

Connected Communities

University of the Village

Professor M Wilson



Background

Executive Summary

University of the Village was collaboration between the Universities of Falmouth, Surrey and Glamorgan and BT and interrogated the barriers facing rural communities in accessing university outreach programmes by exploring new modes of delivery, enhanced through Superfast Broadband. Principally it explored new ways of developing and delivering provision through a partnership model of universities and rural communities working together with internet providers and other local businesses. The project also proposed a learning model which focused upon community, rather than the individual and a creative, co-designed curriculum.

The project worked with three village communities - St. Agnes (Cornwall); Ystrad Mynach (Wales); and Fernhurst (Surrey) - over a period of twelve months. The nature of the engagement differed between communities and was subject to the robustness of the broadband service, as well as additional local factors that affected the context of the engagements. There was limited success in our ability to connect the three communities together, but the project produced a set of highly successful outcomes, including additional activity within communities and insights into the benefits of superfast broadband for both universities and rural communities. It also successfully demonstrated the use of additional bandwidth to create co-presence in an online environment.

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Key words

Superfast Broadband

Rural communities

Creative economy

Technology-enhanced learning

University outreach

Co-designed curricula

Summary Report

Outline

The research teams from each university identified potential community partners and made contact with key community members to discuss the project in principle. At the same time, BT explored timescales for superfast broadband connectivity within those communities. Individual community meetings were then held to discuss more broadly with community members the nature of the activity that they would wish to be involved in and begin to co-design the engagement.

In St Agnes in Cornwall, the focus of the activity was to be on film-making, as the community were keen to develop content for a planned village app. A curriculum was co-designed to allow lecturing staff to deliver a series of workshops from a base at Falmouth University to the Driftwood Spars Public House that taught participants the techniques, skills and processes for the pre-production, shooting and post-production stages of film-making. The participants were provided with Flip cameras and also taught to use some new editing software that had been developed at the University. At the end of the process, the participants produced a short film which has been shown within the village and also posted on YouTube (currently 1458 views) and the University website.

In Ystrad Mynach the engagement was made through the team of community outreach workers and the co-designed focus of the activity was on the making of a number of digital stories that could be used to promote an image of the community (and the skills, experiences and activities within it) to a wider audience in particular through the envisaged fibre optic enabled live link up with other participants in the project. The location for the

activity was the local primary school, which also functioned as a community/learning centre in the evenings. Participants received a series of workshops on digital story-making via a broadband link to the University of Glamorgan and produced four digital stories: one that focussed on bee-keeping by Ken Jones called 'A Hive of Local Knowledge', a second on allotment ownership, one made by the Ystrad Mynach Male Voice Choir about its work and a further film made by the local Primary School. All this material is available on Vimeo and is available to share with participants in other communities.

Fernhurst proved to be the most challenging of the community engagements, not through any fault of the community nor the research team, but through the challenges of securing a robust broadband connection. The early engagements with the community were successful and an activity was co-designed that would bring together dance teachers at the University of Surrey with youth groups in Fernhurst. There were, however, technical problems relating to the supply of superfast broadband to the designated community venues, which meant that the availability of the broadband service was not delivered according to the original planned schedule. A number of alternative venues were sought, but the practical problems were not able to be solved before the end of the project. Nevertheless, valuable lessons were learned from this (see below).

At the end of the project, an event was organised that would create a live link between the communities in St Agnes and Ystrad Mynach whereby they would share their outputs with each other and discuss the process live. Unfortunately, on the night there was a break in the broadband connection in Ystrad Mynach that could not be easily repaired. Instead the two communities

watched each other's films off-line and feedback was gathered by the teams and given to each other at a later meeting.

Learning from experience in engaging with communities

Although similar in size and rurality, the three villages involved in this project were very different communities with different infrastructures and, at the time of the project, were at different stages of broadband roll-out. The engagement with the village of St Agnes was perhaps the smoothest of all the engagements and the work there developed a real momentum of its own. It is almost certainly not coincidental that at the beginning of the project St Agnes was the one community that already had superfast broadband installed and available. Even so, there were occasionally technical issues at St Agnes and this was very disruptive to the activity when it happened. Ystrad Mynach needed to have a broadband connection installed at the school and, whilst this was achieved, it involved lengthy negotiations with the Local Education Authority who operated strict protocols regarding the availability of internet services. As previously mentioned, the problems in getting broadband to the community venue in Fernhurst ultimately frustrated the activity plans there. The learning from this experience is that the quality of the engagement in this kind of work is so dependent on the robustness of the broadband service, that the availability of an existing, established, robust connection should be a prerequisite to engagement, rather than using the engagement as a justification for broadband roll-out.

A key part of the success of the project was, according to focus group discussions

conducted by BT and Falmouth University, due to the process of co-design of the activity/curriculum by the academics and the community in partnership. At the beginning of the project most participants had had limited previous engagement with their local universities and their expectations were of a top-down approach whereby the curriculum was predetermined by the university and presented to participants as a non-negotiable offer. The process of co-design and negotiation challenged preconceptions that the community had about the university and allowed for a much greater sense of co-ownership and partnership. It also facilitated an engagement that was more responsive to the needs and aspirations of the community. We would suggest that the co-design and partnership model is one that can be productive for community working by challenging the perceived hierarchies between universities and their non-academic constituencies.

Outcomes and potential benefits for communities and other stakeholders

The project has identified a number of benefits for all the stakeholders in the project. Firstly it has demonstrated potential new models of engagement for universities and rural communities and this could have benefits for both parties, allowing local communities to more easily access the resources and expertise that exist in their local university, whilst at the same time allowing universities to better serve their local communities and their economies. It also showed the potential for how university-community engagements can help unlock the creative and cultural capital within rural

communities. The experience in Ystrad Mynach placed a special emphasis on the importance of the sharing of local knowledge and the potential this provides to develop social and intellectual capital in communities. The project is about the University of the Village not the University and the Village or the University in the Village.

From a technical point of view, we have demonstrated that the additional bandwidth that comes with Next Generation Broadband can provide a co-presence experience that greatly improves the quality of the interactions between teacher and student when they are both differently located. Workshop participants were surprised at how easily the interactions took place, once the pixellations and break-ups normally associated with trying to multistream too much data down too narrow a bandwidth are removed. In doing so, all stakeholders were able to see the possibilities for new kinds of activity that might be possible with superfast broadband.

One concrete outcome from the project has been the establishment of other technology-enhanced activities at the Driftwood Spars Inn at St Agnes. The pub has long had a productive relationship with St Austell Brewery (which also is a wine merchant and supplies the pub with its wines). The pub has in the past run wine dinners to coincide with a visit to Cornwall by a visiting winegrower, sponsored by the brewery. Typically, a menu is designed around the winegrower's wines and the winegrower attends the dinner to introduce each wine with each course. These events are an important part of the Driftwood Spars's business, especially in these times of recession, where the pub is continually trying to broaden its offer in order to secure its income streams.

Having seen the film-making course being delivered, the pub – with the support of the University – employed the technology to host a wine dinner that linked via broadband to a winegrower at his vineyard in New Zealand. This was the first time that such an event had been conducted in that way and it attracted significant interest in the wine press. The event was hugely successful and has resulted in a similar event for technology journalists (hosted by Superfast Cornwall to promote the roll-out project in Cornwall) which linked to a vineyard in France. A further event linking to a Canadian brewery is planned for March 2013 and the pub is gaining a reputation for its innovation in this area.

The project has also generated a degree of interest amongst the academic community and presentations have been made by the Principal Investigator at the British Council's 'Global Education Dialogues: The Asia Series' in Singapore (2012) and at the AHRC/Nesta Digital R&D Forum in Manchester (2013), whilst other members of the team have presented papers relating to this project at 'Internet Users and Infrastructures for the Rural Economy in the Digital Age: A Forum for Policy and Practice' at Oxford University (2012) and at the HEA Workshop and Seminar Series at Winchester.

In addition to the outputs generated by the communities in St Agnes and Ystrad Mynach, the Falmouth team also created a short documentary film on the project, focussing on the St Agnes work package, which has been used to promote the work nationally, as well as the wider Superfast Cornwall initiative. The team will also be presenting the project at the Connected Communities Showcase in London in March 2013.

Plans for future research

Whilst this pilot project has already yielded numerous outputs and insights, there is still further work to be done and BT has agreed to provide additional funding for a further year of research which will focus on the following key areas:

1. Further exploration of the viable business models for this kind of activity. The harnessing of the project by the Driftwood Spars Inn in St Agnes to run commercially viable events to enhance their current customer offer has provided one glimpse into how a viable business model might be developed in the future and how research activities are an important factor which directly can influence such developments.
2. Attempts to connect the participating communities to mutually support their learning and to exchange experiences and knowledge was an area that was not possible during the first phase of the project. We propose to explore this further in the next stage by focussing on communities with established superfast broadband connections (see below).
3. As Cornwall is currently benefiting from the roll-out of superfast broadband across the whole of the county, we intend to focus particularly on Cornwall as a test-bed by recruiting up to three additional communities into the project. This will also allow us to investigate the potential for scalability of the work. In Wales, led by the University of Glamorgan, the plan is to focus on the community of Whitchurch village, effectively a suburb of Cardiff. Whitchurch (along with Muswell Hill in London) was the earliest recipient of superfast broadband in the UK as a

pilot area in 2009. Working in Whitchurch will provide a useful comparator with the rural Cornish villages in terms of both an urban community and where superfast broadband is well-established as a local utility.

4. The University of Surrey will act as the key technology partner, working across all participating communities and trialling the Doc-cam software that they are developing. Doc-Cam is at proof-of-concept (demonstration) stage and requires further technical work and testing to realize in a robust and suitable way for a range of teaching interactions and materials. We therefore propose to co-develop an integrated software and hardware solution based on trials of an early prototype in a community education context. These trials will also reveal further requirements for video-conferencing facilities specific to these settings.

References and external links

<http://air.falmouth.ac.uk/content/university-village-film>

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www.connectedcommunities.ac.uk