

Promoting intergenerational understanding through Community Philosophy

Findings
Informing change

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Communities can bring younger and older people together in ways that may be uncomfortable for both groups. Young people's behaviour may be labelled 'nuisance', while older people's views may be labelled 'intolerant'. This study summarises an independent evaluation of the 'Thinking Village project', which was designed to develop intergenerational understanding in a neighbourhood, using the principles of 'Community Philosophy'.

Key points

- The project has succeeded in developing relationships and dialogue across generations, although it remains to be seen whether these relationships will continue when the project is no longer in place to support them. It has been able to initiate and support conversations that otherwise would not have happened, both within and between generational groups.
- The project was working to numerous objectives, which could be difficult to reconcile. These included: How does philosophy of this nature work in communities? How can it address issues of the perception of nuisance? How does it engage people inter-generationally?
- The Community Philosophy approach drew on the tradition of Philosophy for Children (P4C) in schools. However, facilitating community-based philosophy differed in some significant ways from school-based work. In particular, it needed to be less directive and more flexible.
- Because Community Philosophy required non-directive content, it was important to respond to a range of participants' interests, beyond the 'nuisance/tolerance' agenda.
- In the course of its work, the Thinking Village project tried many different approaches and has effectively developed a bank of experience from which similar projects could draw.

The research

By Chris Seeley and Sue Porter of the University of Bath.

Background

Living side by side in the same community can be a challenge for both younger and older people. Young people can feel constrained and alienated by measures introduced to enable older people to enjoy quiet, such as restrictions on where ball games can be played. Older people can feel intimidated by groups of younger people 'hanging out' in groups in public spaces.

The Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust, as part of its wider work on anti-social behaviour and tolerance, commissioned the Thinking Village project to explore how community relationships and tolerance could be improved between different groups.

The project was designed to promote intergenerational understanding, through promoting conversations and relationships between disaffected/dissatisfied young people and disaffected/dissatisfied adults using the principles of Community Philosophy (see below).

This study explores the trial of a Community Philosophy approach to reduce 'nuisance' behaviour and increase tolerance, and evaluates the impact of the approach.

What is Community Philosophy?

Community Philosophy developed from a US-based approach called Philosophy for Children, which emphasises the importance of questioning in the development of reasoning. It does this by convening discussion groups or 'Communities of Enquiry', through which participants learn new ways to speak and listen to each other.

A Community of Enquiry involves a 'community' of people 'enquiring together' by meeting regularly or taking part in one-off activities to ask questions, think and reflect collaboratively; and a method in which, typically, a stimulus is shared by the group to generate a question that initiates discussion. The idea is that the question should be philosophical and the discussion reason-based.

How was it applied?

During 2007, the project recorded that 89 specific Community of Enquiry events had taken place in the host neighbourhood, and that another 70 activities there were provided with some degree of Community Philosophy content. In total there were well over 1,000 attendances at these events, with turn-outs ranging from very small numbers to (a few) large gatherings.

Ongoing work with young people

Philosophy4U, a young people's group, grew out of what had been called the Police Advisory Group. Supported by the Community Philosophy project, this had formed in response to the dispersal order that had been implemented in the area, and provided a forum for dialogue between young people and the police

The group of young people involved would fall into the category of 'at risk' in terms of social exclusion, and began with quite negative perceptions and experiences of the police. They were given time to explore their views and research their rights before any contact with police officers took place; something that also provided them with the opportunity to facilitate workshops and philosophical sessions within the group and with other groups of young people..

The project hosted a 'speed-dating' event with police officers where young people had the opportunity to

ask the questions they had spent time formulating and articulating. As well as being positively received by the police, the young people reported enjoying the project and claimed to have changed their views. One said: *"I will never look at the police the same again."*

'...[Community Philosophy] creates a level of understanding between members of the community about issues that far too often go undiscussed as the opportunity to do so does not otherwise exist.' Police Officer

Rather than dissolving, the group developed into Philosophy4U, and was joined by a younger cohort which had been involved in a separate community initiative supported by the Philosophy team.

The group holds regular sessions and has tackled some challenging philosophical questions around issues such as the background to addiction and the oft-posed association between terrorism and Islam.

The groups involved have been made up of different generations; encompassing primary school children, teenagers, middle-aged adults and older adults. Mixed groups have met, as well as groups of a single age bracket, and there have been regular Communities of Enquiry from different age groups.

The following accounts, drawn together by the project workers, give a flavour of what has been involved in applying these techniques within the context of the project:

Challenges

The Community Philosophy team that was employed to initiate, facilitate and maintain this work faced a threefold challenge in delivering the project:

- *Addressing tensions between purpose, process and content in the work*

This manifested in terms of: a shifting emphasis between directly addressing fear and nuisance issues and allowing the range of philosophical discussion to emerge, and, consequently, unclear “success” criteria for the team to work to. The facilitators have needed to respond to things as and when they have surfaced against the background of a complex, changing context.

- *Engaging and developing trust and respect within the community*

This manifested in terms of: low to zero attendance at some events; fickle and unpredictable levels of engagement; and difficulties in engaging middle-aged adults in the philosophical conversations. The team has needed to make considerable effort, and use a variety of strategies, to engage mixed, intergenerational groups of participants.

- *Pioneering the practice of Community Philosophy in a non-institutional context*

This manifested in terms of: an absence of bespoke training or tools that could have supported the team in using the approach outside of a school setting; and the evolution of a form of the work which has been ‘naturalised’ or adapted to fit the context. The team has needed to develop its own bank of learning and experience, which could be used to help others.

Ongoing intergenerational work

A group of young people recruited through street-based work was introduced to a group of people living in a local sheltered housing and care home facility.

The initial focus of their shared philosophical discussion built on a joint visit to the National Media Museum. This trip, which was designed as a stimulus, was followed by the older people inviting the younger people to play a game of carpet bowls.

The different age groups have continued to meet on a monthly basis for activities and subsequent philosophy sessions, facilitated by the project team. Examples include shared exploration of views around homosexuality, and a debate about farming and animal activism (both prompted by a theatre outing); and using drama techniques to explore local and societal stereotypes. As time has gone on, discussions have become more challenging and robust.

In addition, and independently of the project, young people continue to attend a weekly bowls night at the older people’s scheme. This has carried on even though the original group of young people is no longer involved; a new cohort of young people has taken its place.

During the period of activity, one young person involved has applied to become a volunteer at the older people’s scheme, and an existing volunteer there has undertaken training to qualify in facilitating philosophical enquiry.

Achievements

Despite these challenges, it appears that the Thinking Village project has been able to convene wider community and intergenerational conversations within its context. The project has not shied away from controversial and potentially conflictual subject matter for these conversations. Indeed, Community Philosophy seems to offer a mechanism for addressing these conflicts in a non-adversarial way. The philosophical conversations have covered a range of issues, from addictions to prejudices, bullying, anti-social behaviour, leisure facilities for young people and human rights.

Community Philosophy appears to be a useful technique to build relationships, increase understanding, develop empathy, and cultivate tolerance. Although only a small number of the project's Communities of Enquiry have yet brought the different 'sides' together to directly address the issues of nuisance/tolerance, the skills that have been developed could be helpful in doing so.

It remains to be seen how self-sustaining some of the relationships that have been developed will be once the project is no longer in place to support them. However, the research observed that some participants had taken philosophical practices into their everyday lives. In this way, the project might have a lasting effect on individual behaviour and practice. For example:

'... it's brought out the best in the residents at X, plus the fact that [the project team] have brought in children, and this is really, really important, because if you talk to an 80 year old in X, they will say to you: "I never go out in the dark, I daren't go out in the dark." So what I think we were all trying to do was say to the children: "These are old people and they are not as stupid as you think they might be." And say to the old people: "These are young people and they are not all tearaways and thugs."'

Volunteer worker and participant

Concluding remarks

Community Philosophy appears able to initiate and support conversations that would otherwise not have happened, both within and between generations. It is different from, but may be complementary to, other forms of community development work.

The value of using Community Philosophy as a technique in relation to anti-social behaviour (real or perceived) remained unproven within the time-frame of this study, and may never be answered conclusively. What can be said is that Community Philosophy represents a very different approach to much of what appears in current policy and practice responses, many of which do not seek to address wider causes of unacceptable conduct and/or unjustified insecurities, or consider local people's views of what the problems are. In contrast, Community Philosophy seeks to gain a deeper understanding and acceptance of multiple interpretations and concerns.

About the study

The final design of the study, like the project itself, needed to be adapted to its context. The team intended to use the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique (a form of participatory monitoring and evaluation) for qualitative work but this required an extended in-depth engagement with participants which did not materialise. The researchers therefore developed a more open set of 'stories' through which to encompass participants', facilitators' and advisors' voices.

Quantitative information was drawn from the project's own monitoring data.

Further information

The full report, **Promoting intergenerational understanding through Community Philosophy** by Sue Porter and Chris Seeley, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk

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Tel: 01904 615905 email: info@jrf.org.uk