



The Tetley Feast

Abstract

Against the current drive in the UK for Higher Education Institutions to operate in a global arena, The Tetley Feast connected some of the local, multi-cultural communities and different classes within Leeds, a city in the North of England, through social design practice. The project focused on community-engagement and participation between undergraduate students at a specialist art college and community groups situated on the opposite side of the city in a disadvantaged area. Elitism in formal art education automatically excludes marginalised people, and educational exclusion has been linked to social exclusion and poverty (Quality Improvement Agency, 2012). South Leeds has a growing population and a rich network of community organisations who provide specific services designed to target inequality. An awareness of this professionalism from their own experience of working in community arts, two lecturers realised students could both benefit from this knowledge and contribute their own design knowledge in a joint effort to effect social change.

Students worked in small peer groups and were partnered with a community organisation. They spent the duration of the project working together to develop relationships. Students responded to the needs of the group to create a variety of visual and other work, with the emphasis to develop core skills central to social design, such as transferable liberal arts skills, as well as to value other forms of success beyond fame and fortune, and to value other people. The project embraced new technology and social media to expand notions of community and, as a whole, it gave students a broader world view. It also aimed to create a transformative dialogic learning experience for all.

The Tetley Feast was a collaborative, practice-based research project and this paper reports as a case study that encompasses methods of design education as social practice.

Keywords: *Community-engagement, participatory design, design education*

Introduction

'The Tetley Feast' was a community-engaged participatory design project, which took place during a six-week period in January and February 2014. It involved 70 undergraduate students from BA (Hons.) Visual Communication (Viscom) at Leeds College of Art (LCA) in the north of England working together with community organisations located in a different area of the city. The Tetley Feast was a feast of ideas which led to the participatory production of visual work, and which culminated in a celebratory event. This event occurred within a host building, The Tetley, a new contemporary arts centre situated in South Leeds, the same area as the community groups. Previously this was home to the Tetley brewery, at one time an employer of people in the area and well-known landmark. In contrast to the location of both the art college and most of its students in more affluent areas of the city, South Leeds is an area geographically, economically and culturally deprived. It therefore follows that people there are, in the main, excluded from design practices and education (Armitage et al., 2003, p.67). It has high levels of empty housing, lack of opportunity, unemployment and children living in poverty. The community groups working there are vital and have a wealth of professional knowledge and experience providing support to local people.

During the Tetley Feast project, students worked with: schools and informal education providers, Hamara (an Asian health centre), a youth club, a group of adults with learning and/or physical disabilities, a single dads group, and a mental health organisation working with women from the Polish and Bangladeshi communities. These established groups were approached because, like Viscom at Leeds College of Art, they want to make a positive contribution to society. The project is based around the Viscom commitment to making the world a better place. "We ask our students to use their visual skills to engage with social issues and, wherever possible, work on projects which effect real social change" (LCA 2014). The project also originated from the experience of two Viscom lecturers, themselves community practitioners, who had previously worked with and recognised the value of these specialist organisations in South Leeds. As a multi-disciplined course, Viscom values real-world application of design and social skills. Students working on the project were given an ideal opportunity to learn outside of the studio and apply theoretical and visual skills to specific professional contexts (Figure 1).



Figure 1: student working with a volunteer from SLATE (South Leeds Alternative Trading Enterprise)

Aims

In contradiction to the current trend towards ‘internationalisation’ in Higher Education in the United Kingdom, and especially the conflation of this term with ‘marketisation’ (Caruna and Spurling 2007), the Tetley Feast connected students with some of the multi-cultural communities and different classes within Leeds. One of the main aims of the project was to promote positive engagement that would lead to sustainable long-term relationships. It was important that these were dialogic and people created learning opportunities together. The other main aim was to encourage students to value process over outcome and this was reflected within the Learning Outcomes of both First and Second Year modules, with assessment criteria focusing on the development of professional and collaborative skills. Learning from the experience of engaging with others was crucial to this. Students’ ideas and visual work aimed to improve the visual representation and visibility of the community groups and had to focus on the needs of others. This was achieved through listening, observing, negotiating and interacting. Influenced by Lave & Wenger’s ideas around communities of practice being groups of people who share a concern and participate in a practice together (Wenger, 2006), students’ engagement aspired to transform community groups into communities of practice for the duration of the project.

Project partners and relationships

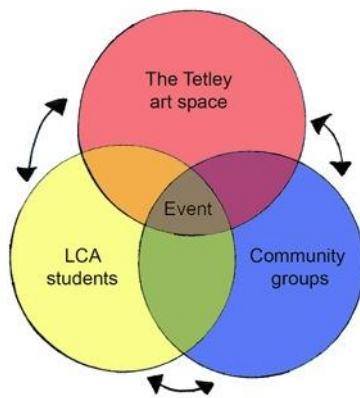


Figure 2: Planned

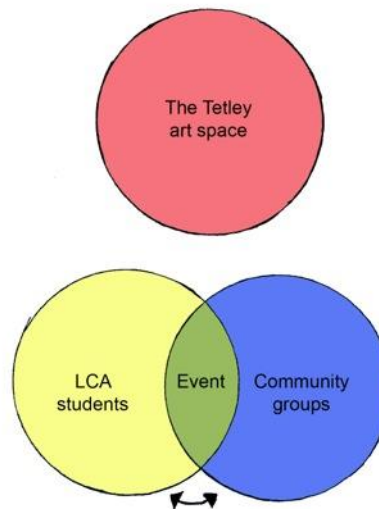


Figure 3: Outcome

The project was originally proposed in conjunction with The Tetley arts centre with the intention of building connections between it and the communities of South Leeds (Figure 2). However, the Tetley's commitment to the project dwindled during planning stages and so this aim diminished. Despite this, the drive for students to collaborate, and to work with community organisations still remained (Figure 3), and we also wanted to explore new technology, in particular social media, and how it might enhance collaboration and participation.

Methodologies

Students were encouraged to develop participatory approaches when working with participants and to foster ideas inclusively by working alongside, with and/or in consultation with groups. Students collaborated within small peer groups to co-produce work with a common goal. This was vital to achieving the primary objectives of The Tetley Feast, which were to build relationships with people and to value process over product. As Bishop states:

Artistic practice can no longer revolve around the construction of objects to be consumed by a passive bystander. Instead, there must be an art of action, interfacing with reality, taking steps – however small – to repair the social bond. (2012, p.11)

It was important to build a framework that enabled students to have the freedom to build a genuine rapport (Figure 4). *Genuineness, trust and understanding* are identified as key attributes by Carl Rogers in any learning relationship (Rogers, 1967 304-311 in Smith, 2004). Hence most of the LCA staff effort went into the role of facilitation, organising the infrastructure of the project and seeding academic ideas and ethics at the onset. Key lectures introduced students to the concept and process

of social design drawing on theorists such as Papanek, and showed examples of contemporary, national and international projects. Ethics, as guided by *Involve* (an organisation specialising in community engagement), assisted the safeguarding of students and participants and underlined students' social and moral responsibilities.



Figure 4: Year one student Kit Cowley, plays film back to children at Menspace community group

Additionally, drawing on Viscom staff experience of working with local communities over the past twenty years, students were provided with a supportive structure for collaboration by being placed in mixed ability groups, with third year students and graduate fellows as mentors. This framework avoided the process being overly prescriptive and allowed a plurality of voices within the project. Similar to Vygotsky's 'Zone of Proximal Development' (Vygotsky, 1978), students' learning was mediated, social and situated in that they needed to communicate (both verbally and visually) within a social network in a specific professional context. This support structure, which drew on the experience of others, enabled all students to work collaboratively in unfamiliar circumstances, which they might not have otherwise experienced.

Process

Prior to the commencement of the project, tutors met with managers of the community organisations to establish trust and expectations. To commence with authenticity, it was important to be located in the same geographical area as the groups. Gui Bonsiepe (Fathers, J. 2003, p.5) argues we must recognise the significance of a 'local context' when considering design needs. Hence the main bulk of teaching, which occurred in the first week, took place within the Tetley building, and this enabled students to familiarise themselves with the surroundings.

To encourage a positive start to the project, students organised an exhibition of their work for the community groups as a way of introducing themselves. Early meetings between students and the groups enabled relationships and initial ideas to form. Following this, students started to visit community groups and engage with them in their own space. First years, arguably less experienced than second years, had a set outcome to make a 3 minute documentary either for or about their community organisation. Second years were free to decide how they might interact with their group and negotiate a creative response. Students decided upon their own timetable and needed only to attend a weekly tutorial with their tutor at Leeds College of Art and see an occasional mentor on location.

Technology played many important roles within the project. The use of a social network platform which permitted both online public facing and private spaces within it, allowed students to share ideas, materials and to critique processes privately on a group blog. It acted as a repository for documentation of the project, allowing students to upload photos, films, documents and work-in-progress. It supported communication between groups working in different locations and allowed mentors and tutors to monitor progress (Figure 5). Community groups and the wider public could also engage with parts of the Tetley Feast social platform. In addition, Twitter gave us a public presence and we gained many followers, especially leading up to the end celebratory event, helping to situate the project within a broader social and cultural context and adding to its 'realness'.

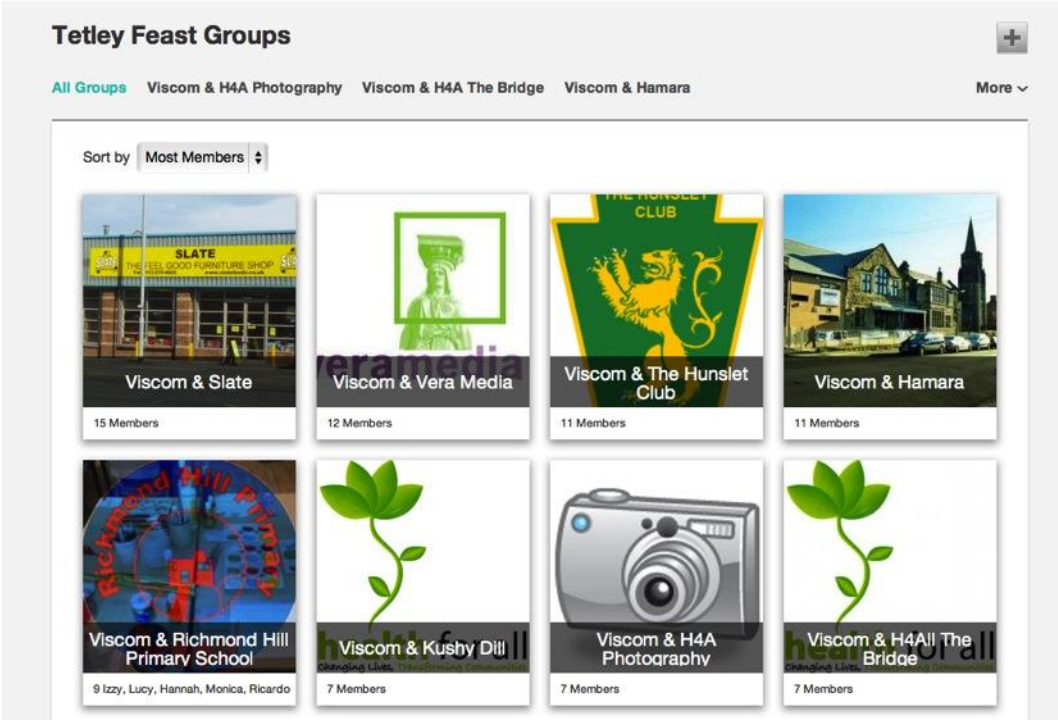


Figure 5: Student groups on The Tetley Feast social network platform

Technology also featured in other ways with students using cameras, video cameras and mobile technology to enable participation and interactivity amongst participants. For some groups, such as the Hunslet Club youth group, it was simply a case of the young participants watching themselves back on camera. Other groups didn't have access to technology and this was also a critical factor. For example, students working with the Polish women's group taught accessible photography workshops using participants' own mobile phones.

The project finished with a one-day celebratory event at the Tetley. This was designed, curated and hosted by the students and included the screening of films, an exhibition of photography, graphic design, craft, installations, interactive workshops and a community cake (Figure 6). Over 200 participants from the community groups and 70 students attended the event. One of the community organisations, Hamara, provided food.



Figure 6: Community cake made by year 3 student Rachel King

Evaluation

Qualitative and quantitative surveys from students and community groups, revealed well established and respected relationships between the two. 90% of students said they wanted to engage with community groups in the future and 100% of community groups want to sustain their relationship with students. The depth of the student experience varied from group to group. 100% of year one students felt they had positive impact on the project, whereas only 75% of year two students felt they had a positive impact because their increased freedom led to them feeling uncertain of the effectiveness of their response. The depth of response depended upon the frequency with which a community group met. For example, students working at Hamara, attended Monday to Friday and were able to fully immerse themselves in the organisation, whilst other students who worked with groups that met once a week, had a more limited experience. Students had a far more positive experience of working with participants than collaborating with peers. Community groups were transformed into communities of

practice for the duration of the project and these became a context for learning for all, with students bringing new ideas and 'a breath of fresh air' (McGeever, P. Feedback Interview, 16th May 2014).

Our online social platform worked well for students, tutors and mentors, and helped with the assessment of students against module outcomes. However, the site itself failed to establish a dialogic relationship with both community groups and the wider public. Many students questioned its use and were reluctant to use it at first, preferring more familiar platforms such as Facebook instead, whilst some students said it was invaluable in enabling them to work collaboratively. Comments post-project reveal many of the organisations had neither time, nor access, nor skills to engage with the platform and would have liked prior training.

The majority of students stated the project was a valuable experience, most citing helping others or bringing different groups together as the main reason, as well as achieving the aim to make groups visible to a wider audience. Following the event, the student films were screened to community groups within their own settings. Participants enjoyed seeing themselves in the final productions. As one community group manager identified, it added to their sense of self-worth (Iqbal, A. Feedback Interview, 9th May 2014). Students also presented the project to the Group for International Design Education (GIDE), Erasmus project in Belgium. The photographic skills taught to some groups are still being used and enjoyed and most of the 'product', be it information design or documentary films are being used by the organisations.

Students valued the development of their ability to interact with community groups. As a year two Erasmus student reflected:

It did not just developed ourselves in a creative photographic project, it also permitted us to interact with people who we probably would not have met in daily life, which deeply enriched our personal experience. I assume that our approach on people evolved different as we went along the project depending on what kind of people we were dealing with, and this is probably the best way to become more open-minded (sic.)

(Chaplain, J., Student Evaluation, 19th March 2014)

The space given to students to engage with organisations and think for themselves allowed a process of praxis, which can be defined as 'acts which shape and change the world' (Lindeman, 1944, p.103 cited in Smith 2011).

The planned development of sustainable relationships between the groups and the Tetley arts center was less successful. Following the event, it is questionable whether or not participants would return, especially of their own volition.

It became apparent that the Tetley's community aims were not fully developed. One week before the final event was scheduled, the Tetley withdrew their offer of the agreed space, arguably putting commercial gain before community engagement. Although we were eventually offered an alternative smaller space, fortunately this did not deter any of the groups from attending, but it did make the event somewhat congested (Figure 7). A community group manager said she enjoyed the event but found it 'very crowded' and 'really hard work' (Garthwaite, A. Feedback questionnaire by email, 17th March 2014).



Figure 7: the Tetley Feast celebration event

Conclusion

The framework and freedom of the project worked well for students. Evaluations and feedback indicated they valued the process of the project and could see its worth, especially social interaction with community participants and learning through experience. On the whole student conduct was excellent. They rose to the challenge of engagement and, as one manager identified, this was due to being given 'carte blanche' to interpret the project on their own terms (Iqbal, A., Feedback Interview, 9th May 2014). Derrick refers to Schon's 'swamp', the 'messiness' of life, as the site of real learning (Schon in Derrick, J. 2010, p.150). He argues, 'Creativity is part of a toolbox for liberal arts skills. [...] Skills to cope with the unexpected are worth cultivating [...]' (ibid. p.148). The unfamiliar setting outside of the studio has given students confidence and social and professional skills.

Although the impact on community groups was positive, managers identified the project had a greater impact on students. One manager acknowledged the worth in 'educating the younger generation to be socially responsible and understanding that the positive effects of working with people can be a valid form of success,' (Jones, F., Feedback interview, 15th May 2014). The community groups seem happy with this outcome and value investing in young people as a means of social change for the future.

Community managers also broached the subject of funding and goodwill. For some, the time spent attending the event was unpaid. The project necessitated lots of unpaid time given in goodwill from Viscom Lecturers. Student transport and material costs were paid for by a local Community First Grant. Without this, the project would not have been possible and this highlights the need for more core funding to be made available to run similar projects in the future.

We plan to run a similar project again next academic year but over a longer period of time. Now that a successful model of practice has been established, more time and space will be available for students to 'play' with process and integrate participation more effectively. Students need to work with organisations whose structure is more amenable to an immersive student experience. However, we are committed to maintaining a working relationship with all groups and have already engaged in other smaller projects with several of them. Next year, we plan to work in partnership with a community organisation that has clearly defined aims and a centre for the final event instead of the Tetley. Whilst we agree with Harland and Pickering who argue, 'the grand claim of a liberal education is that it frees educated people to help society and perhaps make the world a better place to live in' (2011, p.85), we would also contend that we have a lot to learn from community organisations, who are themselves very capable and experienced in shaping a better world.

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