Responding to Change: Creating a new research methodology to meet our needs

Presentation Notes

1.

I'm **Nic Gratton**, a senior lecturer in Youth and Community Work at Staffordshire University and I am the evaluator for Appetite and First Art.
My section of this panel is based on the methodology we first used to evaluate the Appetite programme, which was adapted and tweaked. We have used a similar approach to since evaluate First Art.
I want to be **honest** with you. With **honesty comes vulnerability** so I hope you understand that **it is difficult to admit when your best wasn't quite enough**.
I have heard about so much amazing work over the last two days and we should all be collectively proud of what Creative People and Places has achieved.
But, being a part of a couple of CPP programmes I know how much hard work they take. I know how exhausting they can be. And I know that sometime things don't always go as planned.
But if we gloss over the bits that don't work, it only makes life more difficult for everyone else who is struggling.
So this my offering of honesty about a methodology that we thought would work like a dream, and an adapted version that gives us fewer nightmares.

2.

 This talk is essentially about how we can hold on to our principles and values and use these to underpin our work, even though our original plans had to be adapted as the realities of evaluating a programme the size of CPP became apparent.
We'll look at our original methodology for Appetite, which was called get Talking and the challenges that made us re-evaluate the approach.
I'll present an adapted model and perhaps most importantly our learning from the process.

3.

Get Talking is a model **of Participatory Action Research** which we have used as part for our work at Staffordshire University for many years.
It is underpinned by a set of principles including **participation** – really people, who are affected by the service or community in question, are at the heart of the process, as researchers as well as participants

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It recognises that some **groups are quite often excluded** from the research process and so identifies where the gaps are and actively involves them.
It is a **flexible** approach which adapts to the needs of the groups and the findings, identifying where the gaps are and changing direction accordingly
It is **honest** about what it can achieve in the times scales and constraints of the work
And it leads to **action**…. It is a means to creating change.
It uses **creative means** of engaging with people to make sure as many people as possible can actively take part in the research.

4.
Get Talking also follows a clear **process** of planning, involving people, listen and learning, cross checking findings and taking action. However, central to all of this are a team of **community researchers**. Get Talking research is **carried out by a team of people** made up of a broad range of stakeholders who are **trained and supported throughout the research**.
In **year one** a team of community researchers were trained in the first few months of Appetite. Some of this team were employed by Appetite as Appetite Builders and others were people who had an interest in arts or being more active in their community.
We understood the **benefits** of this approach as we had seen it many times before. Research that involved local communities in this way was more likely to lead to **sustainable** action, and communities were likely to **remain active** and move onto other activity after the initial research.

5.
By and large the greatest challenge was one of **capacity**. To maintain a team of community researchers takes **time and a requires constant level of support and activity**.
After an initial burst of intense activity with Appetite both the community researchers and the Staffordshire University team were **exhausted** and we realised that we **did not have the capacity to continue that level of training and support on top of the day job**.
Sadly, the capacity to manage a team of volunteers was **underestimated** in the original planning process.

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And in addition to that, the volunteers only have certain capacity and those who could commit to the research could not always be at every session and therefore every meeting was **like starting from scratch**.

As the programme progressed we also realised that there was a relatively **low level of flexibility** in the research. This was the first time we had used Get Talking for such a large project and the on some occasions the **needs of the funders and programme outweighed the needs of the community research team**. At times we were not able to follow the interests of the research team because within the limited capacity and resources we had, **other areas of enquiry took priority**. **As a result, we were not able to offer the community researchers the control over the research we had originally planned**. A model of a lead researcher with community input at certain points in the year was starting to take shape.

A further challenge was one of **sample sizes**. Gathering qualitative data in the depth we were collecting it meant that the sample sizes were relatively small. This teamed with a need to gather more monitoring data resulted in us using online surveys to **supplement our findings** from the conversational data.

In addition to all of this **Get Talking was becoming known for its creative consultation tools,** which while an important part of the approach was only one element of the planned methodology.

But it was the wish tree people saw, not the commitment of the volunteers. It was the ribbon wheels that were visible, not the conversations.

6.

The methodology probably adapted long before we acknowledged it.

There reached a point during year two that I felt that **if honesty was a principle underpinning Get Talking, I could no longer say we were using a fully participatory approach**.

That is not to say that our research was underpinned by ethical principles. And not to say that the community weren't still involved in different ways.

But were they driving the direction of the research? No, and I couldn't pretend they were.

By the end of the second year, the Get Talking methodology had **morphed into a more linear approach** which we affectionately call **Carla** (Creative Approaches to Research for Learning and Action).

The main difference is that this model is **led by a lead researcher**, not a team of community researchers. Community members still played an important part

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of our research team. Supper Club members helped us to design creative tools for events and community hub members used the tools to talk to audiences. So those creative **consultation tools that had become so important for audiences of Appetite were still an important part of the process.**
However, the issue of samples sizes was overcome by **supplementing our research with surveys which** served a dual purpose of collecting **demographic** data and gathering **qualitative and qualitative evaluation data.**
The findings from both of these methods were then **analysed by the lead researcher** and shared with the team who are able to **respond through the adapting the programme** based on the findings.

   7.

So, the whole process is quite a **balancing act**.
One the one hand we have any good researchers' **ethical principles.**
 But on the other hand we have the **reality of short term funded projects**. Everyone's time and capacity is limited. Let's be honest, the reality of volunteering is that it is quite a **middle class luxury**.
So the people who we really want to be impacted by this work are generally too busy to spend their precious hours volunteering - busy making ends meet, bringing in a wage, looking after their children, looking after they parents, managing their own health, struggling to find bus fare…. If I can't fully commit to making their experience of volunteering as a community researcher the best experience of their life, I can't blame them for not being able to turn up to every meeting.   And I simple didn't have the capacity to do that in my existing role in a way that didn't put my own health on the line.

   8.

So, what have I learnt?

Things don't always go to plan – I have only recently reflected on how important it is to have a team or a supervisor or a mentor who understands participatory research and the challenges it brings.   Because we need to be able to live with

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Balancing our values as researchers with the expectations of a project

I don't think anyone in my team at the University is under any illusions about the need to cost volunteer management into project planning any more. Just do it.

But it's not all bad….

We have now got a far better balance between breadth and depth of data. It feels like we have finally got this balance right.

And in many ways a linear approach to research is a far better fit with time limited projects.

Finally, I wanted to leave you with this…

I was in a focus group recently and one of the very first people I trained in Get Talking for appetite was there too. While I was busy talking about the challenges of using Participatory Action Research for large scale projects she reminded me of a couple of things.

She reminded me of the fact that although the research for Appetite is not shaped liked Get Talking any more, the shape of the Appetite programme was. The Appetite Builders and the programme team shaped the Supper Club and many of their engagements with communities based on their learning from Get Talking. And that feels kind of great.

And she also told me of how, if she hadn't been involved in the Appetite research in the early days , she wouldn't have gone onto other training and to lead projects of her own.

So, although our approach may not have worked out the way I had planned, it certainly had an impact on many more levels than I give us credit for.