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Reclaiming the shrew was a partnership project between Atrium (Glamorgan University) and Flight Wings (ValleysKids).
Guidance Notes

Please complete every question as fully and honestly as possible. The Beacon for Wales is a pilot project: the key issue is to learn as much as possible about embedding engagement and what obstacles there are that might impede. All answers will be anonymised prior to inclusion in Beacon for Wales reporting or wider dissemination.

Whilst we do not suppose answers to be overly developed we do anticipate thorough and detailed accounts that provide genuine insight.

Questions

1. Overview

1.1 Provide a brief overview detailing the objectives of your project?

Reclaiming the Shrew was a very specifically targeted community-based physical theatre project. Designed for a critical audience in the Beacon for Wales remit: young people outside the formal education system it was inspired in name by Shakespeare’s famous character “The Shrew” and involved young people from Penygraig, Rhydyfelin and Penyrenglyn areas in South Wales Valleys and a range of students and teachers from the Atrium undergraduate drama, film, and music programmes.

The principle aim the project was to pilot a custom-designed methodology for the “at risk” group. Using a practice-based research approach it aimed to:

- enable participants to develop and deliver a personally meaningful art project for their community
- investigate the strategies and skills required to engage with this group in meaningful and sustainable way
- investigate more precisely what this vulnerable participant group needs in order to maintain engagement and build their capacity for engagement and contribution draw on the power of the environment to empower the young people to enhance their capacity to participate (situating the project in the Atrium campus - with support)
- integrate various peer-learning/peer teaching and other mentor and role model opportunities
- investigate how to improve perceptions and understandings of university for participants, practitioners, and general public

The project also sought to address issues of efficacy and sustainability in a community-based arts project by
a) Investing in the capacities of the newly appointed arts-worker for this age range and artworks more broadly through the resources of Atrium staff and students; and
b) Providing invaluable experience for both staff and university students to enact and assess public engagement methodologies with community cultural development.

1.2 Were these successfully met?

In each of these numbered responses I comment on each of the objectives listed above.

1. To pilot a custom-designed methodology for the at risk group

The practice as research approach enabled a full exploration of the physical theatre method for this group.

Beginning with a person-centred approach to creativity and participation in which the participants integrated their own experiences into the creation of images and scenes, the project narrowed to focus on a disciplined non-verbal physical practice. This was profoundly effective in relation to objectives of inclusion, empowerment and retention creating a democratic space in which a range of contributions from the young people were integrated. This was then elaborated to more complex physical structures and complimented by thematic, metaphoric, and narrative fragments informed by or derivative of the Shakespearean text and the young people’s interests. Participants commented:

“ Our bodies ached!”
“ I remembered the routines’”
“ The repetitiveness – it was hard/effective/boring”

While the young people were aware of the process that their bodies were enacting, the placement of the Shakespeare text also generated outcomes for the Flight Wings group. Members of the agency team commented: “Using such a strong stimulus like Shakespeare’s Taming of the Shrew was very useful. The themes in Taming of the Shrew were strong and the young people related to them. It seemed to raise the young peoples self esteem to tackle Shakespeare and they commented on this - how people won’t believe what we are doing and that we have come up with our own version. The
university students also commented on how surprised they were that the young people were so able to develop the text so effectively and this made them wonder if they had underestimated the capacity of the young people. It seems that something about the interaction, power of the story and Shakespearean language enabled the young people to find a new footing in the devising. Using Shakespeare may have helped to challenge external perceptions (community) of the group witnessing that young people can interpret Shakespeare and own it and demonstrating the ability to of the group to work with classical and serious material.

Evaluative comments varied but consistently suggested that the method was working on a level the agency had not succeeded at before, particularly with some of the more “at-risk” in the group. This included one young woman who is predominantly nonverbal. The repetitive and patterned physical method opened a doorway for her that is usually limited due to the need to deliver spoken text or read and construct character. Another participant for whom the method appears to have had significant success is a young man (late teens) who was able to express himself in a more athletic way rather than the often more exposing “acting a character” process. Art worker Gemma reflected that the non-verbal approach had fast results, early, and at a high level. She states: “The way that physical theatre works, I feel had a great effect on the group. I feel some of the group members would have struggled a lot longer, had we used another form of theatre. The text and verbal content was limited, which helped participants such as L and K to be able to express themselves without feeling too self-conscious.”

Participants were also aware that this approach offered something different and was creating different opportunities. One commented: “I got so much more confident when we didn’t have to speak – just relied on our bodies to tell the story.”

Others stated:

“ It was good that it was devised (made up) non scripted – we didn’t have to worry about learning lines, just remembered where we had to be!”

“ Could be yourself in the play – didn’t have to worry about what other people thought about you”

Artworks staff commented on the first day that the approach to building the cast had already met all their expectations in terms of participation, inclusion and capacity building. They continued to comment throughout the process and noted that in the stress of production week, the artworks team commented that the young people appeared to be very centred. They raised the possibility that “ the way of physically working had built a new resilience, as they seemed to be able to hold together powerfully and stay very focused within the drama.” In reflection later, they also commented: “ Rea introduced new ways of working that we were unfamiliar with. In a sense we are only left with the impression of how it seemed to calm the group, give them a clearer sense of themselves and that they were most often fully engaged in the work. Quite how this was working we don’t feel equipped to say but for L, E and K in particular perhaps the most vulnerable people in the group we feel it had a powerful and lasting affect (outside of the sessions and performance) in developing their
confidence. Also, for the young men this way of expressing themselves physically seemed to release them from their more fixed gender roles they were able to explore and express themselves and we were surprised at how willing they were to allow themselves to enter the process."

The young people were equally active in commenting on the way the method was working in effective but unfamiliar ways:

One stated: “I was surprised by how far I can push myself.”

Another made comments about how she was finding that she had stopped looking for reasons to avoid coming. She said, “I don’t know. I just feel better. I am mixing better with the group. Before I was shy and didn’t want to come along to different groups.”

The facility within theatre to respond to a range of ways of communicating has been significant. Theatre can communicate in stories, through the body, and metaphorically. The inclusion of music has increased this accessibility further for the young people on this project.

Some limitations to the approach were noted on the level of accessibility for the staff of the agency who commented that they would not feel equipped to use such a physical approach themselves in future. They also commented that they could not “put their finger on” just what it was that was working so effectively to build the groups’ confidence and capacity. Yet they also commented that they had begun to integrate more physicality into the group process at Artworks for this age range, and found that they young people were responding and the Artworks method was complimentary to the approach in the research. Evidence of this is the upcoming production by the group in which Gemma has continued to integrate some aspects of the physical theatre methodology to support the group to devise ‘Sleep’.

Sleep will be performed at Soar Centre on Friday 27 and Saturday 28 August 2010. Promotional material states: ‘Sleep’ is the newest project from the Flight Wings Creative Group. A devised piece from our 16-25 group that combines Drama with Physical Theatre exploring our dreams and what happens when we sleep. This piece explores our unconscious mind through the dream state!
(http://valleyskids.org/involved_events_detail.php?eventID=200)

2. To enable participants to develop and deliver a personally meaningful art project for their community

This was accomplished with a high degree of success with the presentation of the performance to the community on 19 February 2010. Community members supported the event with approximately 100 in the audience including the young people’s families and friends. There were comments made that suggest the audience/community were proud of the young people’s efforts and also surprised at
the high standard of the work, and the high degree of participation of some of the young people who would not usually be considered for performance-based activities.

One music colleague from the university who has also had various associations with the area attended the performance and agreed to be interviewed. Here is an excerpt of his comments:

It was clear that the journey to the performance and the journey of the performance was an important experience for the performers and those journeys had been respected rather than treating the performance as a reified artwork. It was clear from the atmosphere and reaction of the audience that they also sensed the powerful transformative potential of the physical theatre practice. The performance was spectacular and moving and carried a form that seemed as much based on physical movement and rhythm as on narrative progression. This appeared to come from the drawing out of material from the participants rather than the imposition of external structure (JB, Atrium).

Professor of Community Arts, Hamish Fyfe, also attended. Professor Fyfe commented: The Shrew Project was obviously a piece of work that depended on a demanding process of invention and thought and not having been privy to that part of the project makes it seem like bringing a kind of theatre criticism to the process which wouldn't do it justice. I can say however that I was impressed by the vivacity and inventiveness of the performance and by the energy that the cast brought to the performance. It was impressive to see an inclusive and diverse group of young people work so hard.

The performance demonstrated some of the potency of the public engagement of University staff and also some of the vulnerabilities that this brings.

It is also worth noting a comment by one of the young people who had to withdraw from the project after Christmas due to a work placement opportunity. Exciting to be in the audience on the night, after the seeing the show admitted: “I wish I could have done it!”

See attachment 1 Programme for the Performance
3. To investigate the strategies and skills required to engage with this group in meaningful and sustainable way

This aim was one of the central successes of the project. Perhaps the single most useful outcome of the Beacon Engagement money was the way in which it enabled the Flight Wings/Artworks group to access significant additional human resources for the establishment phases of the project. Flight Wings is a new initiative of Artworks specifically for this age group, yet the fragmentation of the communities in the valleys and the limited resources (one arts worker) meant that they had experienced a number of challenges engaging and retaining the young people for a sufficient length of time to create the feeling of a “group”. Unlike other artworks projects that are located in a nominated community, Flight Wings' mandate was to gather together those young people who had outgrown the younger participant model and to forge a new identity for those older teens. The presence of Dr Dennis and her team meant that there were significant resources to focus and implement the artistic process. This became the principle function of the university group up until the rehearsals were moved to Soar Centre in Penygraig in mid February 2010.

This then freed the Flight Wings co-ordinator to focus on invitations, personal contact with participants in their own neighbourhoods, personalised transfers and other logistics that maintained momentum and resourced participation. The one to one approach required of Gemma to ensure consistent attendance was the single most important factor in realising the success of the project and the ongoing momentum in the Flight Wings group.

The engagement and retention function became the criteria by which many of the decisions were made early in the project. Initially we had pitched the application for young women as they were identified as the most „at-risk”, yet very quickly it was determined that at least 2 young men were expressing interest. The decision was taken immediately to broaden the scope of the participation to ensure Gemma (Flight Wing’s) broader and long term agenda for the group was not threatened.

A similar decision was taken early to support Gemma to prioritise group management roles so that she was not as available to undertake the artistic roles in the way we had anticipated. The reality of basing the project at Atrium meant that she had pick-ups to do, lunches to organise and other logistics – calls to parents, late comers, absentees, etc and it was identified early in the project that Gemma’s personal attention in these matters seemed to be building the kind of relationships that she believed would have a long range benefit for the group once Atrium withdrew. This same understanding also led to a change in the rhythm of the project.

At planning stage we had designed a 4-week intensive project, quasi-residential. Through the preliminary months it was identified that this was not sustainable for the young people, some of who had part time jobs, or had returned to school. With this in mind a decision was taken to have just one contact a month with Atrium in the first 5 months, and then from January 2010 to increase this gradually until production week. This change freed Gemma up to facilitate specific periodic sessions with the group within the Artworks facilities, once again building the true picture for the future of the group. Also, this enabled more students to be involved in a greater variety of ways,
with some joining the weekly 2 hours sessions in the Valleys as participants serving to resource Gemma with the kind of skill diversity that was becoming foundational in the success of the young people in the project.

4. To investigate more precisely what this vulnerable participant group needs in order to maintain engagement and build their capacity for engagement and contribution

See 3 (above)

Intermittent feedback from Valleyskids suggests that the project has been very worthwhile both in relation to stated objectives and in relation to objectives that could not have been anticipated.

Establishing the posture or quality of the project through situating it at the University and including university students was a value – adding kind of aspect for the young people. One said: “It was nice to work with the people from the uni (Kayleigh and SJ) as they were the same age range as us.”

Another agreed: “yeah, it made me want to know what it was like to do drama at a university level – it was good working with K and S as they are drama students”

While a third suggested: “Working with professionals gave me more of an outlook on life.”

5. To draw on the power of the environment to empower the young people to enhance their capacity to participate (situating the project in the Atrium campus - with support)

One of the more interesting findings in this research was the value of the university-based project for this group. Flight Wings Co-ordinator Gemma Fraser Jones, and
other ARTWORKS staff commented on the prestige of the environment on two levels:

1. It was in Cardiff – this meant that more than attending a drama workshop every week in their local area, once a month the young people set out together to visit Cardiff and attend the university. The value of this for the Flight Wings/Artworks personnel was significant as it facilitated a type of “higher authority” in their engagement and retention process. It also served to cohere the group, to ritualise the beginnings and endings of each day, and maximise the shared experience of the young people in such a way that a genuine group identity was consolidated.

As one student reported: “I loved the bus journey down to Cardiff and using the space in ATRIUM (a lot bigger), a total different experience!”

Flight Wings/Artworks then maximised the student experience, particularly in the first two visits by taking the group into Cardiff for lunch. The chance to be out and about in the city at lunch time was seen as a huge bonus by the young people and prioritised by the staff so that the Project Team extended the lunch break by 30 minutes for these episodes. Later the young people elected to eat in the on campus union canteen (this is discussed further below).

2. It was at Atrium – This meant that the young people had the opportunity to work in the relatively new “purpose-built” theatre spaces rather than the more generic community centres with multiple purposes they might otherwise know. One student admitted: “I didn’t know it existed”

This aspect worked in favour of the work ethic of the group. The very specific purposes of the spaces acted on the young people to arrive ready to work. The clean and large spaces were immediately accessible for the work of the project; there was no doubt that the spaces were for making theatre. Situating the project at Atrium on the weekend was enhanced by the support of the student union that saw value in making the union resources available to the group. While the union was making a business decision, the value of the access to these additional university environments expanded the participant experience and made a significant contribution to their understanding of how the university might operate during the week.

In order to minimise the intimidation of the new Atrium building and maximise the young people’s sense of belonging, the Atrium students facilitated a welcome ritual for the first three visits (first three months) that included:

- a creative space in the foyer where the young people created their own name plates;
- guiding them to the Workshop spaces and giving them a tour of the theatre spaces;
- arranging water, juice and chocolate bars for coffee break time;
undertaking each of the tasks with them and participating as full members of the process to ensure the young people valued the theatre workshop as a real university experience

- hosting them in the student union and other student areas to maximise the young people’s exposure to the university site and to demystify the university as a place in which they are welcome and belong;
- answering questions about the university and the courses they did there.
- joining them for lunch

One of the young people commented, “I loved the ATRIUM – the atmosphere, it was nice to have a different place to work. Enjoyed the tasks before the session (name tags/collages)”

Another stated: “I loved the security guard!”

The young people were further oriented to the university process when we invited them to what we called “Interim Event – A return to Atrium” in which they travelled to the Atrium on a Tuesday night in March, one month after the performance, to watch one of the Third Year Student groups perform their final practical exam piece. The night was divided in three with the young people arriving and enjoying a reception with juice and sandwiches and crisps. Then the film makers arrived and we showed just 10 minutes of a rough cut of the documentary, “The Making of…” as a way to build motivation and remember the experience so far, next the young people participated in an informal feedback session facilitated by the students of Atrium who were also in the project. After this they were ushered into the large Theatre where seats had been reserved for them, to watch a 1-hour performance piece in which other students of Atrium that they had met in the process were performing. It was a great success for the young people to witness this culmination in the work of the students after their three-year degree.

One student in particular stated: “Working in the ATRIUM has made me think that I want to go there to study. I found it a real good experience working in the building, with the students and the lecturers” (N)

Students also discussed the value of locating the project at the Atrium. As the following comment suggests there were benefits for both participants and students volunteers

Can I say something about if you do it again next year? I think it would be important to have them at Atrium again, to have the university as a base – it was much harder when we were there, things were not so clear. And I really noticed a change in the young people between the three places. Rhydfelin is their place; Soar not; Atrium not too, but they seemed to understand the boundaries here in a way they did not understand them in Soar.
6. To integrate various peer-learning/peer teaching and other mentor and role model opportunities

This was accomplished by what become known as “the companion model” which operated alongside the physical theatre model. The Companion Model was adapted from previous project I was involved in during 1998/99 where I worked alongside a Disability Officer (DO) to create a piece of theatre. The DO facilitated a group for adults with learning disabilities who wanted a more satisfying experience of belonging in the Catholic Church. She opened the group to all adults creating a more diverse group in which disabled and non-disabled adults co-existed. I adapted this model looking at the skills and experience of theatre and physical performance so that I was not expected to undertake a teaching role, rather a more artistic role in which we created theatre. This approach also maximised the participation of the Atrium students yet also included ex-Atrium students and professional artists both in the creation and within the performance and in other functions (costume design, lighting design, set design and). During the devising process the students, ex-students and professional artists all participated equally in the process and by modelling, example, support or encouragement the young people with less experience grew exponentially in their capacity to create and perform the piece. Flight Wings art-worker Gemma commented: “The way the „Shrew” project was structured, was very positive, in the sense that there were former and past students, qualified practitioners, and young people from the community, all working together. This for me was one of the greatest strengths in the process and idea of the project, as the young people had influence from the others, who were all modelling their practices and experiences for each other. This deeply benefited those who were less confident and also those who were experienced, yet new to working with such a specific group of young people, who all had individual needs.”

This aspect of the method was so successful that I would try to use it in other work with at-risk participants.
The model did have some problems as the project progressed as I was constantly changing the roles of the companions in order to free roles/spaces for the developing young people. Students, ex-students and supporting artists alike all commented that at times this left them in a confusing role and at times minimised their effectiveness as they needed to adjust or re-enter the process in another way. It also created some confusion for the Artworks/Flight Wings staff who were also engaged at times in various roles as “companions” due to the way in which they supported the young people. It was clear at the close of the production that more briefing and de-briefing in relation to the changing roles was needed to safeguard motivation and effectiveness, and enjoyment.

7. To investigate how to improve perceptions and understandings of university for participants, practitioners, and general public

    See comments in 5 (above).

8. To invest in the capacities of the newly appointed arts-worker for this age range and Artworks more broadly through the resources of Atrium staff and students

This was perhaps the most sensitive objective in the life of the project. Flight Wings has recently received a small Arts Council of Wales grant to appoint an art-worker for this age range. However the work to develop momentum in engagement and retention in addition to creating a performance requires extensive resources and intensive periods. In early discussions with the agency it was identified that a key outcome had to be that the presence of the university did not undermine the long term and sustainable potential of the Flight Wings visions. This lead to some significant decisions regarding:

1. Including young men and young women in the project
2. Limiting the frequency of contact with the university in the first five months to once a month, which the agency delivered the other three encounters per month within their own realistic resource limits.
3. To ensure the work of devising was within the realm of possible repetition by the art-worker and agency.
4. To ensure the art-worker profile was congruent with that of the academic/researcher and other university and professional artists.
5. To support ongoing decision-making by the art-worker and ensure the project was responsive to her vision for the longer-term viability of the project
6. To accept decisions about resources, time frames, availability of the young people, and capacity of the young people that were informed by the experience and longer-term plans of the agency.

Yet the real evidence is in the way the group progressed in the period directly following the performance on February 19. Gemma reported: “All is going well, and the group is really starting to focus back into devising. E is continuing to grow in confidence and we have chosen to use some physical work in the devising process, to
ensure L and E in particular feel a familiarity with the methodology they have worked with on the Shrew. G, is also continuing to attend the group, however due to work commitments starts back next week. The group is more integrated and is working together in a lovely manner, and I honestly believe this is due to the process of working with “Reclaiming the Shrew” (May 2010).

Despite the obvious success of the project in relation to Gemma’s brief for developing Flight Wings, there were consequences for her that meant she had to narrow her focus to undertake very specific roles in recruitment and retention that excluded her from having more input into the artistic process. She reflected: “From the outset I offered to be assistant director to Rea, as well as the Flight Wings co-ordinator. I feel this was un-achievable. The job as the flight wings co-ordinator was a lot bigger than I had anticipated. Ringing the groups, organising transport, arranging and paying for lunches, whilst offering support to individual needs was really enough.”

Yet she also acknowledges that she was involved in a range of other ways that were meaningful and satisfying to her; “However, I do feel I contributed to the material within the play, from the workshops I had led, and the content I had provided.”

9. To provide invaluable experience for both staff and university students to enact and assess public engagement methodologies with community cultural development.

Feedback from participating interns and artists and from Atrium staff and students also indicates that we have been successful in achieving engagement outcomes for University of Glamorgan personnel. Students particularly spoke about the value of the experience for them personally and professionally.

One stated; I started with low confidence but found as we kept going I got more and more confident and got to know people and it was really good to see how much
fun they were having … To see them change, L really changed and it was really great to see him change (Hannah, Drama)

While the call for engagement focused on the drama students there were also some film and music students involved. One of the music students reported: It was fantastic to be with people who were experiencing something for the first time. I had no preconceptions so I don’t know what I was expecting but it was not like anything I have done before. Everyone had lots more input, everyone had a say. It was nice to do something different … being involved in the evolution of the piece, effecting how it developed, all the cooperation (C, music).

Two film students were late additions to the team and began the project with the idea that it was a technical task. This was soon reconsidered. One explained: I was more involved than I thought I would be, thought we’d be. Getting to know people, I didn’t expect. As a documentary maker usually you stand back, or try and to maximize the situations for dramatic effect. I realised we were having a bigger role in the process than I expected—we were deciding things, and were also bonding in some ways. I didn’t expect that … there was a moment in the process when I suddenly realised how much of an impact we’d made on the group, we were leaving and they were in the bus to go and they called to take a ride with them to the station and we were like, oh, no thanks we’re ok, and they were massively disappointed (F, film).

And another stated: It wasn’t just any show—we felt proud; part of the team, like it was somehow our group. We were not just observers. I felt I had a responsibility… usually we (documentary makers) expect to milk every dramatic opportunity but this time … it felt more important to give them attention, to capture them looking good and to make sure we get good footage for them to see themselves later … For me it was a great learning curve—it was all about dealing with people. It was great, I could do it, I enjoyed it! In a way I think the cameras there were helpful to them—there is a saying:

Treat stars like actors and actors like stars—the camera was powerful, it kind of directed them to do something—like interview lee, gave nothing, but once I just stood there and nodded a bit and he kept talking and eventually started to open up and say things that he wouldn’t usually say in a social situation (Jon, film).

While many of the students commented that the relational side of the project was unexpected but delightful, there was one student who found this challenging, yet was highly positive about the opportunity to practice his craft: I was skeptical about, I don’t know, about the “power of theatre” … but when we ran our first activity, it was hard, but it really did make a difference the way we used light to create a stage and how the young people responded to the difference environments … the way we structured the workshop really effected them. And for me, some things were hard. I did not expect the human contact (relational side) that’s forced upon you. Like on Facebook we are still getting messages everyday and I am not sure how to respond … it is difficult to detach (S, Drama).
Drama students evaluated the project from a professional perspective as well. For example, H reported: I miss it. We did these amazing things and now we are not doing anymore drama work there. It really affected me. I now know what I really want to do – community theatre, I think I wanted to, but shrew made me very sure. It is what I want to do – just this (H, Drama).

Third year K was also influenced to re-imagine her future: It has influenced me professionally too. I always thought I wanted to be a teacher but being up there; I changed my mind and decided I wanted to do community arts. I will try to apply for a PGCE first to have a base… (K, Drama)

For S, it was not so personal. Rather he commented on the role of the Atrium in this kind of activity. My thinking is not so personal; more from the point of view of the Atrium and how the university can make a difference. This made a big impression on me. We can come to the community… my thoughts haven’t solidified yet but… for example, like N (one of the young women in the project), she is coming, or at least she is going to enroll in Uni because of this experience (S, Drama).

Finally, the visibility of the project in Atrium influenced other students who were not involved yet who were provoked and reflective about the value of community engagement. One of the drama students reported that other students came to the show cause they “they could see the way their colleagues were working and learning and they had listened to many stories throughout the term as they would talk with each other and exchange tips and methods for managing the groups … they were always interested in what was different in what we were doing to what they were doing.”

In addition to Atrium students, Music colleague, Div Subramanian, became involved in the project in the lead up to the live performance. He says that his motivation was simple: “to get a glimpse of experimental theatre and work with the local community.” Yet the outcomes for him were broader than this. He said, “The experience was interesting, surprising and fulfilling. Interesting to see young people express themselves freely; surprised with their excellent interpretation of musical expression; and fulfilling, in having been part of their experience … in getting involved, I have learnt new ways of arriving at creative tangibles. Such innovative methods present abundant opportunities for individuals and offer an experience that contributes towards personal development … I would happily get involved again.”

There was also broader reach in relation to faculty and other university staff.

1.3 What were your project milestones?

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<td>Identification of Need and Potential Project</td>
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Atrium’s formal engagement with the young people began in May when we secured the Beacon funding and the Reclaiming the Shrew project was used as a “beacon” to attract the young people to two preliminary workshops between June and September 2009. From October 2009 to February 2010 a range of workshops were delivered by Dr Rea Dennis from Atrium in various collaborations with Artworks/Valleyskids Flight Wings Co-ordinator Gemma Fraser Jones, International visiting artist Magda Miranda, and Atrium past and present drama students, Rachel Clement, Claire Bailey, Hannah Jones, SJ Mitchell and Kayleigh Bennett. Claire, Kayleigh and Rachel are also young people from the Rhondda area. This integration of a range of workshop leaders with a diverse array of styles and methodological contributions established a rich environment of experimentation, shared leadership, companion participation contributing toward ensuring a democratic developmental process in the creative process that included everybody’s ideas. This collaborative companion model enabled a range of positive outcomes for a successful second stage in the project.

In February, the project shifted into a more intensive mode for the second phase. Firstly this involved reviewing the group’s creative archive from October through to January (remembered elements from each of the workshops). This preceded a compositional phase in which these elements were further developed, sometimes deconstructed and reshaped, and sometimes edited entirely. This process again adopted the democratic devising approach reported by Heddon and Milling (2005) as one of the principle values of devising within the community. As one young person commented:
"We had so much more involvement in the show, sharing ideas and working on costumes. It was a really good experience. Everything in the play was something that people in our group wanted" (G)

After this second phase of work-shopping we entered the rehearsal process. During the rehearsal stage we were able to concentrate more fully on establishing a structure for the physical development of the participants and move toward a more ritualised application of the foundational physical theatre exercises. This enabled them to build endurance and stamina in preparation for the 50-minute performance. The rehearsals also functioned to organise the elements into a coherent score that had meaning for the group integrating notions of electronic communication (sms, facebook), metaphors of interpersonal connection and speaking up for yourself. This process progressed alongside the demands of design and then production and culminated in an intensive production week (as is Valleyskids model) with a performance by the young people for their community on Friday evening 19 February 2010.

During this period two film students, one music student and a staff member from the Division of Music, Div Subramanian agreed to become involved. This enabled the process to explore live music and to develop a more focused process of documentation toward an artifact/keep sake for the young people, “A Making of…” DVD.

2. History

2.1 What was your experience of public engagement previous to this project?

I have a history of arts-based public engagement in Australia prior to being appointed to the University of Glamorgan.

Some significant projects include:

1. Gay Pride – an annual event (July) in which I produced a theatre performance based on the personal stories of this community.
2. Disability – over a period of about 5 years I was involved in a range of projects with people with disabilities and mental illness including: focus groups for engaging people with disabilities in the Catholic Church communities, performances for communities and their disabled members, advocacy performances, and playback theatre for people with disabilities.
3. Mental Health – In a range of projects during progressive mental health weeks in Brisbane Australia and also in a Healthy Relationships project in partnership schools in remote areas promoting healthy alternatives to relationships using theatre and performance.
4. Social Inclusion – As drama consultant on the sound project 'Sound Circles' with Access Arts, Queensland.
5. As an academic in Australia I produced a number of projects integrating students within specific communities including the Children's hospital.
Since arriving in the UK and teaching at the University of Glamorgan, this is my first community engagement project.

3. Expectations and Motivations

3.1 What was your initial motivation in applying for Beacon funding?

I had invited Artworks co-ordinator Miranda Ballin to teach with me and over a number of months identified a genuine possibility for my practice within the Valleys. Then I came across the Beacon Award and saw it as an ideal avenue for establishing a meaningful partnership project with Artworks/Flight Wings.

3.2 Were your expectations of engagement fulfilled or changed?

Personally, my expectations were fulfilled. Professionally, my expectations were changed.

Early in the creation of the project I focused heavily on a university based project. This meant delivering the full project within the university with a very structured schedule. One change came when it was clear that the on-going success of the engagement beyond “Atrium” demanded that the project and the young people identified the experience with their local area, and that the ongoing operation of the group be branded in some way within the local context. This was easily remedy and required little negotiation of resources and was achieved through a re-visioning of the stages of the project. The second change was more difficult. This concerned the sudden unavailability of the Atrium resources in the week we had scheduled for the performance. At one point it looked as if I could be flexible, but the needs of the agency was to deliver the “finale”; the performance to the community, within half term in live with their tradition. The space limitations at Atrium meant that an undergraduate course had needed to be timetabled within the half term and so the main theatre was not available for the performance. This resulted in the relocation of the project to Soar Centre at Penygraig in the final days with insufficient time to attend properly to the re-negotiation of roles for The University Team and the increase in demand on the Agency Team in this other site.

The production went ahead as scheduled but there were clear incidents in which this shift and the pressure on the various teams increased the stress on everyone. I have to say, the teams responded professionally and there was little impact on the young people, but the final few days were tough. A decision was taken by the University Team to invite the young people to Cardiff/Atrium for one final evening to find a more formal „closure“ at the Atrium venue. This “Interim Event – A return to Atrium“ was a great success and resulted in an ambience that helped to finalise the University team’s collaboration with the young people and the agency. Flight Wings had elected to go into recession during the month between the show and this interim event, which also helped to make this a kind of finale for the combined groups.
3.3 Would you previously have considered communicating with the project audience? What reasons can you give for having previously not?

No, it is not really my area of strength. Young people’s theatre, and youth or community theatre is very demanding and influenced significantly by various social care agendas that can challenge the principles of risk taking inherent in my practical approach. My preference is to work with a more structured brief: in environments that have clearer frameworks or purposes. Working artistically with young people in a social or community context requires a good deal of negotiation with social care and other values inherent in such contexts.

3.4 What were the initial impressions of your public participants to academics? Did these change?

Initial impressions were fairly stereotypical, or example, they saw the Lecturers as experts and as authoritative. There was also some shyness in front of the students and ex-students. As I have discussed above, this changed rapidly and dramatically with the implementation of the Companion Model. Interestingly, my approach to building capacity and agency within the devising process introduced some tension at different times within the agency team who tended to operate a more teacher-led model in which staff members are more clearly segregated from the participants. The Companion Model blurred that boundary at times resulting in tension and some role conflict for the agency team, and some difficult moments for the University Team. For example, one student asked how to respond to conversations about drinking as she felt a responsibility to not just “be herself” but to represent the agency position. As a student of the University she also represents a different perspective for the young people. I am still not clear what the best answer is for this student.

While we learned as the project progressed that everyone associated with the project would have benefited from an agency orientation (as if we were volunteers or new employees) to really comprehend the framework within which the young people were recruited, at the same time we were also aware of the value of the contact with the university context for the young people. There are still questions in my mind about this. On the one hand, alignment with the agency may have assisted the project to find more coherence at times. Yet operating at times within the university framework, seemed to allow for a greater flexibility and new horizons for the young people (which at times compromised the agency team). I think such work needs such tensions yet it makes for a challenging working environment at times.

3.5 Did you notice during the course of your project any noticeable change in attitude from your team towards the task-at-hand?

The main change came about due to the University Teams’ observation of the way the young people were so rapidly engaged in the project despite lots of discussion beforehand by the Agency Team that they would resist, be uncomfortable, exposed, and maybe even disruptive. There were one or two participants who disrupted early in the process but they quickly saw the benefits of engaging. The University Team
worked with a method of action, showing, doing, observing, and trying again which meant that very quickly participants were working in complex tasks in a very different social framework than they had experienced previously. We worked to minimise talking and maximise showing and doing, participants were expected to work together and at times within a structure that demanded the focus of the entire group. While this was a new way of working for the Agency Team, they were quickly involved and supportive.

3.6 To what extent do you think engagement can and should feature as a part of the research process?

I think that all research has to be contextual and relevant. Perhaps engagement is not always relevant at the beginning of a research process but at some stage there must be facility to have a public response.

3.7 Has this project changed in any way, your or your colleagues’ views to public engagement?

For me: In a way, yes. I think the biggest thing for me was how much I had to do. “I” was “the university”. The grant was small; some of my time was costed into the grant, yet there was no infrastructure in the university to assist with any of the logistics, the accounting, and the management. In fact, the finance system was even a problem for me when I wanted to involve the young people in buying costumes and other things there was no facility for the finance department to be flexible. It was more effective to let the Agency pay for these things.

For others: My colleagues and line managers were very encouraging and appreciative of the work I was undertaking. In terms of the Atrium resources, as I discussed above, there were challenges in accommodating the project for the full length of time and which led to a last minute change in the performance venue. That said, drama colleagues were very open to try to re-negotiate various things to maximize the experience of the young people at Atrium. Auxiliary service personnel – catering, security and the student union – all responded very positively to the young people’s presence at the Atrium.

Colleagues: One colleague agreed to be involved so that he might “get a glimpse of experimental theatre and work with the local community”. He came away with much more. He wrote:

“The process was as delightful as the product. The chance to interact with such a variety of individuals offered a wealth of information to me. The production itself was very different in its evolution, and the musical interaction and has helped me identify new artistic resources” (email 16/03/2010)
3.8 Has this project made you more or less inclined to engage publics?

Neither, but it has certainly raised questions for me about how to cost these projects; and “at what cost” to the individual?

3.9 Do you believe that engagement is integral or ancillary to academic labour?

Integral (in my disciplinary area)

3.10 What would deter you from engaging the publics in future?

Time.

3.11 Would you recommend engagement as rewarding and/or beneficial to academic colleagues? How would you pitch this?

Yes. Usually I just tell the stories. It is impossible not to be affected by the participants in these projects – to witness their growth, their claiming of the space, their joy at productivity and participation. There is always something that a colleague can bring to such projects. The other caution I would offer is to bring humility rather than ego, to bring skills and knowledge rather than opinion, and to start early getting others on board.

4. Positivies

4.1 What methods of engagement did you find to be the most effective?

Constant, rhythmic and ongoing in relation to specifics (tasks, dates, times) and a broader vision.

4.2 What were the most rewarding / satisfying aspects of your project?

a) The extensive impact across the participants – young people, students, ex students, artists, agency staff, and community.

b) The quality of the performance and seeing the young people look so good, competent and happy.
c) How it all looked – very professional. As one participant stated: “I loved the music - it was different to what we seemed to have done before (moving on the beats of the music) and I loved the colour theme and paints on faces”

4.3 What were the major benefits of engaging for you and your team?

For me, it was to test the model of working – physical theatre with young people.

For my team, the benefits are wide ranging. All value the experience. One student even announced that it should be compulsory for all final year students to “do something like this. You should have it every year!”

Other’s spoke about being inspired to take their practice into other fields, academic colleagues found new ways of working creatively (independent of the target group).

Ex-students commented on the satisfaction of applying their knowledge and skills and seeing results, feeling like they were not only making a contributions, but that their contribution was meaningful and far reaching. Another spoke about the sense of satisfaction and empowerment of working in her own community and seeing something grow where she had felt there was no hope before.

Many of the students asked to be involved again.

4.4 What were the major benefits for your public participants?

- A high quality performance experience to which to invite their family and friends;
- The desire expressed by the young people and students to do it again;
- The imprint for a theatre company for this age range
- Feeling proud, exhilarated and competent in stage

5. Difficulties

5.1 Were there aspects of the project you struggled with?

Roles and Responsibilities between the agency and the university – as I wrote earlier, the project was designed as a university-based project. This meant delivering the full project within the university with a very structured schedule. This changed unexpectedly and presented challenges due to the un-availability of the theatre.

Transferring to the Agency site demanded a re-negotiation of the lines of accountability and there was not enough time to do this well. There were negative consequences for the Agency Team, who were suddenly “The Production Team” which had a certain style and mode and the University Team who were them not sure just how to enact their roles and who to seek permission from.
Project Management within the University System – It was a big challenge coming to grips with how much I had to do and I had anticipated that it was a partnership with the agency. But in fact, I was the producer, on behalf of the university. Yet despite winning the grant, it was not automatic that they university systems would bend to ensure the success of the project. It was all up to me.

5.2 Drawing on the experience of this project, what do you identify as the major obstacle(s) for engaging publics.

Clear frameworks for Roles and Responsibilities with Agency/partner
Negotiation/Competition between communities and university personnel
Time and appropriate support

5.3 How might you better prepare for and pre-empt these in any future project(s)?

I think I might have benefited from a greater audit of my bid and some assistance to ensure the scope of the project was more appropriately costed.

5.4 Were there members of your team who struggled to engage with participants? What is their or your own account of this?

No.

5.5 Would you or your team have benefited from greater support or training? Suggest examples.

I think support in costing the project in greater detail.
A framework to cost “in-kind” contribution by the agency.

6. Outcomes

6.1 Has Beacon funding enabled you to communicate with a new audience, or in new ways?

“The Beacon funding created an opportunity for the Valleyskids project to enter into a genuine partnership with the university for the first time”

(comment by Head of Valleyskids)

Yes. A principle strength in securing the Beacon support seems to be the way in which it enabled the establishment of genuine status for the broader context to which
the young people were being invited (Glamorgan University/Cardiff). This appears to have had very positive spin-offs for the Flight Wings programme. Flight Wings co-ordinator Gemma Fraser Jones states that the promise of the possibility of working inside the university, with university personnel, has been a key factor to early engagement and to overall retention of the young people. Historically, the disparate nature of the young people in this age group across the three villages has meant that constant outreach has still faltered in building and maintaining momentum for the target group. It seems the larger context has enabled the Valleyskids staff to focus on outreach and participant support while the university team focused on delivering the arts-based part of the process.

Significant evidence is that the group is still meeting and on showing their second production at the end of August. Further, the art-worker, Gemma Fraser Jones, is working independently with the group and appears to be investing more time in creating the art than needing to recruit, retain, or engage. She has said that in this latest project there are now 17 young people (5 more than the Shrew project); the success of Shrew itself served as the key for these additional young people wanting to be engaged.

Finally, the Beacon funding also enabled small and meaningful internships for ex-university students to work alongside established artists, current students and the young people. These participants (the ex-students) are proving to be a link pin within the engagement process as they are flexible and have offered to maintain their involvement periodically as a volunteer. One was recently appointed as the apprentice artworker in Artworks.

6.2 Summarise the principal lessons learned from this exercise.

A significant lesson is about “engagement” generally: engagement processes are complex and phenomenological. The relationship with the community agency and key personnel requires delicate facilitation that appears to be almost entirely the responsibility of the University; or more accurately the individual.

Learning that the physical theatre methodology proposed was effective at a very high level for this age group has been a significant outcome. Integrating a physical basis to theatre-making offers a unique and effective way to engage the whole person in a range of challenging yet complimentary tasks in the developmental process of theatre making without the pressure of communication skills, literacy skills, well developed social skills.

Role definition and project management - roles and responsibilities need to be defined each phase and Projects need their costing interrogated in relation to the objectives of the project and the stakeholders.

Devising in theatre is an accessible, democratic, and liberating experience with long lasting benefits.

The more students need to help the more they learn.
Working under pressure, needing to make unexpected decisions, having resource constraints and conflict in teams all seem to make projects more satisfying in the end.

6.3 Can you identify any specific skills or attributes honed or discovered during the course of your project?

1. Refining the companion model for the purposes of creative development.
2. Directing physical process with non-actors for the purposes of making a performance.
3. Working nonverbally with young people who are more familiar with more verbal-text driven processes.

6.4 Has your research been enriched by this experience? If yes, how so?

Yes. I have long worked with physical theatre methods in a range of contexts but not had the chance to argue about the specifics of the efficacy on competence and capacity due to the method. In this process I have evidence of the profound impact of the nonverbal collaboration that occurs in ensemble processes that I can continue to explore.

6.5 Has this project allowed you to build new working relationships?

Certainly. I have built significant relationships with the students and ex students involved. I have built amazing connections with the young people but do not expect these to translate into relationships unless they come to university to study (or seek advice linked to this). My previous relationships with the Agency Team have been tested in a more complex professional context.

6.6 Were you able to identify yourself as working within a community-of-practice?

Yes. I think together we created a community of practice. However, there was little to time dedicate to talking and reflecting and building our common understanding – all the work to evaluate was done almost one-on-one or with small groups as people had little time. In fact I had little time too. One of the students made a significant comment at the end of the project.

“One thing I think was missing when I think about Atrium as a group of people in the project is that we should be more cohesive … we started at different times … for em we did not feel like a team of people” (S).

Comments by Artworks co-ordinator also suggest a weaknesses in the conceptualisation of the project as occurring within a community of practice was highlighted when the project was relocated to Soar Centre. A shift that demanded a
reconsideration of the lines of responsibility for ensuring best practice whether it is
within the University or within the agency premises.

“...In these changed circumstances more consideration of the ethical implications of
the change of circumstances and how this may impact on both teams was needed
between the agency (Artworks, Valleys Kids) and the University team” (Artworks co-
ordinator)

6.7 Overall, who were the main beneficiaries of your project?


6.8 Do you believe your engagement project will in any way impact your teaching?

As I have lots of engagement experience I do not anticipate a large impact but I do
think I will tell stories of the project, and use examples in my teaching.

6.9 To what extent were you able to attain dialogue?

Due to the nature of the project and the aspect of performance that we built in from
the outset, the project has created dialogue within the agency itself and in terms of
what had previously been expected of the young people, and how these expectations
were challenged and changed. They agency team feel that this also has flowed to
many of the wider community from the Rhondda who have been engaged in some
ways. A particularity of this dialogue has been repeated expressions of surprise that
“these” young people have been successful in the way that they have.

To a lesser extent there has been dialogue within the local student body.

I also think we attained dialogue (not always co-ordinated) within and among the
teams. During the intensive periods the young people were constantly engaged in a
dialogue but agency workers were not always integrated.

6.10 Do you think that your team and lay participants were mutually engaged?

Yes.

6.11 Has your project generated interest towards public engagement within your home School / Faculty / Department?

Not in a particularly new way. Theatre and Drama at Glamorgan is very active in
engagement. Colleagues have been very supportive and encouraging but not
necessarily inspired by my work alone.
Engaging the music staff may have more direct impact.

6.12 Have you received any form of acknowledgement, support, commendation from your Head of School / Faculty / Department?

Not specifically.
I prepared a press release for the CCI News which was published as the project was launched. On disseminated promotional material to colleagues across faculties which generated some comments of goodwill, for example one email response for receiving an invitation to the event stated:

    Hi Rea

    Good to know you're working in the Valleys. Unfortunately I cannot attend due to a prior engagement but I wish you all the very best for Friday night.

    C

6.13 Have colleagues, external to your project team, endorsed and encouraged your Beacon project?

A couple of colleagues attended the performance. As I report above, one or two others in the wider university community sent emails commending the work when they could not attend.

7. Future Horizons

7.1 Will you maintain relationships forged from the project? If so what mechanisms/strategy will you implement for sustainability?

There will be some association but I do not expect to have a large part to play as one of the objectives was to ensure I was dispensable and that the project was sustainable in my absence.

That said, I will make students available or encourage students to be available for participation in future flight wings productions under the direction of Gemma Fraser Jones. There is also the ongoing partnership I have with Artworks Coordinator Miranda Ballin in the creation of placement opportunities for drama students in the course of their studies in applied drama.

7.2 What guidance/caveats would you offer to any academic getting involved in public engagement?
As I have said before – project management (time), budget, and roles and responsibilities.

7.3 Do you anticipate that your project will have lasting impact? If so, what is its legacy?

Yes I think I feel able to make this claim and at the same time it is not necessarily linked to the work of Atrium, rather as the first production of the Flight Wings group I think Reclaiming the Shrew and the Beacon Engagement project will be always part of the narrative of the group, and that the methodology I shared will in some way become part of the infrastructure of the group method. For example, when asked about their second production, the group requested that the physical basis of the work be retained.

7.4 Do you anticipate conducting or participating in similar projects in the future?

Yes, I do. I do not expect to work with the same audience. But who knows.

7.5 Are you enthused by the prospect of future engagement work?

At present, I would not undertake anything for 2010/2011, as I need a break and to attend to other things. But with a better budget I would definitely consider something for mid to late 2011/2012.

7.6 Given the opportunity to do this project again, what would you do differently?

Conduct the entire project in the University. Engage more interns. Make more decisions about delegating artistic and production roles earlier.

7.7 Are there aspects of the project which remain incomplete or could benefit from further investigation / follow-up?

I am still to finalise the Documentary and have struggled to supervise the film students without a film colleague involved.

7.8 Do you have wider dissemination activity planned post-project?

I have thought to publish some findings but I am not sure about this yet as I need to discuss it with the agency and the young people and to consider the benefits to them if I do so.
THANK YOU for completing this Evaluation Report. PLEASE direct any questions to Dr Richard Watermeyer at WatermeyerRP@cardiff.ac.uk.

Preapred by: Dr Rea Dennis rdennis@glam.ac.uk 24 September 2010