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EVENT REVIEW

'Born of Coal' – Project Report

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In May 2014, the University of Sheffield's *Engaged Curriculum* initiative (also known as 'Engaged Learning') awarded funding for a small-grant project entitled 'Filmmaking and the Engaged Curriculum', an undergraduate research project supervised by Dr David Forrest and Professor Brendan Stone (both School of English) and undertaken by the author of this article. The project ran from July 2014 until September 2014, and sought to explore the potential role of filmmaking within the University's curriculum, through an investigation into the empirical effects of the 1984-85 Miners' Strike – and the subsequent process of post-industrialisation – on the present sense of community spirit and resilience in an ex-mining town: Barnsley, South Yorkshire.

'Filmmaking and the Engaged Curriculum' can be broken up into four phases:

- 1) **The Interviewing Phase** – nine long-standing residents of Barnsley were interviewed and audio-visually recorded in places they felt comfortable (i.e. their living rooms; their place of work; etc.);
- 2) **The Gathering Phase** – contemporary and archival film material was collected; the latter of which, accrued via the establishment of new collaborative links between the researcher and external partners, included the *Yorkshire Film Archive* and the *Barnsley Archives & Local Studies*;

- 3) **The Composition Phase** – material from phases 1) and 2) were compiled and arranged into *Born of Coal* (2014): a 50-minute ‘ethno-documentary’ intended to be shared between both participants and wider audiences;¹
- 4) **The Dissemination Phase** – a shortened edit of *Born of Coal* was screened at a ‘This is our City: Sheffield on Film’ event at the Showroom in May 2015; before the full-length film was exhibited on *YouTube* and the *Storying Sheffield* website in August 2015.²

Whilst the film was initially intended as a means of communicating the unheard voices of post-industrial Barnsley to an audience unfamiliar with its contemporary social climate, *Born of Coal*’s greatest achievement has been in its ability to build a further sense of community within the area itself.

The *Engaged Curriculum*

The *Engaged Curriculum* initiative, also referred to as ‘Engaged Learning’, publically began as an online blog in June 2014.³ By that point, several developmental projects across the University, including ‘Filmmaking and the Engaged Curriculum’, had successfully received small grants to pursue ideas around the academic concept of an ‘Engaged Curriculum’ – a mode of learning built on a foundation of public and civic engagement between University researchers, and external communities and partners.

¹ Ryan Bramley, ‘Looking back on ‘Filmmaking and the Engaged Curriculum’: Why I’m so proud of *Born of Coal*’, *Engaged Curriculum Wordpress* (2014) <<https://engagedcurriculum.wordpress.com/2014/12/08/looking-back-on-filmmaking-and-the-engaged-curriculum-why-im-so-proud-of-born-of-coal/>> [accessed 16 May 2016].

² Showroom Workstation, ‘This is our City: Sheffield on Film’, *Showroom Workstation* (2015) <<http://www.showroomworkstation.org.uk/thisisourcity>> [accessed 16 May 2016], *Storying Sheffield*, ‘Born of Coal’, *Youtube* (2015) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqHPgVA1c5w>> [accessed 16 May 2016], *Storying Sheffield*, ‘Born of Coal’, *Storying Sheffield* (2015) <<http://www.storyingsheffield.com/stories/born-of-coal/>> [accessed 16 May 2016].

³ Engaged Curriculum, ‘Welcome to the blog’, *Wordpress* (2014) <<https://engagedcurriculum.wordpress.com/2014/06/>> [accessed 16 May 2016].

Since then, the *Engaged Learning Sheffield* publication has been launched (in November 2015), outlining the ways in which such funded University of Sheffield projects have enhanced the opportunities for ‘co-production and community in education’, both within the academic curriculum and extra-curricular.⁴ The ‘Engaged Learning Sheffield Network’ has also been established as an interactive forum for the sharing of ideas and experiences related to engaged learning and teaching and, in particular, as a method of facilitating ‘the development of supportive interactions’.⁵

The aims of ‘Filmmaking and the Engaged Curriculum’

Fitting in line with the early aims of the *Engaged Curriculum* initiative, the ‘Filmmaking and the Engaged Curriculum’ project sought to explore a contemporary social research question: Do the people of Barnsley feel that the sense of community in their area has changed since the Miners’ Strike of 1984-5 (and subsequent de-industrialization) – and if so, for better or for worse?

To rephrase this in terms addressable to an interviewee, the question was asked to (and extensively explored by) participants thusly: Do you think believe the sense of community in Barnsley has changed since the days of the Miners’ Strike, when the pits were still open? (And if so: how has it changed?)

Inherently, this original social question was not one that could have been effectively answered without a new co-productive engagement with the community in question. Whilst similar themes may have been touched upon by other academic projects, past and present (most recently, the AHRC-funded ‘Working with Social

⁴ Engaged Learning Sheffield, *Co-production and community in education at the University of Sheffield*, *The University of Sheffield* <<https://issuu.com/engagedlearning/docs/engagedlearning>> [accessed 16 May 2016].

⁵ The University of Sheffield, ‘Engaged Learning Sheffield Network’, *The University of Sheffield* (2016) <<http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/als/current/engaged/network>> [accessed 16 May 2016].

Haunting’ project led by Geoff Bright), it is highly probable that this specific question in its entirety has never been asked of the people of Barnsley by an academic researcher before.⁶ New questions, as ever, present the prospect of new and enlightening answers, as the ‘Filmmaking and the Engaged Curriculum’ project later discovered.

Methodology:

1) Film practice-as-research

The term ‘practice-as-research’ as a whole is one particularly used in relation to particular arts practices at university level.⁷ Primary examples can be typically found in most performing arts departments (for example University theatre schools), where creative outputs (namely performance pieces) are seen as a necessity to research in that field.⁸ Outside of the arts, the practice of film production is now generally perceived as a valuable mode of practice-as-research enquiry across a variety of disciplines including geography, ethnography and, in the case of ‘Filmmaking and the Engaged Curriculum’, English Literature studies.⁹ Whilst semantic arguments surrounding the categorisation of ‘practice-as-research’ have

⁶ Working with social haunting, ‘Working with social haunting archive’, *Tumblr* (2016) <http://workingwithsocialhaunting.tumblr.com> [accessed 16 May 2016], The Education and Social Research Institute’s Blog, ‘Social Haunting: Talking To The Ghosts Of Our Past’, *ESRI Blog* (2016) <<http://www.esriblog.info/social-haunting-talking-to-the-ghosts-of-our-past/>> [accessed 16 May 2016].

⁷ Johannes Sjoberg and Jenny Hughes, ‘Practice as Research’, *The University of Manchester* (No date) <<http://www.methods.manchester.ac.uk/resources/categories/qualitative/practice/>> [accessed 16 May 2016].

⁸ Desmond Bell, ‘Creative film and media practice as research: In pursuit of that obscure object of knowledge’, *Journal of Media Practice*, 7.2 (2006) <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1386/jmpr.7.2.85_1> [accessed 16 May 2016].

⁹ Bradley L. Garrett, ‘Moving Geographies: Film and Video as Research Method’, *Place Hacking* (2010) <<http://www.placehacking.co.uk/2010/12/13/moving-geographies-film-video-research-method/>> [accessed 16 May 2016].

been previously made, with a particular reference to the difference between ‘practice-led research’ (for which a creative artefact is the basis of knowledge contribution) and ‘practice-based research’ (in which new understandings about practice are developed), this report will settle for the broader term of ‘practice-as-research’, given that the project in question has incorporated both elements to some degree.¹⁰

2) Co-production

‘Co-production’ is a long-standing model of academic research that has often been overlooked as a less valuable academic practice than more traditional research methods in the past, as reflected by academic funding trends. However, it has developed a great deal of recognition and attention over the past year, both institutionally (as one of the University of Sheffield’s new ‘Principles of Engaged Learning and Teaching’) and cross-institutionally (as exemplified by the N8/ESRC Research Programme Report on the potential of co-productive practice, published in January 2016).¹¹ ‘Filmmaking and the Engaged Curriculum’ sought to align itself with this movement in order to optimise benefit, not just for the research itself, but for all of those who were involved.

In its most simplistic form, co-production in academia is a way of removing barriers between researchers (i.e. academics) and non-researchers (e.g. practitioners, external partners, communities, etc.) by recognising the unique and valuable

¹⁰ Creativity and Cognition Studios, ‘Differences between practice-based and practice-led research’, *Creative and Cognition* (No date) <<http://www.creativityandcognition.com/research/practice-based-research/differences-between-practice-based-and-practice-led-research/>> [accessed 16 May 2016].

¹¹ The University of Sheffield, ‘Principles of Engaged Learning and Teaching’, *The University of Sheffield* (2016) <<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/als/current/engaged/principles>> [accessed 16 May 2016], Heather Campbell and Dave Vanderhoven, *Knowledge That Matters: Realising the Potential of Co-Production* (Manchester: N8 Research Partnership, 2016).

contributions that the public can make to enhance academic research projects.¹² Via proper use of this model, non-researchers are seen in a more empowering light, not as *laypeople* (a term which perpetuates the dichotomy of privileged researcher and under-privileged research subject/partner), but rather as ‘experts by experience’ – just as academic researchers are seen as ‘experts by training’ (thus retaining the prestige of the latter, without underestimating the former).¹³

Effective co-productive practice should strive towards the ideal of ‘equality of benefit’ for both the researcher and the external partner.¹⁴ For example, the principle product of ‘Filmmaking and the Engaged Curriculum’, the film *Born of Coal*, was made publically available, whilst the full unedited edition from each individual interview was offered to the relevant participant of the project as a personal keepsake. Thus, what initially began as a short-term, typically once-only engagement with participants from an external community has continued into more long-term interactions between them and the researcher (and, more broadly, the University of Sheffield itself); some of those conversations are still on-going at the time of writing.

3) Participant Selection

Quite simply, participants were selected on a basis of internal relation to the researcher. Whilst this often involved the creation of new partnerships, such as links with the Thurnscoe Harmonic Male Voice Choir and the Dodworth Colliery Brass Band, there was a strong reliance on prior knowledge, social understanding and

¹² Rural Economy and Land Use Programme, *Common knowledge? An exploration of knowledge transfer*, The University of Newcastle (2007) <<http://www.relu.ac.uk/news/briefings/RELUBrief6%20Common%20Knowledge.pdf>> [accessed 16 May 2016] (p.6).

¹³ The British Psychological Society, ‘Re-visioning Mental Health through Coproduction’, *KC Jones* (2016) <<http://www.kc-jones.co.uk/coproduction>> [accessed 16 May 2016].

¹⁴ David Forrest, ‘Filmmaking and the Engaged Curriculum’, in *Co-production and community in education at the University of Sheffield*, ed. by Engaged Learning Sheffield (Sheffield: The University of Sheffield, 2015) pp. 42-43 (p.42).

connections internally within the research demographic. Whilst this rather ad-hoc nature of participant selection initially raised some ethical concerns, exemplified by feedback from the project's declined funding application from the SURE (Sheffield Undergraduate Research Experience) scheme prior to the successful bid for an *Engaged Curriculum* grant, the project was nonetheless approved by the University's Ethics Approval Panel.

Indeed, in one case – as briefly described in one of my reflective project blog posts, which I shall draw on in more depth later in this report – one project participant actually explained that he would not have participated in the project had he not known me personally prior to it. This is a point that deserves to be underscored. Whilst an internal connection to the communities we co-productively conduct research with is not a necessity to such research, it should be valued and encouraged, rather than unrecognised and, in some cases, avoided – particularly in areas, such as Barnsley, where access to higher education is relatively limited. For all participants, regardless of any interaction that may have occurred previous to this project, this was their first engagement with me as both an academic researcher and a representative of the University of Sheffield.

Born of Coal (2014)

In the interviewing phase, all of the nine participants of the 'Filmmaking and the Engaged Curriculum' project were made fully aware, via the required ethics application process, that the end product of this research project would be a feature-length film, *Born of Coal*, which would be shared with the public. Given this, I was pleasantly surprised to see how comfortable my participants were on camera – particularly given that the majority of them had never been formally recorded before.

Ensuring that the participant is comfortable in sharing their stories with the researcher, by establishing a construct of trust between the two parties, is an essential component of ‘Engaged Learning’ research – especially if those stories are centred on uncomfortable events, such as the ‘Miners’ Strike’.

Being able to trust the researcher allowed the participants to speak freely about difficult experiences. I believe that the internal connection between the researcher and the community the research situated itself within, as previously explained under the ‘Participant Selection’ heading, was key to obtaining the participants’ trust. Therefore, a sufficient amount of valuable interview material was accrued to make *Born of Coal* a documentary film whose narrative was led by the narratives of the people depicted within it. Those narratives were complemented by archival material (including Strike photographs from *Barnsley Archive and Local Studies*; local media coverage of the Strike from *Yorkshire Film Archive*), rather than inhibited by it. Having a loose film production framework which established the ‘why’ (a single primary research question) and the ‘what’ (the production of a film) without necessarily setting out the ‘how’ (how the material would be used in the film) allowed the composition of the film to adapt and be influenced as the interview footage was gradually received.

Born of Coal, as a composite of contemporary and archival footage and material, makes a conscious connection between Barnsley’s community spirit in the mid-1980s, and the sense of community that exists three decades on from the Strike. Other contemporaneous films that have depicted the Strike from a twenty-first-century perspective, such as the documentary *Still the Enemy Within* (2014) and the historical comedy-drama *Pride* (2014), have also drawn this association, but through an often overly nostalgic lens that sees the Miners’ Strike as the primary focus. Whilst these perspectives remain important, they often fail to establish the social effects that

were felt by ex-mining communities following 1985, when pits began to close in the coalfields. *Born of Coal*, then, is more aligned with the University of Leeds' *Strike Stories* films (c.2009), in particular, the films *Rubble* and *If You Didn't Know, You Wouldn't Know*, which similarly sought to explore contemporary community issues in West and South Yorkshire respectively and can be traced back to the Strike and its ensuing aftermath.¹⁵

However, one key difference that separates *Born of Coal* from the *Strike Stories* is the conscious inclusion of the researcher's own perspective. As someone who grew up in Barnsley myself, I felt it almost impossible to do a film about the same community I have grown up in without putting forward my own thoughts. Indeed, in an early supervisory meeting for the 'Filmmaking and the Engaged Curriculum' project, Brendan Stone recommended that I find a way of including my own observations overtly within the film. I chose, therefore, to create my own poetic narrative voice-over, which acted as both a cohesive element that drew the interview chapters together and a creatively voiced representation of my own reactions to the research as the project developed.

These poetic interludes also fit in with the definitions of 'co-production' and 'collaboration'. To put my opinions out into the public sphere was a task I found incredibly difficult (and even more difficult to listen back to), but to ask my participants to tell their narratives and not offer my own in return felt somewhat unethical and unequal. To co-produce narratives, however, has enabled a stronger solidarity between researcher and non-researcher participants, whilst retaining an academic distance. Combining professional practice with personal stimulus and interest has enabled the formation of trustworthy relationships and, subsequently, the

¹⁵ School of Media and Communication, 'Strike Stories – Films', *The University of Leeds* (2016) <<http://media.leeds.ac.uk/research/research-projects/strike-stories-films/>> [accessed 16 May 2016].

co-production of more authentic narratives in *Born of Coal*. This balance between the professional academic and the personal researcher is vital to any ‘Engaged Learning’ project which seeks to involve external partners and communities.

Reflections & Outcomes

When the Engaged Curriculum initiative initially awarded funding for this project back in May 2014, two amendments to the original project plan devised by myself and David Forrest were suggested by the appraisal panel.

The first proposed that the researcher should produce a ‘short how-to guide for other [film] practitioners/students’ (personal communication, 22 May, 2014), so that others may be encouraged to pursue similar research projects in the future. Written in a similar manner to the weekly reflective research journal tasks assigned to undergraduate students participating in project modules with the University of Sheffield’s School of English (e.g. the ‘Storying Sheffield’ second-year module; the ‘Hearing Community Stories’ third-year module; etc.), the written and audio-visually recorded entries of the ‘Filmmaking and The Engaged Curriculum’ blog frame the internal, individualistic perspectives of the research project with an empirical approach to applied logic and theory surrounding narratology, ethnography, and film practice-as-research methodologies.¹⁶

In retrospect, the production of this reflective journal helped to frame my own personal and academic development, as well as that of the project itself. However, fitting in-line with the previous definitions of co-productive practice, these findings – made whilst the research project was in progress – have been written in terms more accessible to the general public, as opposed to just other academic researchers. This

¹⁶ School of English, ‘Storying Sheffield – Telling Untold Tales’, *The University of Sheffield* (2016) <<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/english/school/story>> [accessed 16 May 2016].

analytical transparency was vital in meeting the terms of the second funding proposition put forward by the appraisal panel, which considered the possible ways in which external links made with the co-productive community could be maintained beyond the duration of the project (personal communication, May 22, 2014). Being able to present the external non-researcher participants of this ‘Engaged Learning’ research with the findings the researcher has made, including the film, the project blogs and this report, is a sustainable method of stimulating further conversations around the project, as well as creating the potential to facilitate new connections with other interested parties within that community, which can often lead to follow-on projects.

This often overcomes the feeling that can be experienced by external co-producers when the discussions decline after the project is completed, namely that they have simply been used for their data (as a textbook would be used) and nothing more. This experience not only poses significant ethical pitfalls, but also risks jeopardising the reputation of the involved researcher, the research field, and the academic institution. Any academic project that looks to involve external partners and communities must therefore seek to address how maintainable long-term partnerships can be established from the project’s outset.

In terms of other long-term project outcomes, ‘Filmmaking and the Engaged Curriculum’ has proved to be very successful, at times in ways other than the researcher initially intended. At the time of writing, the film had received over 600 views on YouTube since it was released in August 2015.¹⁷ Thus, it can be argued that the film has succeeded in providing a platform for the voices of a community, which is often underrepresented in mainstream national media outlets, to be heard more

¹⁷ Storying Sheffield, ‘Born of Coal’, *Youtube* (2015)
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqHPgVA1c5w>> [accessed 16 May 2016].

broadly both in-of and outside that community, albeit by a relatively modest number of people. This can be seen as a positive, short-term surface outcome.

However, deeper positive outcomes have been simultaneously achieved through the production and distribution of *Born of Coal* in the long-term. This researcher has noticed – rather ironically, given that the majority of his participants believed the sense of community in Barnsley was, to use one interviewee’s terms, ‘dead and gone’ – that a community of participation and viewership has been built around the dissemination of the film. After watching the completed film in its entirety, a significant volume of my interviewees commented in follow-up meetings on the apparent similarities between their experience of the Miners’ Strike and the experiences of other participants based in other pit villages of the region during the 1980s. In one particular participant’s case, during an off-camera discussion in December 2015 (a few months after the film was released), the parallels that were drawn between the experiencers of the strike, and the same experiencers of the pit-closure process that gradually followed, appeared to retrospectively make that individual feel less socially isolated and more socially aware of similarly life-changing experiences that affected other people in that area.¹⁸ Furthermore, the participant expressed that he/she felt the watching of the film to be a therapeutic exercise; indeed, they had already watched the film several times since its public release.

Whilst I acknowledge that these claims are made without direct reference or evidence (primarily for ethical reasons), this discussion about the personally and communally beneficial outcomes for participants in a filmmaking project has substantially informed my subsequent and successful application for an ESRC-funded

¹⁸ The participant being discussed here has chosen to remain anonymous for the purposes of this article.

1+3 PhD Studentship. The project, entitled ‘Filmmaking as a Community-Building Practice’, commences in October 2016. This forthcoming PhD project would not have been possible without *Born of Coal*, such is the academic value of an ‘Engaged Learning’ project.

Conclusions

The importance of ‘Filmmaking and the Engaged Curriculum’ (and more broadly, of Engaged Curriculum & Learning) has been outlined throughout this project report. The use of filmmaking as a practice-as-research methodology has been briefly explored, whilst the co-productive model for research has been emphasised as a method of generating unique and informative knowledge. At Sheffield co-production values the contributions of external non-researchers working in partnership with academic researchers, whilst also striving to make the research itself more accessible to external communities and partners akin to (and including) those we work with. The production of *Born of Coal* has produced long-term benefits for all three vital components to co-productive research: the academic researcher as expert by training, the non-researcher participants as experts by experience, and the research field itself as an amalgamation of the two aforementioned elements.

‘Born of Coal’ is available to view via the Storying Sheffield website:

www.storyingsheffield.com/stories/born-of-coal/.

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My thanks also go to the *Storying Sheffield* website, which has hosted my film online since August 2015. The second-year undergraduate module of the same name, which David and Brendan both convened when I undertook it in Spring 2014, brought me to the idea of conducting this research in the first place. *Storying Sheffield* instilled me with the belief that university projects which engaged members of the wider community were not only valued by the institution, but valuable to the research field itself.

Finally, my special thanks to the other external organisations involved in the project: *Yorkshire Film Archive* (archival footage), *Barnsley Archives and Local Studies* (research and archived photographs), And finally, *The Dodworth Colliery Miners’ Welfare Brass Band* and *The Thurnscoe Harmonic Male Voice Choir* (for kindly allowing me to visit and record their rehearsal sessions).