

Connected Communities

Stimulating Participation in the Informal Creative Economy

(SPICE)

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Background

Executive Summary

SPICE (Stimulating Participation in the Informal Creative Economy) investigated the informal creative economies that grow up around cultural heritage in England. The research team drew together participants from four distinctive locations (London, Oxford, Sheffield and N Yorkshire/E Cleveland)

Through a series of workshops blending discussion and practical tasks, key issues in developing a vibrant informal creative economy were analysed by participants from the four neighbourhoods together with researchers. Participants included social entrepreneurs; artists, poets and photographers; trainers and facilitators; local authority staff responsible for the cultural sector and regeneration; retirees; academics; small business and voluntary sector representatives.

Given the importance of place and identity to the project, the decision was taken to run a workshop in each of the four areas, meeting some of the same participants in different places, acting as 'visitor' or 'host'. Although we intended to make local activities the focus in each visit (inviting the 'hosts' from the area to present their work and discuss it with the 'visitors'), this aspect developed further than we had originally conceived and tours of the area and other opportunities for civic pride to manifest became an integral part of the agenda in each place, led by participants' interests.

Researchers and Project Partners

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Key words

Economy
Creativity
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Life Writing
Culture, community

SPICE

We drew together participants from four distinctive locations (London, Oxford, Sheffield and N Yorkshire/E Cleveland) where innovative cultural heritage activity is taking place. These included guided walks, ad-supported blogs, community-generated tourism, and social enterprise work.

Changes and Developments

There were some qualitative adjustments made by the research team between each workshop, in the light of findings emerging, and recognition of the value of particular activities. The emergence of local-guided walks as a creative way to experience a location was one – with the recognition that productive interactions were not produced only from the walk leaders' scripts, but also contributed by visiting participants in unanticipated ways.

We augmented the research questions when we realised how significant place would be to the visitors to each locale and how valuable it would be for them to walk about in each other's areas. We might frame the additional question as:

How does the experience of being in a place impact on participation in the informal creative economy, over and above any cultural heritage activities?

and the paper (*Recoupling Sociality and Walking in Place-Making* by Bidwell, Light and Brereton) which has just been submitted to the *Designing Interactive Systems* conference (DIS 2012) addresses the learning that emerged in using the methodology of running workshops in locations that held significance for our participants.

The investigators considered at several points and in considerable depth the different

implications for research findings of having return or repeat participants (as opposed to a new group of participants). Whilst practicalities meant participants in some workshops were unable to come to others, participants who went to more than one workshop, or to all, indicated they felt a cumulative awareness of issues that was more transformative than they wished to explain simply through having more opportunities to compare. How this awareness could be translated into benefit could form a research question in itself, particularly in the light of developing a language (other than 'tourism') about how visitors connect with community.

Another unexpected achievement came through provisioning: some workshops sourced hospitality through local suppliers where ethical issues were foregrounded (especially community identification, or not, with locally-sourced or prepared ingredients.) At these workshops there were debates about the implications of such descriptors, debates that raised issues about the way local intersects with global.

Advancing Creativity

In the subject area of Life writing, SPICE was moderately useful in trying out several forms of life writing in community contexts, including semi-structured questionnaires, blogs and creative writing. What worked best was an exchange of mini-autobiographies, or online self-introductions. The SPICE blog, valiantly promoted by one investigator, proved not to be a medium of choice (participants were too busy to contribute to it.) Sound and image media worked variously as shareable. One community film proved powerfully cohesive, not only catching the attention of a new audience but

also reigniting passion in the community that produced it – through viewing it.

In the subject area of history and cultural history, SPICE showed the considerable value of industrial history in community exchange and creative economy. That included oral history, in stories of those who had worked in now-vanished industries or much-changed industries. (This doesn't normally include academia: maybe it should.) The literary form of this history also produced interesting findings: the power of personal testimony and anecdote; the simultaneity of official and unofficial histories; languages of engagement with social and economic change; attitudes to architecture old and new and to cultural and natural environments.

SPICE also catalysed thinking about interdisciplinary in relation to the roles of creativity and economics in forming the creative economy. One potentially very productive finding was of a discourse that could be located between tourism and anthropology: the process of exchange through workshops involved hosts, guests and gift-giving, a triangulation that can map symbolic value in the creative economy where the value of transactions is not always or simply material. It could contribute to understanding the creative economy as cultural (im)materialism; it could also contribute to understanding what if any distinctions are possible between the creative economy and the informal creative economy. The exchange process of SPICE created numerous points of contact for cross-fertilising projects and publicizing them beyond their originating locality. It also stimulated awareness of value: the value of design (Sheffield compared to Oxford), the value of community film (Teesside and Oxford), the value of community projects in places of

disparate and potential communities (London) and the value of exchange between academia and communities (all.) Participants from both north and south examined and re-examined some prejudices about region (it's grim up north vs southern prosperity); the roles of class and ethnicities as connective tissue; cross-regional aesthetics of arts and design. The opportunity to compare regionally-varied experiences of local and national government were especially valuable.

There were individual advancements of creativity, knowledge and understanding in SPICE in that some of the participants wrote poems and some made visual records.

Follow on Activity

As originally planned a paper about SPICE (Thompson, Light and Brant 2011) was delivered at the CIRN 2011 conference and has been entered into conference proceedings. Collectively all papers are published ISBN: [978-0-9581058-9-7] Format: CD-ROM Publication Date: 12/2011

Additionally we await a decision on *Recoupling Sociality and Walking in Place-Making* by Bidwell, Light and Brereton, submitted to the *Designing Interactive Systems* conference (DIS 2012)

Synergies with a Finnish group of community activists have been exploited throughout the project, following an early project visit by representatives. There was particular interest in the Jericho Boatyard struggle, which was the subject of the fourth SPICE workshop. After that workshop, the P.I. visited Oxford again and worked with some of the boatyard members on their social media strategy. Now a study

visit to Finland is planned for April 2012 and the synergies between Tampere and Oxford are likely to be explored.

One of the SPICE investigators is also an investigator on another AHRC Connected Communities follow on project – Issue Based Creative Clusters (Exeter). There will be a piece of work coming out of this on community co-designed technologies vs geek led solutions which has been influenced by the learning from SPICE. In May 2012 the ideas on community technologies will be developed further during workshops in Bezirksmuseum Floridsdorf, Austria and both SPICE and IBCC will be referenced there.

The first SPICE workshop was hosted by a Social Enterprise called “Be All You Can” in their premises at Rigwood House. Over the two days of workshops several other social enterprises participated. As a direct result of this, Teesside University held a seminar at Rigwood House and consulted all those social enterprises to help inform the University’s developing Social Enterprise Strategy. This is continuing with several of the social enterprises taking on consultancy roles with the University.



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