page 5) to show that nobody was

'sitting out'. The remainder of this section shows more images alongside text which captures some of what people said about their maps:

This is the train line from Cardiff to Bristol

But, actually, it doesn't go in a straight line – it bends, like this.

There are similarities between some areas of Knowle West in Bristol and the Gurnos, and at the same time a huge disconnect between Knowle West and the rest of Bristol. This disconnect is cultural as well as physical, and people in Knowle West get by through foraging, rabbiting and "making do and mending". In an area of much wildlife and nature, housing has been built in a similar vein to Gurnos: very bordered housing with gardens which have a definite start and end.

MacBooks and mobile phones are crucial for everything going on at Hamilton House in Bristol. People migrate to this area because of the sense of creativity, openness and community.

Sue told us the story of her mum, a market stall holder in Swansea who had gone bankrupt, and her dad, a GI from Chicago. They met at a land army in Taunton after Sue's mum had left Wales and her siblings had scattered across the UK. The young man and woman fell in love and moved to Chicago, however as communists during the McCarthy years they were told to "get out!" They settled back in the UK in Bolton, where Sue was born. Every time Sue thinks about Taunton, she associates it with Chicago and the story of how her parents met. Sue used some string to connect Taunton with 'Chicago'

This is the Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) map showing a Communities First area. It is brutal: *"white is in, blue is out"*. Communities First operates in identified areas of deprivation, but not all deprived people live in these areas, so they work in some 'blue' areas too. People spoke about other areas where pockets of deprivation existed in affluent areas, for example in areas of Bristol, Cardiff Bay and Porth Cawl. This means that in some areas community groups find it difficult to get funding for projects because they are not recognised through official data as being deprived. Someone suggested that a door-by-door level of deprivation would be an improvement on an area-based model.

The group broke for lunch. A conversation I had over lunch highlighted some uncertainty relating to the project's purpose and direction. This was articulated more directly in the discussion after lunch, where tensions between the different groups at the forum were openly discussed.

6. Iron and Steal

Gwyn talked about a musical drama project he ran with pupils from local schools, along with artists and other community partners. The project was funded by Heritage Lottery Fund and focused on the history of Merthyr. The group watched some footage of the drama production that was created by the people involved in the project and some footage of the rehearsals (here is a link to the footage of the rehearsals: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BSYaAjIIutQ). Gwyn talked about the importance, for this project, of making it *not* about learning history: *"If they think they're in a learning environment they switch off"*. The pupils went on weekly research trips to various sites in Merthyr including Roman sites and the recently closed Hoover factory. A script-writer worked with them to produce the script, although Gwyn told us that on the night of the performance some of the performers improvised on stage! Gwyn talked passionately about the impact that the arts and performing can have on people, and this was echoed by another member of the group. Art was claimed to be a catalyst for change in people's lives, and that people 'get a taste' for performing. Five years after the project, some of the original participants are still involved in the community choir.

Access to funding was seen as a barrier for communities running these types of projects. Ben felt that the contextual environment, including the willingness of skilled volunteers and organisations to spend their time writing bids and establishing a project, strongly mediates a community's access to these kinds of projects. Gwyn countered this point with his own view, which was that someone has an idea and then from that they find the people with the skills and time to help. Gabrielle felt that Merthyr is exactly the kind of place that Ben was talking about – she said that they do not have access, so for this to have been achieved is incredible.

7. The politics of data

Gareth spoke about the 'bigger picture' of data and of the relationship between the state and multi-national corporations who store data about us. He made several key points:

- The more connected the world becomes, the harder it will be to regulate;
- The world is awash with data in different forms and increasingly online;
- Maps embody certain types of data and, as the forum has shown, can be subverted;
- There are implications for 'objectivity' and its relativism;
- The shape of the wider world is changing in terms of technology, economy and changing communication structures (e.g. twitter);
- People in communities may make use of data to resist the regulatory power of the state.

Penny, from Knowle West Media Centre, then talked about a project "Whose Data?" which took place 4 years ago. The project looked at ways in which 'live' data can be represented to benefit local people (here is a link to the project website: http://whosedata.net/). Five artists created visual representations of different kinds of live data such as live performances, live weather data and survey data. Penny talked about the discourse of 'art' legitimising the actions of young people who took part in live performances with a range of different objects; they had said "*if we do this sort of thing we get ASBOs*". The value of performance therefore lies partly in the allowing of things to be done and said that would otherwise not be allowed.

Jamie felt that whilst some projects were a tall order in terms of cost, the key areas of benefit were:
- Mixing of art with political thought;
- Collaborative processes between artists and communities;
- The development of other projects;
- People understand that they have power though the data they can create and do something with.

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8. What's in it for us?

At this point in the discussion, Ben raised an issue that is crucial to the operation of the entire project. Whilst acknowledging that great projects can happen when communities, artists and researchers collaborate, Ben asked two questions:
- Where is the co-production? and
- What are we (community partners) getting out of it?

Ben expressed his feeling that he was not sure of the benefit the project would bring to the people he works with, and that he felt that the community partners were being 'used' to enable the academics to, ultimately, write papers. Other representatives from community partners joined the discussion, highlighting the operational differences between community groups. For example, timescales are far longer in academia which may be frustrating for groups which operate on far shorter, quicker timescales. Penny felt that community partners should take some responsibility for ensuring the people they work with benefit from the project. Tove said that priorities are important for community groups, and asked how their involvement fits in to the three parts of the research project. She went on to highlight the issue that priorities in a community are often defined by the most articulate members of that community, leading to many important issues not being vocalised. Jamie added that community partners need tangible, identifiable purposes above and beyond the university's involvement. The discussion signalled a shift in the atmosphere of the forum and, rightly, demanded that attention be paid to the tensions existing between the different groups' priorities, and how to move forward with sincere co-production.

Gareth spoke about wanting a genuinely reciprocal process during the project and not just extracting information from people. There were a few moments during the discussion when I was anticipating a more heated argument to develop, but there followed some suggestions on how to improve the quality of relationships between academics and community partners which moved the discussion forward:

- Penny suggested that academics should spend more time visiting community groups;
- Tove suggested bringing in an artist to work with the forum to explore some of the issues of working together, rather than just talking about it;
- Jamie suggested hearing more about *why* everyone is involved in the project in order to better understand his role ("*I feel like a passenger in a process*");
- Ben suggested greater clarity of motives, resources and levels of commitment, as well as more explanation of how each discipline fits into the project;
- Someone said that community partners needed to feel that they were here 'on trust' which is tough because there is a period of waiting and uncertainty until projects unfold;
- Gerald asked for clarity on the process and how much support groups could expect.

We broke for tea and coffee.

9. What next?

Morag talked about the timeline of the project. There are 5 years within which 7-8 projects are anticipated to take place. Although the research money has to be spent by April 2018, Jamie suggested that we view the projects that are set up as investments which will hopefully continue. Morag also mentioned 8 festivals which will take place across the 5 years: day-long events to showcase what has been happening and engage with people who have been involved. Ben suggested linking in with existing events such as the Bedminster show on 21st September.

Community partners commented on the timeline and what they felt they would like from the process:

- Jamie wanted to capture the ways in which we learn from each other. Big research aims would not hold his attention; action and practical sharing of resources would be more useful. He asked "*what mechanisms will allow the 'noise' to be heard?*"
- Ben asked if his group could get legal advice through their involvement in the project;
- Penny asked about papers and dissemination and other ways in which the project could be disseminated e.g. case studies, website.

This brought the conversation on to the website, and it was briefly discussed as something which would need to be tailored according to the needs of each community.

Seed corn funding

Sue spoke about seed corn funding and the availability of small pots of money to kick start collaborations between community partners and to pave the way for the larger projects. A discussion was had about the various ways in which this could take place, including possible collaborations and some ideas for projects. Of particular interest at this point was the dynamic between the different groups in the room. The process of obtaining seed-corn funding had not been clearly defined, and Sue said that there would be an application form for community groups to complete. Immediately the question of who decides which group gets the money was asked. I could feel and see irritation rising in some community partners as they asked questions like "*Will academics decide who gets the money?*" and in response to the statement that the proposals need to be interesting *research* ideas "*Why would community partners know what makes a good research idea?*" Some of the academics in the room looked at each other and it felt to me as though the values of the project were on the verge of being seriously undermined. A timely contribution from Gwyn was that all community partners could receive £500 each, which would help to resolve this impasse. The response from academics was tentative but Morag did agree that it was one possibility and that there would be enough money left for other seed-corn projects. The mood immediately softened and the discussion continued. The decision was made to change the application process in response to the questions about the bidding process.

10.   Concluding remarks

The day began by immersing us in the history and stories of the South Wales Valleys and, for me, having a guided tour enabled a more embodied understanding of some of the features, losses and tensions which characterise this beautiful part of Wales.

The format of the day worked well overall and there was a good balance of 'doing' versus talking. The creative and physical element of the mapping exercise served to generate discussion, draw distinctions and similarities between different locations, explore personal narratives and experience the co-production of something new. It appeared to me that this part of the day was the most harmonious and enjoyable part for everyone.

Tensions arose surrounding issues of roles, resources and governance. This was to be expected and it was a test of the strength of the forum. There was potential for relations to break down at several points, however the forum appeared to operate with a genuine openness that allowed conflicting perspectives to be voiced and debated. Even when potentially serious conflicts arose, other members of the forum contributed suggestions which enabled the group to move forward.

Having said that, the discussion surrounding seed-corn funding brought home to me the delicacy of this project, and made me wonder how far universities can remain in control of finances and still be doing co-production.