PEP TOGETHER SESSION: THURSDAY 4TH JUNE, 2020

NCCPE Updates

- The NCCPE has recently launched a series of online training courses, with 6 modules available through Blackboard Collaborate. These courses will be delivered by members of the NCCPE team and training associates; and are currently open for institutions seeking training in PE for a cohort of staff.

- The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) has launched a survey regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the research community. This will end on Tuesday the 8th of June, with the results published shortly afterwards.

- The NCCPE is hosting Engage Conference this year, using a hybrid model of online and offline activity. Taking place between the 30th November and the 4th of December, the festival will be partially curated via suggestions and ideas from those in the PEP network, with a range of sessions, plenaries, workshops and performances that reflect the diverse array of knowledge, needs and experience available in the sector. A prominent theme to this year’s Engage will be around the role of public engagement in reimagining a post COVID-19 world. The NCCPE will be offering a small number of bursaries for those bringing ideas for online and offline engagement to the table, with a call for contributions scheduled in July. More information can be found here.

- Registration for the NCCPE’s PEP Network is now free of charge until March 2021, with the status of current members extended at no cost for the next membership year. To find out more, click here.

- Future PEPTOgether sessions will be held on a fortnightly basis, with each session extended to 75 minutes in length. This change is designed to allow space for longer conversations and the discussion of more complex issues; however, we welcome any feedback from delegates regarding this decision.

- For PEPs who wish to share any news, updates or stories during future sessions, please contact Maddy Foard (Maddy.Foard@uwe.ac.uk)
Hyper-Local Engagement

Poll: Which of these statements best describes how you have been adapting Public Engagement with Research (PER) for social distancing?

1. Developing online content
2. Involving patients/participants online
3. Home kits and activities to do offline
4. Working in neighbourhoods and streets (respecting social distancing)
5. Putting activities on hold until lockdown is lifted

To open up a conversation about Hyper-local engagement, we ran a quick poll to explore how people have adapted their PER activity in response to social distancing. While a few responses included numbers 4 and 5, the vast majority of delegates have seen an overwhelming pivot to online engagement.

Engagement Stories

This session focused on the use of Hyper-Local Engagement in PE practice, in the context of the COVID-19 lockdown. While many professionals are adapting by taking their work online, there are other ways in which engagement can take place in small, immediate localities outside of the digital sphere, such as neighbourhoods and streets.

In his blog post ‘Hyperlocal Engagement during the time of lockdown’, David Owen invited PEPs to share examples of the types of engagement that can be put into practice on a hyperlocal scale.

This session’s speakers were:

David Owen: Public engagement consultant and associate of the NCCPE

Ed Stevens: Arts and Humanities research institute manager at Kings College London

Emily Morrison: Head of the Institute for Community Studies Team at The Young Foundation

David Owen

In his discussion, David gave some further examples of good hyper-local engagement, particularly in the arts and humanities, and reflected on the development of PE for social distancing and further lockdown.
Broadly speaking, around one third of the world’s population has experienced lockdown, with social distancing a significant part of this.

What positives have emerged as a result of the lockdown’s impact on PE? David gave some examples:

- The ‘experts’ are (potentially) back in fashion, with anti-academia/anti-intellectualist rhetoric now losing momentum due to the public need for scientists and researchers in combating the virus.
- The pandemic has pushed people into envisioning a better society.
- There are already examples of very rapid public involvement and responsive public engagement with research during this time (such as attempts to build a mental health response during the crisis through research).

There have also been a number of challenges such as:

- Structural challenges in organisations, with many members of staff furloughed and spaces closed (such as science centres and museums).
- Making the space/time to engage the public with research, while in the midst of efforts to respond to the crisis and conducting other research in that regard.
- While there has been a move to developing content online, there are still questions r.e. the quality and the over-saturation of online material.
- The differences of public reception towards PE with research during this time.

How can we adapt to continue our work during social distancing, when even the very idea of ‘hands-on’ experiences (such as interactive science centres) is no longer tenable?

It has been difficult to support PE with research during this time. David noted that during the early stages of lockdown, much of the conversation was geared towards engaging audiences online. While an understandable solution, David wanted to explore other initiatives and possibilities that were occurring parallel to online engagement – those that were face-to-face while still maintaining social distancing.

David mentioned examples of hyperlocal community activism and entertainment, such as the famous ‘Stockport Spiderman’, or socially distanced parties/theatre performances. There have also been many mutual-aid groups and community groups responding to the crisis in a face-to-face context.

What might this mean for PE with research? David is trying to answer this question with his call for hyperlocal examples, which can be found here.

One example was of ‘Sidewalk Science’, an initiative by researcher Daana Staaf in the USA. Using chalk writing and drawing on the pavement, Daana has been inviting residents and passers-by to ask her questions about a specific field of her research: squid! All questions are welcome, from those pertaining to squid biology, to recommendations for films and documentaries about squid. Sidewalk Science has taken off in Europe and the U.S (though chalking pavement is illegal in the UK).

David compares Sidewalk Science to a similar idea used during a Bristol based conference, using chalk to create a ‘playzone’ for the general public (with some rather creative results).
- Other examples revolve around the lockdown phase itself, (rather than planning or envisioning a socially distanced world post-crisis) i.e. adapting activities, delivering science packs and collecting/curating responses to lockdown.

- David’s template currently contains around twenty case studies of responsive engagement during lockdown. Some of these fit into the category of volunteerism as well; working as a researcher and offering advice in the community.

- There is much we can learn from the response to the crisis during the initial weeks of lockdown. But we also need to look ahead to possible future lockdowns. Whilst shifting engagement online is welcome by some, was it the most appropriate response to the challenges many people faced at the time? As we look towards future lockdowns; we know that we need more resilience in our public engagement planning, and how we adapt our work for social distancing. Funders will not encourage projects that cannot be delivered in the event of a second lockdown; thinking about hyperlocal engagement is an important aspect as we are moving forward into an uncertain future.

- Much can be learned from other sectors, such as arts, heritage and civil society. There is also inspiration that can be drawn from the rapid responses of these sectors, that they require some hunting down.

- There is a good deal to reflect on in exploring how people themselves may have been changed by lockdown - what might this mean for their appetite to engage with research? Priorities have been altered; the need for social interaction balanced with the need to stay safe. How long will it be before people want to visit somewhere? Touch things? Stand in large crowds? Communities have been redefined too; there are new ideas around community aid after the population has been forced into staying local. Lockdown has also pushed people to produce new content themselves, rather than just consuming it.

- The future is unclear, and a large body of work (such as our audience segmentation models) will have to be updated in order to be resilient for the times ahead.

- What might this mean for PE with research? The NCCPE is supporting David in trying to answer this question. With NCCPEs support he has put out a call for hyperlocal examples, which can be found here.

Emily Morrison

Emily’s discussion focused on the responses of community organisations to the lockdown and social distancing, with some case-studies around the use of hyper-local engagement and examples of the community sector adapting to social distancing measures and community need.

- The Institute of Community Studies works with a community-led research agenda, the details of which have been prioritised and set out by communities. The Institute works with partner organisations to examine solutions and different models to answer the questions and challenges put forward in the community agenda. This can involve evidence gathering,
and challenging hierarchies of evidence (the focus on statistics, the idea of ‘big data’) in communities, while looking at what ethnographic, qualitative and participatory insight can lend.

- The Institute also has a UK wide peer research network, which trains people in communities to become researchers, while also offering training to academics looking to ‘decentre’ themselves. The project is examining the changing ideas of identity in research; the institute is looking to partner with universities to examine how community research and researchers who are living/working closer to their communities can explore the shifting of identities during this time.

- Emily gave examples of how civil society and community organisations have responded to COVID-19, with regard to hyperlocal engagement

- In the larger civil society space, mobilisation was relatively quick. One response to the panic and uncertainty felt by communities at the time was the creation of a community charter, an initiative led by the Eden Project and the Trussell Trust with the Young Foundation and other partners. During this time, the Institute for Community Studies was working to offer practical advice (approved by Public Health England) around how charities, community organisations, and ordinary people could support others in their hyperlocal communities, encouraging the idea of ‘physical’ distancing while maintaining ‘social’ connectivity. This was a quick, five-point plan, created immediately after lockdown was enforced.

- There has also been a degree of rapid data gathering from the Institute, along with Power to Change and a number of other organisations; this involved polling members of the different community organisation networks to better discern their needs. The New Economy Network has pursued a similar approach for organisations and charities.

- The Institute for Community Studies has focused primarily on supporting community development and informal community groups, with regard to questions of accessibility (particularly digital accessibility). Almost the entirety of community group work takes place on a face-to-face basis, and the adjustment to a digital focus has been far more difficult than that of universities.

- There have been a number of large-scale studies examining hyper-local engagement in communities, including those from the Institute for Community Studies: click here

- The Institute is examining whether there is a growth of informal community capital, and a sense of belonging to a neighbourhood (which may lead to questions around community need and eventual mobilisation) during the crisis - or whether the inverse is true, with greater isolation and a disconnect from one’s locality or growth in hyperlocal tensions due to inequality experienced during lockdown.

  - During the early times of lockdown, informal community capital appeared to be very strong. However, following the easing of lockdown (and the confusion around government guidelines) some of the community organisation and capital has fragmented. There are impending greater risks to this as the economic fall out from lock down becomes more severe.
- On a smaller scale, there are a number of examples of community groups engaging hyper-locally.

- ‘Communities Driving Change’: a collaborative project between the Young foundation and Tower Hamlets council. One challenge Emily mentioned was the need to move the entire support programme online, revealing the barriers faced by many to online engagement (and the need for hyper-local options too).

- It’s important to check our own assumptions when attempting to engage a community during this time, as many members are undergoing huge changes to their lives and livelihoods, with severe health and economic challenges affecting poorer communities. These can be barriers to engagement; we have to ask how people want to engage now, and in what capacity they are able to.

- Emily talked about the power of networks: she gave an example from the community advisory board, which is comprised of 15 individuals working in very different community contexts across the UK. In rural Derbyshire, it was apparent that meeting the needs of vulnerable people in the community was the first priority; working through organisations would not meet the more holistic picture of individual needs. A network was therefore created, decentred from the institutions, in which members could better respond to this need. This functioning as a network has given members a new insight into different ways of organising.

- Regarding capacity; there has been a huge demand for training, which relates to the Institute’s peer research network. There are those who want to engage with local community members as researchers, or as collaborators in research: the digital emphasis means that there has to be widespread training in software and digital systems.

- Hyperlocal engagement can build informal community capital; this is something that the civil society sector has struggled with in varying degrees, while hyperlocal engagement has the potential to embed it with greater success.

- It’s important to remember that those quickest to take on engagement are those with the greatest capacity already; however, during the pandemic, there may be a greater number of people now able and willing to engage.

- The Institute is seeking collaborators to work on developing good models of how informal community capital can be embedded into communities for the long term; as well as for collaborators across the wider themes and questions in its co-created Research Agenda for Communities, which is published next week on [https://icstudies.org.uk/](https://icstudies.org.uk/)

Ed Stevens

Ed spoke about the identity of PEPs and researchers in the context of hyperlocal engagement.
- Due to the dramatic changes in our social world, PEPs and researchers are having to rethink their identities, potential and place within their own community.

- There has been a significant rise in volunteerism in communities.

- In some ways, people may feel more connected with their communities than before, with local areas and networks banding together during the crisis and a rise in community mobilisation.

- As the community changes and evolves, so too does the researcher and PEP’s role/relationship within that community. It’s important to see identities as flexible and changing with context, rather than set in stone; our actions may shape communities, but so too will our communities shape ourselves.

- Regarding PE on a hyperlocal level; this engagement stems from a ‘professional-social’ basis. This brings up questions around our ‘professional identities’- the ways in which we perform our ‘professionalism’. Ed splits this ‘professionalism’ into three categories;

  o The ‘head’ – our knowledge and experiences.

  o The ‘heart’ – the values and beliefs that drive our profession

  o The ‘hands’ – our practical skills, and what we do on a day-to-day basis.

The nature of these aspects is shaped by the context in which we are working, and our institutions.

- Institutions are important to PEPs and engaged researchers; they shape the understanding of a certain type of professionalism, and can both give and withhold permission to do certain things. They can shape the way we think about certain issues or challenges. For engaged researchers, their disciplines also provide an important professional context.

- These professional identities are undergoing a time of evolution and are currently in flux; our homes have become our workplaces, and we are having to balance our work personas with our domestic spaces and responsibilities.

- In pursuing hyperlocal engagement, we will be engaging with our own communities; this necessitates a process of rethinking and reshaping our professional identities, adopting new knowledge and experiences and even drawing on different values and beliefs.

- There is great potential in this; the situation may free our imaginations to uncover new ways of working and co-existing. However, an identity change can be uncomfortable and challenging in itself, requiring reassessment and risk taking, which many individuals and groups may be resistant to. Ed gives an example of researchers who may be hesitant to cross boundaries between their professional ‘in-group’ (i.e. their institution), and the community in which they are working, for fear of being criticised as ‘unprofessional’.

- Universities will also be operating under certain ‘survivalist’ pressures. In recent decades, there has been a rise in corporate academic identity, driven by neo-liberal ideology, which results in individualistic, competitive practices and the infamous ‘publish or perish’
mentality. As a result, there may be a greater focus on the economic rather than the civic, which would be largely counter to the idea of hyperlocal engagement (the latter operating with principles of kindness, compassion, wellbeing etc).

- At KCL, some funds will be repurposed to support a small engagement unit; a small selection of researchers, who will initially be asked how they and their community have changed under lockdown. In light of this introspection, researchers will then be asked for specific engagement activities than could be applied to their local area.

- Ed ended by asking - how best can we support ourselves and those we work with to be more comfortable with the inevitable changes that we are all facing?

Questions and responses from delegates

Breakout groups:

Participants were asked to explore the following points:

- What are the opportunities and challenges of hyperlocal engagement?
- How else are you adapting PER for social distancing (not online)?
- What can we learn from each other? Other sectors?
- What can we put in place to make PER more resilient to future lockdowns/social distancing?
- What further support is needed?

Group 1
- Do universities have the postcode info about their researchers in a shareable format in order to avoid GDPR or privacy issues?
- Over-worrying about connecting engagement to ‘research’ may actually be unnecessary and detrimental; there are other more important practical needs that are pulling PE professionals from their old roles, while redefining what their work entails.

Group 2
- ‘We chatted about current evaluation methods, working with youth groups online (the ‘curiosity’ programme), and hyperlocal working through libraries as well (with a focus on the mobile libraries in the Western Isles) to engage around research and participation for social connectedness (the last of these made possible with the Engaging Libraries programme).

Group 3
- ‘We’ve discovered the need for more funding to pursue hyperlocal engagement – e.g. to courier out equipment to people’
- ‘Being able to move money out of the university to community organisations is so difficult – the bureaucracy gets in the way.’
- ‘Community organisations, on the other hand, are getting on with things, working quickly and flexibly to meet community needs.’
‘There is a perception that HEIs have a large amount of money and resource. We try to be open and transparent about our situation – but this is really difficult to navigate, as we are under a lot of internal pressure to demonstrate ‘value for money’.’

‘There isn’t a priority / demand for engaging with research at the moment – people just want practical support, like volunteering (which is often not connected to research)’

Do we have to let go of the expectation that activity must always link back to the research?

‘We’ve seen real ambition across the university to demonstrate support for communities - we are now suddenly volunteering experts!’

Group 4

We have been looking at how to work with food banks, delivering resources through charities (need to consider safety concerns e.g. disinfection.)

Some members are engaging in face-to-face hyperlocal engagement when allowed; but will this be a priority after lockdown?

Many projects place too much emphasis on writing up reports or articles for publication rather than looking at the hyperlocal; however, we’re still thinking and talking about the future.

Group 5

We recognised issues of focus around putting content online e.g. instantly sharing online resources to support parents working from home, in order to help with their home learning.

None of the group have done anything hyperlocal yet.

We are aware of a split between what we’re doing professionally and what we’re doing personally. We’re recognising that we can do more to merge these, e.g. sharing the latest information on COVID-19 (and the University of Edinburgh’s research which has contributed to it) while combating misinformation etc.

Further comments from delegates:

‘Many spaces we think are ‘public’ are actually privately owned, shopping centres for example can own a lot of land in the area.’

‘As professional sport will soon be showing without any spectators there, but online - which will no doubt affect play in some way - I wonder if we will end up having exhibitions without visitors but online…’

‘I know that the ‘Who Cares? History of Emotions in Nursing’ project was cut short due to COVID-19-- so they took their originally planned curator tour/talk online, and have made a digital version of the exhibition.’

‘STFC use the multiple indices of deprivation to define areas where they want to engage - but is hyper local engagement dependent on you being part of the community you are engaging with - or is this not important?’

‘Hyper local was originally a way of playing safe. E.g. working within the restrictions. Managing risk. But also depending on a bit of existing and/or prior knowledge.’

‘Here is one really interesting case study from my local area of how a charity adapted for lockdown to offer support for communities and engage people with playing outside /in’
Resources shared by delegates:

**NCCPE Training**
https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/whats-new/news/new-online-public-engagement-training-courses

**Announcement of NCCPE Engage Conference 2020**
https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/whats-new/news/engage-2020-announcement

**UKRI/ BEIS survey**
https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/BEIS_C-19_Impact_on_research

**David Owen’s Template for ideas and experiences**
https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1yrOGGh475BD-chAw8QmuQK0Tiptmu3Eh9SpUzqszNwQ/edit#gid=0

**Article on chalk graffiti and botany**
https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/may/01/not-just-weeds-how-rebel-botanists-are-using-graffiti-to-name-forgotten-flora-aoe

**Eden Project Community Response**
https://www.edenprojectcommunities.com/community-action-response

**Details of the OU/ Young Foundation research**

**Playing Out initiative**
https://playingout.net/covid-19/

**Scientist Next Door initiative**
https://www.scientist-next-door.org/