

Institution: Staffordshire University		
Unit of Assessment: 34 Communication, Cultural and Media Studies		
Title of case study: Addressing inequalities through creative, place-based participatory action research.		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2008 - 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Names:	Roles:	Period employed by HEI:
Nicola Gratton	Academic Lead for Civic Engagement and Evaluation	2011 – present
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Period when the claimed impact occurred: August 2013 – December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact

Get Talking is a participatory action research initiative developed at Staffordshire University and used across multiple projects. It addresses issues of power, inequality, access, and participation by coproducing knowledge using creative and artistic consultation techniques. It has led to **increased access to art for diverse and under-represented groups**. Over 1,200 people with low access to arts have benefited from being consulted about civic arts in Stoke-on-Trent. This work increased art audiences and led to more local involvement in decision making about artistic programming. Get Talking has also **supported the Hardship Commission's work by** recruiting and training people with lived experience of poverty and hardship as community researchers. **Benefits for community researchers** include skills, knowledge, qualifications, employment, and greater wellbeing. 10 of the community researchers are people with learning disabilities. They have gained the skills and confidence to challenge cultural sector organisations to improve accessibility to mainstream arts.

2. Underpinning research

Get Talking is an approach to community-led participatory action research, designed and developed by Staffordshire University's Creative Communities Unit [3.1]. It uses creative and artistic consultation techniques (often developed with artists) to engage with people who might be sceptical or afraid of formal academic research.

The programme includes training and support for a wide range of people with lived experience of the research subject as community researchers. It empowers them to influence projects which affect their lives. There is an established process for involving the community researchers for the length of each project. This approach is founded on five key principles (Participation, Action-driven, Inclusion, Honesty, and Flexibility) [3.2, 3.3].

Get Talking has been used on over 15 projects since 2008, including public sector policy development [3.2], participatory arts evaluations [5.1b, 5.1c] and voluntary sector support [3.4]. We evaluate and refine Get Talking to ensure meaningful participation, authentic findings, and participants' shared ownership of the research. Methodological questions that shape the on-going development of Get Talking are interlinked with the project-specific research questions. In this way, the research findings have broader significance in addressing the limitations of previous approaches to participatory action research partnerships.

This case study describes impacts from Get Talking's work with four community organisations in Stoke-on-Trent, and in a UKRI-funded project titled Keep Talking. Get Talking has enabled these impacts with individualised and pastoral support for community researchers [3.5] and bespoke versions of the training programme to meet the needs of community research teams [3.4]. The projects are:

1. Get Talking Appetite (2013 – 2016), an evaluation of an Arts Council England funded place-based arts programme. The action research process included community researchers and artists. It focused on how to increase engagement of non-typical arts attenders in cultural and arts events. Methodological insights included the value of partnering with artists to create

consultation tools which embedded artistic excellence into the evaluation and engaged non-typical attendees.

2. Reaching for Culture (2017 – 2018), linked to a Staffordshire University-led, city-wide consultation for Stoke-on-Trent's bid to be UK City of Culture 2021. The research addressed barriers that stop people with learning disabilities from engaging with mainstream arts and culture. We expanded Get Talking with a new training programme that involved people with learning disabilities as co-researchers which extended its reach to include people with limited verbal communication abilities. Unlike earlier studies, which often focus on the arts as a therapy, we created an approach that recognises people with learning disabilities as consumers of arts and culture [3.4].

3. Improving Volunteering Opportunities for People Over 60 (2019), commissioned by Vintage Volunteers (part of the registered charity, VAST) this project investigated barriers to volunteering for people over 60. Community researchers used diagrams to engage participants in informal conversations about volunteering in later life.

4. Get Talking Hardship (2019), commissioned by the Hardship Commission in Stoke-on-Trent. The Hardship Commission is made up of organisations and services that have an involvement with, or influence on, poverty-related hardship. The project engaged community researchers to investigate the causes and effects of hardship on people living in Stoke-on-Trent. It utilised creative consultation techniques in a range of settings including markets and community meals. It identified potential actions for local decision makers and was shortlisted for the Times Higher Education Outstanding Contribution to the Local Community Award 2020.

5. Keep Talking (2019 – 2020), a UKRI-funded project delivered in partnership with Expert Citizens CIC. The project was designed in response to Hardship Commission research on providing support for community researchers' needs. Keep Talking used creative methods to support community researchers whilst socially distancing due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It enabled these researchers and other stakeholders to question how the University research team engages with them, and it developed a local, sustainable model for community research. The findings led to changes in University ethical review processes [3.5].

Get Talking has enabled Staffordshire University to reflect on and enhance its approach to civic engagement. This has resulted in the team adopting a leadership role in high-profile initiatives, such as Stoke-on-Trent's bid for City of Culture 2021 and legacy projects including Stoke Creates and the Cultural Forum. Civic and public engagement scholars and practitioners have recognised the work's significance by inviting us to contribute to Public Engagement conferences and debates. These include the NCCPE Engage Conference (2018, 2019, 2020), national and international peer reviewed publications [3.2, 3.4] and research methods publications [3.5].

3. References to the research

3.1 Emadi-Coffin, B. (2008) Get Talking: community participation and neighbourhood learning. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*. Vol 10. No. 3. <https://eprints.staffs.ac.uk/5141>

3.2 Gratton, N. and Beddows, R. (2018), "Get Talking: Managing to Achieve More through Creative Consultation", *From Austerity to Abundance? (Critical Perspectives on International Public Sector Management, Vol. 6)*, Emerald Publishing Limited, pp. 141-160. <https://eprints.staffs.ac.uk/3145>

3.3 Gratton, N. (2020) *From Engagement to Strategy: The Journey Towards a Civic University*. In Sengupta, E. and Blessinger, P. and Mahoney, C., *University-Community Partnerships for Promoting Social Responsibility in Higher Education (Innovations in Higher Education Teaching and Learning, Vol. 23)*, Emerald Publishing Limited, pp.105-120. <https://eprints.staffs.ac.uk/6073>

3.4 Gratton, N. (2019) People with learning disabilities and access to mainstream arts and culture: participatory action research approach. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*. 48 (2) pp. 106-114. <https://eprints.staffs.ac.uk/6053>

3.5 Gratton, N. Fox, R. and Elder, T. (2020) Keep Talking: Messy Research in times of Lockdown. In Kara, H. and Khoo, S., *Researching in the Age of Covid-19. Volume 2: Care and Resilience*. Policy Press, pp. 101-109. E-Book. <https://eprints.staffs.ac.uk/6510>

Research funding: GBP37,377.31 UKRI Enhancing Partnerships for Place-Based Engagement (2019-20), PI Nicola Gratton. Further funding from Arts Council England (GBP90,000 Creative People and Places via Appetite, 2016-2019) and National Lottery Community Fund (GBP20,000 from Voices on behalf of Stoke-on-Trent Hardship Commission 2019).

4. Details of the impact

Get Talking delivered a range of impacts for communities based on their interests and place-based needs. The co-production methods drew on lived experiences and enabled community organisations to implement recommendations based on their stakeholders' needs and views.

1. Increasing access to art for diverse and under-represented groups:

i) Get Talking Appetite

Stoke-on-Trent is the twelfth most deprived English local authority (*Indices of Multiple Deprivation*, 2019) and has a cultural participation rate of 34%, one of the lowest in England ([Arts Council England, Active People Survey](#), 2010). Get Talking increased engagement of people in arts and cultural events in Stoke-on-Trent, and actively involved them in shaping provision. It was used as the evaluation methodology for the large-scale arts programme, Appetite, with 12 people as community researchers reaching a total of 1,224 people who were participants in the first year of the project (between August 2013 and March 2014) [5.1b, pp. 59 - 85]: *'Get Talking helped facilitate unbiased conversations with local people about [art]'* (5.1a). It engaged people who had little experience of the arts sector and had rarely been asked their opinion about engaging with the arts. Between 2013 and 2015 this resulted in increased confidence in communities to debate art and critique art experiences, with audiences more likely to demand quality yet accessible arts from the sector [5.1c, p. 37].

Influenced by Get Talking, Appetite then established clear processes for community voices to shape the programme. This included the introduction of the Supper Club as their core community decision-making platform in 2014, with a membership of 20 people (local residents) by December 2020. Appetite can now *'very honestly say that the decisions we make are instructed by the people in the local area for the things which they want'* [5.1a]. This and the use of creative tools fostered participant skills and confidence, with the result that 2 members gained employment [5.1a]. Appetite have significantly changed their approach to community engagement as a result of Get Talking: *'As time has gone on you can't really separate what Appetite does as a program away from Get Talking as a technique'* [5.1a]. Given the scale of the Appetite project, with funding of GBP2,999,430 and total audience engagement of 363,779 people between 2013 and 2016, this represents far-reaching impact. The approach that evolved from Get Talking has also been used by Appetite to extend their provision into Newcastle-under-Lyme, a neighbouring area. They used Get Talking's prior success to develop funding applications that draw on findings and plan new implementations of the methodology.

ii) Reaching for Culture

Reaching for Culture involved members of REACH, an advocacy service for people with learning disabilities, as community researchers in a project identifying the barriers to accessing mainstream arts and culture for people with learning disabilities. 10 people (REACH members) were supported to conduct research with 82 people which amplified the voices of people with learning disabilities within the cultural sector [3.4, 5.2a, 5.2b]. The work provided *'a previously "untapped" platform for people with learning disabilities to be heard'* [5.2a]. Engaging with this research enabled REACH members to connect to a wider community through arts and culture: *'For some individuals, this partnership has been life-changing, it has been a springboard into the heart of community'* [5.2c]. It represented a shift away from art as therapy [3.4] to emphasising that people with learning disabilities are citizens with rights to accessible arts offerings [5.2a]. An accessible report, co-authored with REACH members and ASIST [5.2b], was launched during a cofacilitated workshop held on 4th July 2018. Attended by 25 people (representatives from the cultural sector), *'This session allowed a gateway to the wider community for people with learning disabilities, which they had not had before'* [5.1a]. Following the session, the group, facilitated by Staffordshire University, met with the MP for Stoke-on-Trent South in September 2018 to discuss the research findings, and to ask him to consider the needs of people with learning

disabilities in planning for transport and culture in the city. As a result of their involvement with Get Talking research, [REACH] *'Members are increasingly called on as experts to help a range of professionals within the community to understand how to listen to people with disabilities'* [5.2c]. This included being asked to advise on and evaluate the FRONTLINEdance Inclusive Arts Festival in 2019 [5.2a]. Community researchers from REACH used Get Talking principles to conduct an evaluation to ensure physical and social access to the event and to develop an understanding of *'what it is like to go to an event which is led and created by people with learning disabilities'* [5.2a].

REACH community researchers also benefitted in terms of increased confidence and independence. One participant described how this had allowed them to take the lead in research sessions, declining offers of support: *'I spoke up to [a member of support] staff and said, "I don't need help with this."* [5.2b, p. 9]. REACH community researchers attended meetings independently without support staff following their involvement with Get Talking. This included a City of Culture Community Network visit to Hull, Get Talking research projects and FRONTLINEdance Inclusive Arts evaluation meetings.

Get Talking has raised REACH's organisational profile and secured them an Advocacy Award for Outstanding Contribution to Equality and Diversity by making culture accessible to all (2018) [5.2d]. Get Talking has become an embedded part of the way that they work: *'For REACH, the collaboration has brought together all the advocacy work which we do and allowed us to stand out in the sector...we will never go back to not using Get Talking or being influenced by it. It is really embedded within the advocacy and self-advocacy approach that REACH uses'* [5.2a].

2. Improving the ability of organisations to respond to unmet need

i) Stoke-on-Trent Hardship Commission

Get Talking Hardship has articulated the challenges that people experiencing hardship face and has made relevant local recommendations. It has legitimated the Hardship Commission's work to Stoke-on-Trent communities. Between January and July 2019, the Get Talking programme drew on the experiences of local people in Stoke-on-Trent to articulate the *'trade-offs and daily dilemmas that people face'* [5.3a]. It worked with 43 people as community researchers, some of whom had lived experience of hardship and poverty. The community researchers reached 250 people in the city [5.3b, pp. 8, 12]. The researchers built rapport with participants through 'common ground'. As a result: *'People who had never been listened to before or had never felt comfortable talking about the issues they had faced, could now have a way of talking to someone about their experiences'* [5.3a].

Our methods enable organisations to collect evidence from people experiencing poverty. They report that these findings influence their work and policies. The commissioner of the Hardship Commission work said, *'I frequently use the findings from the Get Talking project in my [charity] work. The framing and evidence that the project has provided for discussion surrounding Poverty and Hardship has been invaluable'* [5.3a].

A report, co-authored with community researchers in July 2019, outlined a series of recommendations. In response, in February 2020 the Hardship Commission reviewed their Terms of Reference to embed working with people with lived experience of hardship and poverty in understanding and addressing hardship [5.3c]. As a result, a community researcher joined the Hardship Commission Steering group as a representative of the wider team, embedding the lived experience of hardship into the decision making of the commission and to *'provide a continued framework so that the topic of Poverty and Hardship can be continued to be spoken about and influence more inclusive practice'* [5.3a].

ii) Vintage Volunteers

The Improving Volunteering Opportunities for People over 60 project worked with Vintage Volunteers to recruit 8 people as community researchers in 2019, reaching 65 people as participants to investigate barriers to volunteering for people over 60: *'The quality of information which we got from people was so much more than we expected. From the research findings, we were able to identify the barriers that older people faced when volunteering'* [5.5a]. Findings led to Vintage Volunteers amending their approach to recruitment of older volunteers, advertising in ways more accessible to older volunteers, such as radio, local pubs, and word of mouth: 'we

would have never thought about these places without being involved with the research' [5.5a]. They also used information from the research to adapt the use of their transport system to respond to volunteers' needs, enabling volunteers to travel to and from their volunteering opportunities. They have incorporated this change into new funding bids [5.5a]. The research shaped their volunteer management system, which influenced other volunteer organisations to change: *'Changing our own practice has had a knock-on effect in the community... An example of this would be [local group supporting asylum seekers and refugees], they have adopted the understanding of the barriers included in the volunteer management scheme'* [5.5a].

3. Sustaining benefits for community researchers

Get Talking community researchers benefit from structured and accredited training and support. This has resulted in improved health and wellbeing through creative opportunities [3.5], skills development [5.2a, 5.2b] and access level qualifications [5.3b, p. 9]. The Keep Talking project focused on addressing barriers for potential community researchers and developing a sustainable model for community research. Due to the COVID crisis in 2020, a community-led approach to research meant adapting the original objectives to ensure group wellbeing. The adoption of creative approaches such as podcasts, recipes, and photography played a key role in supporting the social networks and wellbeing of 17 people as community researchers during this period [5.4, p.2]. This included some who were vulnerable and isolated. Get Talking sustained a strong group bond [3.5]. A community researcher stated: *'A sense of camaraderie has developed... There was a sense of wanting to make sure everyone is doing well'* [5.4, p. 10]. It also strengthened the partnership with Expert Citizens by building trust and emphasising partnership and cocreation. The Chief Executive of Expert Citizens CIC states: *'We came up with the destination together, even though we had to reset that destination because of Covid... I think for us, actually working in that way, it has been really quite empowering actually [be]cause very often [when] we get invited into to do stuff decisions have already been made'* [5.4 p. 8]. 3 people who are community researchers on Keep Talking used the skills and knowledge that they gained to secure paid employment [3.5]. 2 are employed by a partner charity (Young Foundation) for post-Covid community research, and 1 secured full-time employment with Expert Citizens (5.4, p. 5).

Get Talking has also provided a unique opportunity for community members to access higher education. Get Talking Hardship resulted in Staffordshire University's Civic Fellowship Scheme [5.6]. Civic Fellows act as 'connectors' between communities and the University. They benefit from access to University facilities including the library, staff wellbeing services, IT accounts and software. To our knowledge this is the first scheme of its kind in the UK.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1 Evidence to corroborate impact of Get Talking Appetite: 5.1a. Testimonial: Creative Director. Appetite; 5.1b. Project report. Get Talking Appetite: An Evaluation of Year 1; 5.1c. Project report. Get Talking with Appetite: An Evaluation of Year 2.

5.2 Evidence to corroborate impact of Reaching for Culture: 5.2a. Testimonial: Community Advocacy Manager. ASIST (Facilitators of REACH); 5.2b. Project report: People with learning disabilities and their access to mainstream arts and culture; 5.2c. Email testimonial to confirm the benefits to REACH of being involved in the City of Culture through Get Talking research: Community Advocacy Manager. ASIST (Facilitators of REACH). 5.2d. Evidence of REACH's Advocacy Awards 2018, 2019.

5.3 Evidence to corroborate impact of Get Talking Hardship; 5.3a Testimonial: Project Director. VOICES; 5.3b Project Report: Get Talking Hardship; 5.3c Updated Terms of Reference (Hardship Commission).

5.4 Keep Talking Project Report: Impact and Recommendations.

5.5 Evidence to corroborate impact of Vintage Volunteers work; 5.5a Testimonial: Project Officer. VAST (Hosts of the Vintage Volunteers project); 5.5b Vintage Volunteers Project Report.

5.6 Newspaper report on the launch of Staffordshire University's Civic Fellowship Scheme. The Sentinel, 2020.