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RESEARCH FOR ALL

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Virtual centrality: Young people making meaning from research in a widening participation context

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Paul Evans – *Visual artist*

Abstract

This article investigates the collaborative and creative methodologies behind a project that sought to involve secondary school students in making art that responded to conversations with academics about research. This became the basis for a virtual gallery of their work representing university research. The article describes a particular university–school partnership, with a focus on creative, innovative methodologies for engagement, on young people's meaning-making and maker skills. We explore the potential of digital technologies for supporting this work, and the need to work collaboratively with artists and other skilled individuals to realize young people's capacity. This model is not focused on transmission, but on joint knowledge-creation and co-production. The article also explores the potential of arts-based methodologies to support young people's creative engagement with university research as a widening participation oriented methodology.

Keywords: young people; widening participation; collaborative methodologies; creative methodologies; digital technologies

Key messages

- Young people have articulated their own ideas about university research through various artistic modes, including drawing and digital media.
- Widening participation is about engagement with ideas in universities – a process that can be deeply engaged with research.
- Longitudinal engagement is a key element of this process-led way of working, and artistic approaches are key.

> What interests me is to work with this movement between the centre and periphery (Lucas, 2017: 68).

> Virtual Social Science is a different kind of project – one that is looking at research in the university from young people's perspective. They will be interviewing academics to develop their visions of the research they do. Once this is done, an exciting online virtual exhibition of their work will be showcased, with the help of artist Paul Evans, who will work with the young people to realize their ideas. This is widening participation, but in an innovative and engaging format, one that places young people at the heart of the process (Kate Pahl, November 2013).

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Background

Traditionally, widening participation (WP) is a philosophy and an approach that has had a particular place within universities. With a focus on increasing university participation among young people from 'deprived' communities, it can become a form of 'doing to' rather than 'doing with', with an emphasis on lectures and talks addressed to young people as future university students. In these situations, the primary focus is on the university, and not on the students. Young people's own creative understanding of university research is not the focus of many WP programmes. This is despite a concern that many young people feel distant from universities. A number of studies have identified the ways in which universities are spaces in which many young people do not necessarily feel at home (for example, Hanley, 2016; Reay *et al.*, 2005). This unease is partly a product of the ways in which universities can construct young people from non-middle-class backgrounds as 'the problem', and use language such as 'widening participation' as a code for students who come from neighbourhoods defined in statistics as 'disadvantaged' (Smit, 2012). This language is particularly problematic to encounter if you are a student coming from those areas.

In this article, we see the process of engaging young people in university education – widening participation – from a more collaborative, co-productive perspective. We are interested in young people deciding upon and articulating their own futures, and making sense of universities in their own ways. In this way, the articulations and creative energy of young people can be harnessed to develop their visions of 'what could be'. This is a more utopian model of WP, one that hinges on creative energy, and modes of engagement that are themselves innovative and reside within young people's existing funds of knowledge and skills. This perspective draws on the work of Ruth Levitas that considers 'utopia' as a method for opening up new kinds of social transformations (Levitas, 2013). Our proposition is that creative methods that are dialogic, conversational and rest on a relational model of arts practice could have potential to engage young people with universities in new ways (Kester, 2004; Bevan Jones *et al.*, 2017). This analysis rests on a model of arts practice that understands the experiential and relational nature of some contemporary arts practices, and rests upon practice as research as a methodology (Barrett and Bolt, 2007). Our argument here is that relational art can provide a different, and possibly more engaged, model of widening participation than pedagogical models that rest on more linguistic modes of delivery (lectures, seminars or discussions). We here draw on the potential of methods that engage with tacit, experiential and visual forms of knowledge, such as those described by Ravetz and Ravetz (2017) and Coessens *et al.* (2009). Therefore, we will explore university–school partnerships, but with a particular interest in creative, innovative methodologies for engagement, which focus on young people's meaning-making and maker skills. We will focus on the potential of digital technologies for supporting this work, and for the need to work collaboratively with artists and other skilled individuals to realize young people's capacity. This model is not focused on transmission, but on joint knowledge-creation and co-production.

What could a relational arts model of WP look like? Here, we explore such a project – one that drew on creative work by young people to create visions of what a university could be, using academic knowledge as a springboard for thinking about the possibilities inherent within the notion of a 'university'. In this way, young people engaged in creative practice and 'possibility thinking' (Jeffrey and Craft, 2006). Here we investigate the collaborative and creative methodologies behind the project, and explore our aims of 'flipping the model' or 'reversing the polarity' of knowledge-

making and reception in a dynamic public-engagement context – how the notion of the university as a centralized repository of knowledge can be challenged and re-thought through young people's eyes. We think about university knowledge spatially, and we will discuss how art-making throughout the project has been instrumental in creating a number of equalized 'neutral fields' or 'safe places' for discussion and positive intergenerational social interaction. Our focus is on the process that generated these discussions.

Who are we?

Kate Pahl (academic) has a background in literacy and outreach work, and is interested in working with communities to co-create ways of knowing about literacy practices. Her work in Rotherham has included projects that have explored everyday language, writing, poetry and fishing. She is interested in how communities can be understood differently, through the eyes and with the words of people who live in them. She works in a university.

Paul Evans (artist) is a multi-portfolio practitioner who works across a number of fields that include both a traditional studio practice – based around drawing and painting – and a contemporary approach to socially engaged/relational art practice. Often working in collaboration, he is interested in all aspects of art-making, from hands-on to digital technologies. He is also interested in the possibilities of restoring art to one of its primary social functions, that of creating and defining social/community identity and meaning. He works freelance.

What is the Virtual University project?

The Virtual University project took place over three distinct iterations between 20 November 2013 and 8 August 2016: these were Virtual Social Science, Virtual Life Science and Virtual Robotics. In this article we focus on the Virtual Social Science and the Virtual Robotics projects. We were able to document and record these projects more thoroughly, which is why we focus on them here. These projects were conducted with researchers Kate Pahl (School of Education), who was involved in the Virtual Social Science project, and Chelsea Sabo, who was involved in Virtual Robotics. In the case of these two projects, we conducted an ethical review process, and young people gave their permission to be involved in the project and have their photographs taken.

We worked with: Rawmarsh Community School; the University of Sheffield Faculty of Social Sciences, and departments of Animal and Plant Science, Biomedical Science, and Molecular Biology and Biotechnology; Sheffield Robotics; lead artist Paul Evans; and Human design studio in Sheffield. Together, this innovative collaboration had the aim of supporting young people from Rawmarsh secondary school in Rotherham to engage in cutting-edge research and enable them to communicate their discoveries through art and digital technologies, as well as accessing university ideas and raising aspirations. The young people were aged 11–12 (Year 7) when we started to engage with them. We worked with the same group over a period of three years, ending with the Virtual Robotics project.

Key to the success of this project has been the development of equal, friendly and open interactions throughout the creative process, and the way in which conversational focus has shifted constantly between the young people and the 22 academics involved. Our project was also distinctive because we have worked with the same cohort of young people over a period of time, and this has deepened our understanding of

widening participation as a process and not as a product. The engagement was also participatory. As a result of the project, we co-created a virtual gallery, drawing on artwork by the young people. This was created in collaboration with Human design studio, Sheffield. This gallery is navigable and open to free-roaming exploration using a games console.

The area we worked in is one that has been described as 'disadvantaged' in the language of WP, but one that holds many strengths and funds of knowledge (González *et al.*, 2005). Rawmarsh has a history of coal mining and, as one young person said on a previous project 'coal is in my blood'. A number of writers, poets and academics have connections to the area, which is an outlying village in the Rotherham area. We regard full recognition of Rawmarsh's strengths as key to respectful WP projects, which are often predicated on a perception of young people as 'lacking' or 'disadvantaged'. Our WP project focused on what skills the young people brought to the process of engaging with the academics and with the artists.

The idea for the project came from an initial discussion about the potential of virtual-world technology for work with young people. Virtual worlds have been used in educational contexts (Burnett and Merchant, 2014) and are tools for delivering courses across many universities. The idea of using a virtual world is not new; more innovative is the idea of working with young people and a collaborative cohort of artists to design a virtual world. Our idea, however, of the creative potentialities of a virtual world, was transformed by the notion of working within a widening participation context. Our funding came piecemeal, from WP sources within our university. However, it was enough to generate a series of projects that ended up running over a four-year period. We drew on a series of collaborations that have been built up over many years within the area, including partnerships with local schools and youth centres. A number of innovative youth work projects that celebrated the vibrancy of the linguistic heritage of Rawmarsh (Language as Talisman and Portals to the Past) have generated a culture of working within local schools. Rawmarsh School was, in addition, keen to develop aspirational and positive links with the university. When we proposed the idea of the Virtual University project, the school was very enthusiastic.

Creative methodologies

Our project was founded on conversations and engagement. We created a methodology in which young people asked questions of academics and explored what they had to say in direct conversations with them. Our initial approach to explaining university research to young people was to invite university researchers to present their research in a very short format during an assembly. During this presentation, the researchers had four minutes each in which to sum up their research in an interesting and engaging way. The young people then voted on the topics, holding up a 'good' apple or a 'rotten' tomato to indicate if they found the presentation interesting or not interesting. The academics had been warned in advance that this would be the case – and that this would not reflect on the quality of their research! It would be a purely subjective 'gut reaction' to their presentation. At the end of the assembly, the young people were asked if they would like to be involved in the project, and at least 40 students signed up after the presentation. We are aware that this form of participation/engagement is more closely aligned to standard models of (essentially one-directional) WP – following the form of 'doing to' rather than 'doing with' – but, along with introducing the academics via an entertaining format, it did help the young people to exercise some sense of agency or 'response-ability' over the situation.

The school then selected the young people to go forward to attend a discovery day at the University of Sheffield, where they were asked the research question 'What is a university?' None of these young people had visited a university before, and very few had visited the city of Sheffield. Their exploration of the research question involved a walking tour of the university campus, filming using hand-held video cameras, gathering ideas and writing notes – after which the students drew a mind map of what they had discovered. The young people then interviewed the academics that they had seen present at the event at Rawmarsh School – the first of the project's innovative 'conversational fields' (see Figure 1). This university research visit was followed by a series of creative workshops in Rawmarsh School, based on the research topics under examination.

Figure 1: Young people from Rawmarsh Community School interview Alix Dietzel about her research into global justice and climate change at the University of Sheffield

Virtual Social Science

In the first year, we recruited researchers from across the social sciences, including researchers from the departments of Sociological Studies, Landscape, Education, Politics, Japanese Studies and Journalism. We also recruited a collaborative cohort of Sheffield-based artists to develop a programme of in-school creative workshops for Year 8 students based on areas of social science research. Here we describe these creative workshops in detail.

The first workshop was devised and led by poet Mark Doyle and Virtual Social Science (VSS) lead artist Paul Evans. This was inspired by research into traditional Japanese poetry and poetic criticism, and research into 'banter'. Working in groups,

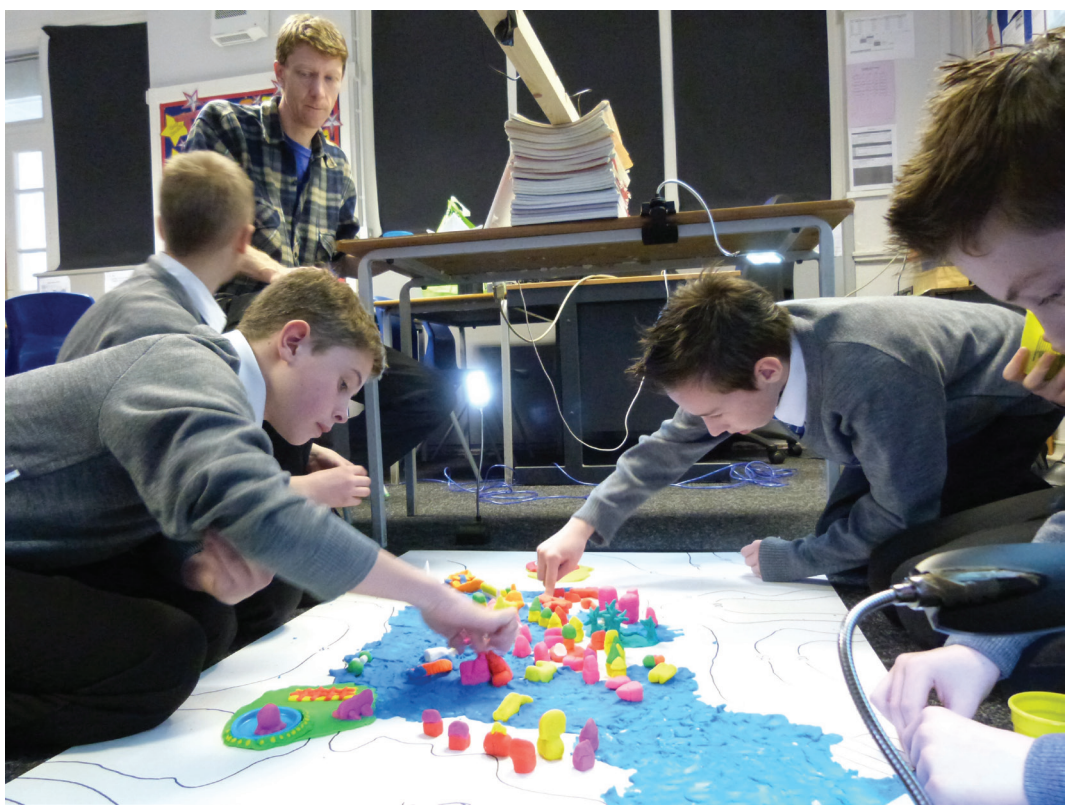
the young people created collaborative five-line poems based on seasonal elements and natural motifs from the local area, for example:

> The tree's branches swayed in the wind as pink blossoms fell
> The riverbank is muddy with fallen leaves
> Tadpoles fill the ponds in the woods
> The flowers blossomed
> Looking at this, I thought of spring and summer and thought 'wow, so beautiful'

Then, channelling Japanese traditions of poetry criticism, the young people were asked to frankly remark on what they felt to be good – or bad – about each group's poems. These comments were then developed into a series of banter discussions that were noted down using local speech patterns.

The second workshop consisted of a fast-paced stop-motion animation activity led by film-maker Jon Harrison and by Paul Evans. This was inspired by research into sustainable regeneration strategies for industrial urban riverside sites in Europe. Using a simplified map of the area around Rawmarsh, we began by filling in the present course of the River Don (see Figure 2). The young people then created houses out of Play-Doh, with which to build a brightly coloured 'Rotherham and Rawmarsh'. These were added incrementally, expanding the town as the animation progressed. Then, when we had all decided that the town was completed, it was time for the water levels to rise …

Figure 2: The flood animation workshop with Jon Harrison at Rawmarsh Community School



The third, three-part workshop exploring images and representation was devised and led by artist/photographer Jennifer Booth and by Paul Evans. This workshop was inspired by research into representations of asylum in the mass media and research into Facebook.

In the first part of the workshop, Jennifer showed the young people a variety of images, matching them up with various newspaper headlines and copy. Issues about the truthfulness of images, how text can alter meaning, how cropping can dramatically affect our apprehension of an image, and so on, were discussed in a lively and frank exchange of views. During this time, the students were each asked to leave the classroom to have a formal portrait photograph taken.

The second part of the workshop began with a self-portrait activity during which everyone in the classroom made a pencil drawing of themselves with eyes closed and directed by 'feel'.

In the third part of the workshop, the students compared the self-portraits, and then discussed the images that celebrities use to represent themselves on their Facebook pages. The students then sat for a series of Polaroid instant portraits. Here they were given full control over the image that would represent them in the virtual gallery – contrasting with the formal portrait taken during the first part of the workshop, which was controlled by the photographer.

The fourth workshop, devised and led by Paul Evans around a series of exercises in sequential art, was inspired by research into global justice and climate change. The workshop began using a classic surrealist parlour game, exquisite corpse. Paul then gave a brief introduction to comics, cartoons and sequential art, using the examples of George Herriman's classic *Krazy Kat* and Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus*. The young people were then asked to create a single-panel cartoon with appropriate scenery for a climate change event. After brainstorming and creating the scenery, thought was given to the characters that might inhabit these scenes, and to dialogue between the characters. The cartoons were then developed into three-panel narratives – or possibly storyboards for films – with thought given to the effectiveness of speech (or thought) bubbles.

The fifth and final workshop was, once again, devised and led by Paul Evans. Unlike the other Virtual Social Science workshops – which were designed to respond to specific university research topics – this session was intended to offer the young people an opportunity to design and create their own interventions within the Virtual Social Science gallery space. Again, the workshop began using the game exquisite corpse. Paul then led a lively discussion about street art, beginning with its origins in wildstyle graffiti, and illustrated with slides. This discussion/presentation incorporated examples of work by Kid Acne, Flo Blanchard, Phlegm, Slinkachu, Ronzo and others. The young people were then asked to draw their own wildstyle nametag and create a street art character (see Figure 3).

Then – inspired by the 3D work of Kid Acne, Slinkachu and Ronzo – the young people developed a series of sculptural street art characters modelled out of clay. We took photographs of these 3D creations against photographic backdrops from the university campus – familiar from our research visit.

Figure 3: Wildstyle graffiti drawing made during the street art workshop

The workshops were shadowed by two undergraduate researchers from the University of Sheffield Faculty of Social Sciences. These researchers also participated in the workshops along with the young people, and in many of the spontaneous conversations that took place while engaged in the hands-on making. Initially there was some concern expressed that the workshops had been devised from the top-down, with little room for agency from the young people involved. These concerns were allayed to a degree throughout the course of the project. This was particularly the case during the fifth workshop, where the young people were given a great deal of creative freedom in terms of determining the creative outputs of the workshop, and in terms of intervening directly within the virtual gallery space.

Virtual Robotics

A version of the project was developed with Sheffield Robotics, a collaboration between the University of Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam University – one of the largest portfolios of publicly funded robotics research in the UK. Entitled Virtual Robotics (VR), this second follow-up project (after Virtual Life Science) followed a simpler, truncated format based around cutting-edge research in robotics. VR took place over two days, in the University of Sheffield Diamond building and at Sheffield Robotics (www.sheffieldrobotics.ac.uk). Over the two days, a number of research themes were explored, including: humanoid robots, human–robot interactions, unmanned flying vehicles, biomimetics and collective robots.

Figure 4: Creating an articulated 'robot hand' with Artboat

After an introduction (including an introduction to the Diamond Building) and icebreaker activity, the first day consisted of a series of short presentations by leading researchers in the field of robotics. This was followed by a workshop on filming and interview techniques. The young people then formed into groups and met a number of research teams – along with their robots. They finished the day by making short, filmed interviews with the researchers, asking questions about their research and the life choices that had led to their careers.

After a review of the core themes outlined above, the second day consisted of a full day of creative activities devised and led by Paul Evans and a cohort of creative practitioners. Activities included a writing workshop with Suzannah Evans, manufacturing robot hands with Artboat (https://artboatuk.wordpress.com/) (see Figure 4), Tanglebots (https://fo.am/tanglebots/) (creating a simple robot from scratch, operated using basic algorithms) with Jon Harrison and Alex McLean, and a comic strip/sequential art workshop with lead artist Paul Evans. Here are some of the comments students made at the end of the project:

- I feel more comfortable with the studying side of it because I know what facilities universities have.
- They were interesting and shows me how it was at university.
- They have shown me that people there help you and show things in a better way.
- It looks more fun than I expected it to be.

Students loved interacting with the robots (see Figure 5) and enjoyed learning in the university environment.

Figure 5: Young people from Rawmarsh Community School meet with Sheffield Robotics researchers – and some of the robots

Conversations with a purpose

We have identified that one of the key aspects of this project was a focus on conversations with a purpose. Drawing on a dialogic form of inquiry, young people devised questions and asked academics about their work in face-to-face conversations. This has paralleled the changing (and challenging) spatial dynamics – university academics transported to Rawmarsh and making presentations outside of their familiar context/comfort zone, and students from Rawmarsh visiting the University of Sheffield with its potentially daunting corporate architecture.

In the case of the short presentations, the students were offered the opportunity to either 'thumbs up' or 'thumbs down' the presentation – basing their decision on a time-limited parcel of information and the ability of the academic and topic to engage them in a very short period of time. This is evidently more of a one-directional exchange of information – although the aspect of judgement challenges the authority/value of this knowledge. By contrast, a common element to all three Virtual University projects was the student–academic interview sessions. During these, the young people got to know the academics by asking whatever questions they wanted. These interviews took place in small groups at the University of Sheffield and offered a 'conversational mode' distinct from the short presentation sessions, where the academics effectively 'projected' their ideas.

We now turn to the idea of conversation as a mode of discovery. Our argument is that it was within these conversations that the young people were able to re-imagine and reconfigure futures. This could be defined as an art practice that drew on both conversations with a purpose and also on relational art precedents. Below, we explore these ideas in more detail.

Conversational fields: A new language for widening participation

Here we propose a new language for widening participation that rests on the idea of dialogue. We draw on discussions of art-making that are not within a gallery but reside in relationships between people. This relational art practice can be constructed in conversations. Grant Kester's (2004) *Conversation Pieces* sets out an agenda for this kind of art, that is, participatory and situated. Claire Bishop's (2012) *Artificial Hells* traces a history of participatory art practice from the situationists to the Artist Placement Group and then relational aesthetics. A previous research study looked at the involvement of artists in community/university projects (see Pahl *et al.*, 2017). This research found that artists have taken up different roles within community/university projects. The team conducted a survey of what artists did when they worked with universities and communities. After analysing nine case studies, and interviewing artists and academics, the research team concluded that there were a number of ways that artists have worked in these contexts. Some artists, for example, were very much there to carry out the demands of academics or communities – to create an exhibition or run workshops that were developed in line with existing priorities. Artists could also be involved in the planning or shaping of research projects, and in this they were conceptually involved in the project. In a third mode of engagement, artists, academics and community partners could be described as creating a new object together, one that belonged to no one but was co-owned (ibid.).

In our project, we drew on ideas from socially engaged arts practice. This can be seen as operating within a different, less enclosed, social space or context, and the role of the artist can be seen as more effective in catalysing social change or action. As exemplified by Kester's (2004) *Conversation Pieces*, relational art opens up a space for conversations to take place. Relational art, or relational aesthetics, is a mode or tendency in fine art practice originally observed and highlighted by French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud, who defined the approach as:

> … a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space … The artist can be more accurately viewed as the 'catalyst' in relational art, rather than being at the centre (Bourriard, 2002: 113).

This is the mode in which our project worked. On a personal level, the students engaged the academics in conversations, both during the interviews that they conducted and while participating in the same hands-on creative activities. On a broader level, the university and the school had a lengthy conversation about research, mediated by the work of the artists and the virtual world.

Bevan Jones *et al.* state:

> In collaborations with universities, research centres and individual scientists, artists can provide an experimental framework for promoting

> alternative perspectives in neutral, re-imagined, playful territories (Evans, 2016; Pahl *et al.*, 2010) because the artist 'moves in a realm of shifting meanings, imaginings and interpretations' (Coessens *et al.*, 2009: 95) (Bevan Jones, 2017: 267).

Throughout all three iterations of the Virtual University project, both young people and researchers inhabited the same 'experimental framework', the same 'playful territories' for re-imagining.

The value of conversations: Art in spatial settings

We recognize that artists working with universities and communities occupy very different, and sometimes contradictory, positions. The problems here are not only the risks of parachuting in and offering temporary interventions with little long-term social meaning or impact for the communities involved, but also the question: whose interests are being served and who is benefiting from these processes and practices beyond the short term? The concept and practice of art within the Virtual University involved creative workshops and represented a 'neutral field of activity' to the artists and academics involved in the project. The idea is that mutual participation in the same creative task allows for the breakdown of uncomfortable social barriers and creates the right conditions for unselfconscious interaction. This has been both generative and instrumental in creating an experience of collective coexistence and co-production of meaning.

Our argument is that, in this situation, art catalyses sociality. Both academics and students were set the same creative activities and challenges, and encouraged to approach them with equality. Within the experience, this took place quite naturally, with the academics soon entering the same unaffected play-state as the young people. The conversations begun in the more formal interview settings had established familiarity between the young people and the academics – enabling open and free discussion and positive, intergenerational interaction. This was very much a case of doing with, working together – literally collaboration – taking place in a bespoke social space that existed outside of established boundaries for the duration of the project. This is our more utopian model of WP, hinging on creative energy and modes of engagement that are innovative and reside within young people's existing funds of knowledge and skills.

Paul Evans, working on this project, described the conversations arising from these workshops as 'the angel's share', a term derived from whisky distillation that poetically describes the amount of alcohol evaporating from the cask. Paul reflected on this: 'This is where the beauty lies: truthfulness occupying the same space as the deeply emotional affect of seeing people from highly diverse backgrounds coming together in creative communal activity.'

Making an exhibition

Our joint art-work led to the co-curation of a virtual exhibition. Outputs from the creative VSS workshops (including poetry, drawings, comic strip art, outputs from the animation workshop and street art) were handed over to Human, a leading graphic design studio based in Sheffield. They took this high-quality raw material – all created by the young people – and developed it into a series of virtual reality artworks to populate a bespoke CGI gallery space navigable by an Xbox gaming controller. The culmination of the VSS project came when the young people were given a special preview of the virtual gallery at Human Studio at Park Hill, Sheffield (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Young people from Rawmarsh Community School preview the Virtual Social Science gallery at Human Studio, Park Hill, Sheffield

Artistic modes within the projects

Here we consider the ways in which we drew from various artistic methodologies to develop the workshops. A variety of artistic modes and strategies were used to enable playful, meaningful interaction with university research. Careful thought was given to matching form and content during the design and development of the workshops. The workshops were about both making and meaning-making, creating both a focus for creative responses to university research and – as de-focused, collective activities – acting as catalysts for conversation and sharing of experiences.

Creative writing: What's your word for this?

During the creative writing workshops (particularly in the banter session during VSS), emphasis was placed on local idioms and forms of speech. Sharing these localized and special forms of language with visitors to the area is always a source of surprise and pleasure, and an important aspect of knowledge-making. We were able to share forms of dialect and describe what particular words meant in particular contexts, taking inspiration from a previous project, Language as Talisman, where children from Rawmarsh wrote poetry that valued their local dialect and ways of speaking. Of course, conversations about language are both generative and help us to understand our own communities and those of others that we encounter.

Drawing/painting/animation

> For the artist drawing is discovery. And that is not just a slick phrase, it is quite literally true (Berger, 2005: 3).

Drawing as a process of discovery was placed centrally within the project. Drawing was used in many ways: as a descriptive tool (for example, in the case of a Virtual Life Science visit to the Alfred Denny Museum), as a way of making things visible and as a mode of speculation or imaginative thought. Cartoons and comic strips (sequential art) were often used, allowing words and pictures to be brought together to develop narratives spanning visual and written literacies. The fact that some of the young people could draw better than some of the academics created an atmosphere of empowerment for the young people that positively contributed to the free flow of discussion around their drawings and ideas.

Street art interventions

Street art is a slippery category that nonetheless has significant appeal to young people. In the last creative workshop of the VSS project, the young people were encouraged to create their own street art interventions within the gallery space. These interventions were not based upon areas of academic research, but were free in both form and content.

Gallery representation

Any artist who has attempted to navigate the tortuous pathways that promise to lead towards 'gallery representation' (actually a specific term within the art world, although of somewhat obscure meaning) will be aware of the continuous and constant barriers to progress that are presented before there is any hope of achieving this elusive goal. The Virtual Social Science gallery has bypassed this onerous process, and we hope that many young people will be allowed the opportunity to participate in this form of digital gallery-making in the future.

Figure 7: Still image from the Virtual Social Science gallery

The virtual gallery extension: A work in progress/regress?

After the creation of the first virtual reality gallery – and after seeing the evident impact on the young people of seeing their work made manifest in such an impressive way – we really felt that the creation of additional gallery spaces/rooms populated with art by young people would be a great asset to the University of Sheffield (see Figures 7 to 9). There was also a positive impact on the design team at Human – this was the first time that young people had been invited into their working space.

Figure 8: Still image from the Virtual Social Science gallery (based on the flood animation workshop)

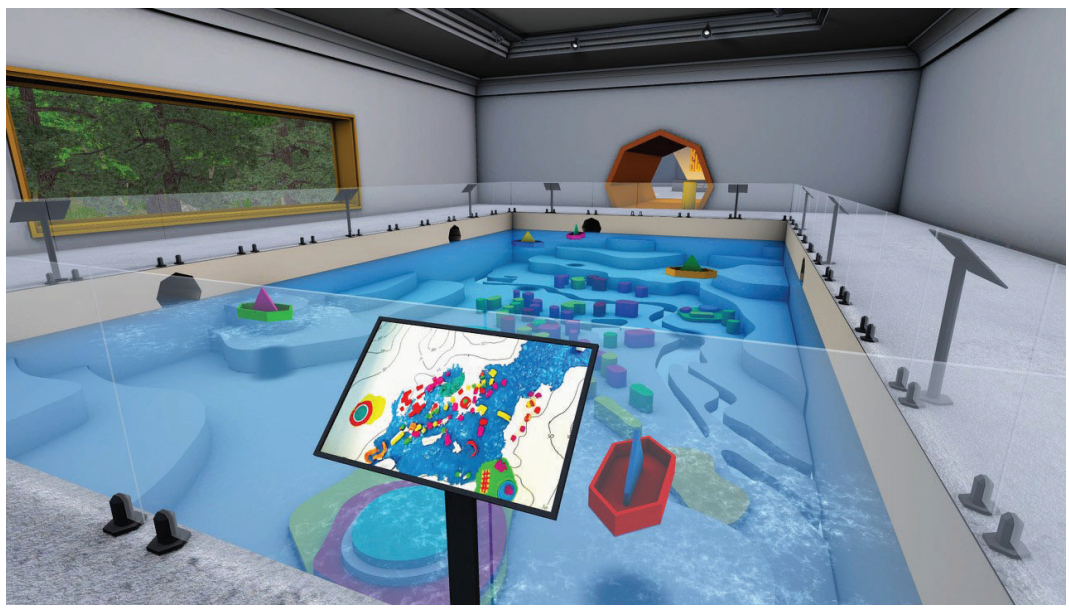


Figure 9: Still image from the Virtual Social Science gallery (based on the poetry and banter workshop)

Conclusions

Here we reflect on how the artistic methodologies opened up different ways of considering widening participation as a process, and we consider some issues that we identified in the course of doing the project.

We considered the relational nature of the university and the community. Our suggestion is that universities need to de-centre themselves in order to listen and pay attention to young people's experiences of life (see Pahl, 2016). This created a question mark as to how the centre could be defined. In specific terms relating to this project, we might see Rawmarsh as peripheral to a notional geographical/cultural centre – located on the periphery of the industrial/economic/cultural centre of Rotherham, let alone Sheffield. Rawmarsh might, then, seem to be a long way from the University of Sheffield. But, as stated earlier, Rawmarsh has its own key strengths that need to be firmly acknowledged in the success of this project – as evidenced from the creativity and quality of work in the virtual gallery. This is particularly relevant when we consider the concept of 'university', and imagine the kind of open, free access virtual knowledge space – 'what could be' – which, of course, resonates with the original, utopian, ambitions for the internet. Perhaps it might be salutary to imagine what might occur if the aesthetic content of this free knowledge space were not determined by centralized institutions, but by those at the periphery of knowledge generation – to imagine this space as open to challenging, non-institutionalized, street art interventions.

We also considered the ways in which conversations that were purposeful and engaged could reshape the delivery of widening participation projects. What we have learned from this project is that re-imagining and reconfiguring futures can take place within – and also across – boundaries of generations, boundaries of experience and boundaries of expectation. We considered that the conversations between academics and young people when they visited the university, and when the academics came to the school, were a significant part of the co-creation of the visual gallery and developing ideas. One of the key aspects of this project has been the use of relational art strategies:

> … artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space … The artist can be more accurately viewed as the 'catalyst' in relational art, rather than being at the centre (Bourriard, 2002: 113).

So, what reaction(s) have the artists involved in this project catalysed, and how have we addressed this particular social context?

To conclude, our work was about re-centring the voices of young people as active co-creators of a widening participation project. In our project, then, we redefined what it meant to be in the centre of our lives. We thought about the university as a place that could incorporate 'other' diverse voices, but also we decentred the university through our practice. We used arts practice to do this. Our work has led to an engagement with the university that was felt, drawn, embodied and spatial. We consider this to be a unique achievement, in that the virtual university embodied something 'other' and, at the same time, the same. The result of this mode of engagement with young people was that they were able to express their version of the university in drawings and through engagement with art, but, most importantly, through meaningful conversations with academics over a period of three years. This kind of longitudinal conversation-making is rare within WP, which tends to focus on one-off encounters,

but it is, we argue, essential to a much more embedded model of engagement. This, combined with a focus on the arts, brought academic disciplines alive in new ways and created a space for young people to express their own ideas and agency within the contexts of widening participation, in a process-focused model of engagement. We conclude that this model could be used in other settings, and, combined with support from artists and academics, young people will then be enabled to become the centre of a programme, not the periphery.

Credits

Images © Paul Evans 2017. Thank you to the University of Sheffield for funding these projects.

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Paul Evans is a visual artist who has a strong track record of working with universities. He is a multi-portfolio practitioner who works across a number of fields that include both a traditional studio practice based around drawing and painting, and a contemporary approach to socially engaged/relational art practice.

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