The Fabric of the Community

Anna Louise Spencer
The Fabric of the Community

My research inquiry considers the fabric of the community as a basis for human flourishing. Through gathering and collaboratively re-telling the threads of local stories, I hope to weave a sense of shared identity, common purpose and collective capacity for meaningful social change.

Just as the clans were known by their tartan fabric; uniquely dyed by the flora and fauna of their environment so I believe the local communities of the Highlands and Islands can find themselves in the re-claiming of their narrative fabric.

And in so doing, play a central role in addressing the question of ‘How innovation of and through design can transform the creative capacity of the Highlands and Island communities towards sustainable socio-cultural and economic development?’
Defining myself within one discipline has often felt limiting, and the move towards ‘unity of intellectual frameworks beyond… disciplinary perspectives’ (Buckler 2004) is liberating - I will consider the strands of my own creative practice in relation to the strands of the research intention and the strands of the outworking of the inquiry.

Woven through these stands are seven thematic threads drawn from my experience to date.
The Weft

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Stages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Informal Educator</td>
<td>Play, Imagine and Critical Reason</td>
<td>Research Stages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storyteller</td>
<td>Gathering Stories</td>
<td>Data Collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Worker</td>
<td>Co-Production</td>
<td>Community Led Inquiry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Producer</td>
<td>Collaborative Retelling of the Stories</td>
<td>Sharing Preliminary Data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network Co-ordinator</td>
<td>Valuing Existing Culture</td>
<td>Identifying Contexts for Sustainability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory Facilitator</td>
<td>Investing in Local Ideas</td>
<td>Develop Community Capacity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Activist</td>
<td>Proximity &amp; Association</td>
<td>Academic Settlement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
My primary practice is as an informal educator and I will draw on the emancipatory, conscious and co-creating capacity of education (Friere 2007) as a foundation for this research. Steiner offers play, imagination and critical reason (Mc Dermott 2009) as the stages of its schooling and I would like to mirror these with an Appreciative Inquiry by valuing, envisioning, discussing and innovating (Cooperrider & Srivastva 1987) through this research.
I will use my experience of making relational connections and encouraging imagination in local contexts to enable communities to take a creative, hands on approach to social renewal and recognise education as a ‘process of living and not a preparation for future living.’

Just like the local young people at this participatory planning session I hosted as part of a research and development initiative where they took the lead in shaping services for young people in their community.
In much of my work, I share stories, find ideas and communicate concepts so gathering stories is a natural way for me to collect a sense of identity and interests from the threads of experience offered by the community to form a piece of Multi-Site Action Research (Fuller-Rowell 2009)
I am interested in uncovering the narrative as told by the people who inhabit a place rather than mainstream ideas presented by external dominant voices.

As well as people’s stories, I am also interested in the language of the landscape (McFarlane 2015) and the traces of humanity left on both the natural and built environment observed through ethnographic inquiry.

Like my role with Dale Force! supporting communities across rural County Durham to reclaim heritage crafts to connect local young people’s future to the richness of their communities’ past.
Drawing on my youth work practice I recognise the importance of acting as a ‘translator, interpreter and broker’ (Erskine 2014) to enable meaningful involvement of marginal cultures within professional, academic and strategic contexts valuing the importance of experts by experience as well as experts by profession.

I will use a co-produced community inquiry knitting together divergent view points as a method for fostering durable socio-economic fabric. I will consider ‘economics as if people mattered’ by ‘joining with
[others] in a common task; [of bringing] forth the goods and services needed for a becoming existence.’ (Schumacher 2010)

I have seen the potential of this approach, whether with people marginalised by their own antisocial behaviour creating an exploded shed installation or people isolated by their lived experiences of mental health using those experiences to create awareness training and leadership courses to improve services for others.
As a creative producer, I bring together different strands of work into coherent sharings, be that publication, exhibition or performance. I will use this practice to share preliminary data through collaborative retellings of the stories gathered recognising that in action research, ‘knowledge creation is a collaborative process.’ (McNiff & Whitehead 2006)

I believe complex social dynamics will be better articulated and understood through the re-imagining of familiar narratives using regionally inspired material and digital practices.
I believe these expressions of experience will bring to life truth from within the community as well as developing agency and ownership for those who have shared them and enable widespread engagement with ‘data through fabrication.’ (Nissen 2015)

Like the creative manifesto for a city which included tents, treasure chests, lanterns and sculptures all made with the opinions and aspirations of people for the place where they live.
In coordinating networks across different settings, I know the benefit of valuing and investing in existing social dynamics and building on them as contexts for sustainability as the most effective ‘mode of human organising [is] rooted in the experience of everyday life.’ (Ward 1973)

I hope to esteem the weak and small things of local life as significant yet overlooked contributors to the renewal of communities. (Critchley 2012, Milgrim 1967)
The values of hospitality, invitation and the common act of sharing food will play an important part in building representative and reflective groups who can enable ongoing local innovation.

Like the NE-Generation network of young people and creative practitioners across the North East which was founded through a series of weekend residential and went on to share best practice and resources across the region and beyond.
As a facilitator in participatory settings, I know that having a group of people isn’t enough in and of itself, those people need to feel confident and be equipped to meaningfully engage for equality of participation. (Arnstein 1969)

I will invest in local ideas which have been highlighted through the gathering and retelling of stories and develop the creative capacity of the community through hosting conversation and using open space techniques to bring shared understanding and the continued formation of new ideas.
This will allow new topics to be discussed in familiar circles towards a learning community for reflective practice valuing ‘emergence…interactions [and] self-organisation.’ (Geyer & Rihani 2010)

Like the significant progress which was made through the investment into a core group of creative young people who went on to host national conferences, launch best practice guides and influence future policy.
The Settlement Movement, gave me a historical framework for the ‘alternative creative tradition’ (Jeffs and Gilchrist 2001) of research coexisting with local community which has been a key facet of my community activism.

The values of ‘proximity’ (Wilson 2012) and association with otherness found in modern expressions of the settlement movement are important for research to be truly embedded in community, practice and theory.
This overlapping of worlds will be the legacy of the research for sustainable innovation and continued human flourishing as the community voice gains parity of esteem for its unique contribution alongside those established voices of policy makers, designers and academics.

I have seen first-hand the shift in respect and depth of insight you receive locally by being resident in a place and being committed to matters of local interests in their own right, rather than for your own ends.
I would like to explore the bardic nature of the researcher as one ‘who works with the arts to conscientise [the] community in ways that liberate the flow of life’ as they weave stories and ‘therefor help to weave [lives] together.’ (McIntosh & Carmichael 2015)

I will use poetic reflective responses during my research to creatively capture ethnographic insight recognising the bard as one who walks between the worlds of the now and the not yet, voicing things that the collective consciousness is not yet ready to utter, or may not even know it is looking for.
Steiner’s principles of anthroposophy deepens reflection (Kolb 1984; Schon 1983) to a ‘spiritual world [accessible] by direct experience’ cultivating a ‘perceptive imagination, inspiration and intuition’ that is ‘independent of sensory experience.’ (McDermott 2009)

Embracing the significance of the soul for our society and soil brings an interconnection to this research. (McIntosh 2012)

Drawing on the bardic tradition allows the exploration of untold stories and perspectives (Gregory 2015) not seeking to regress to a bygone era but ‘suggesting that the past should be carried forward to inform the future.’ (McIntosh 2004)
Patterns & Perspective

Throughout the research I will follow the emerging threads and allow people and places to reveal themselves through gathered and retold stories.

By layering these stories together I will look for recurring narrative themes which become evident as ‘linked patterns of interaction’ (Diani and McAdam 2003) emerging like the visual frequency of the moiré effect which on a micro scale may seem like imperfections but with the benefit of perspective can be appreciated as positive aspects of community which are not yet celebrated.

Through a phenomenological approach to data analysis I will derive meaning as I rationalise ethnography, my practice and the experiences of the community.

This attention to visual and narrative resonance will ‘engage the particular to illustrate the general’ (McIntosh 2004) by highlighting universal patterns drawn from the specific threads which makes up the fabric of the community.
http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic733185.files/Buckler.pdf
169). Stamford, CT: JAI Press.
Books.
Dewey, J. (1916), Democracy and Education. An introduction to the philosophy of education
Press.
Neighbours, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers
New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc.
Century. Steiner Books
Devon: Green Books
Books
Nissen, B. (2015) Data Things: Engaging People with Data Through Fabrication -
https://makingdatathings.wordpress.com/
Smith.
Collins, Perennial Edition
Trust.