‘Telling your Story’: People and the Aylesbury Estate

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Abstract
One of the largest housing estates in the UK, The Aylesbury, South London, is undergoing transformation as part of a £2.4 billion regeneration project. The scheme aims to provide a ‘blueprint for a new neighbourhood’ and in the process, ‘create a strong and vibrant community’. As the demolition of the Estate began in October 2009, the Kaleidoscope Project was launched to share the memories, experiences and images of the people who lived there. This paper focuses on one aspect of Kaleidoscope – ‘Telling Your Story’, which had two main aims: The first was to capture the life stories of the Estate at this moment of change and the second was pedagogical, to use notions of transformational learning to enhance the skill base of some of the Estate’s long-term residents. This was achieved through a series of innovative workshops focusing on dialogues around the cultural aspects of food, craft and a sense of history and place. At the same time, the ‘people-centered’ workshops provided the opportunity to share aspirations for the future through a resident-led blog. These processes and methods can lead to social innovation: social engagement through building a community of learners and knowledge exchange between residents and academia.

Keywords
Life stories, narrative, human-centred design, community engagement, transformation

Introduction
As one of the largest housing estates in the UK, The Aylesbury located in South London, is undergoing transformation as part of a £2.4 billion regeneration project that aims to provide a ‘blueprint for a new neighbourhood’. Designed to address the long-term needs of residents, regeneration has focused on rectifying degenerating housing, transport and employment [1]. In line with the EU Sustainable Development Strategy [2] which seeks to “achieve a continuous long-term improvement of quality of life through the creation of sustainable communities” the UK Government recognised the need to complement environmental transformation with social innovation. Defining design for social innovation as a series of “daily events that cumulatively consider the greater good – of a city, a condition, a system, a culture, a nation, a world” [3], this paper documents a project that employs life stories as a catalyst for transformational learning on the Aylesbury Estate.
New Deal for the Communities: Kaleidoscope

Creation Trust (successor to the New Deal for the Communities), along with partners InSpire, Media Citizens and Information Environments (University of the Arts London), secured funding as part of a 'learning for pleasure' innovation spearheaded by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. This six-month project started in October 2009 as the demolition of the Aylesbury Estate commenced and work began on building the first phase of the new estate.

The Kaleidoscope project was developed to increase the number of adult learners who could access learning through local facilities and progress further along the route to employment. Whilst transformational learning was our goal, we can argue that the processes and methods undertaken led to social innovation: social engagement through building a community of learners and knowledge exchange between residents and academia. Taking place at a pivotal point as the physical regeneration process began, a key focus has been to capture Aylesbury residents’ memories and celebrate the cultural diversity of the Estate, through a series of activities aiming to promote community cohesion and provide a platform for articulating residents' future hopes. Through these activities, residents learned to express themselves and acquire new skills in three creative areas: arts and crafts; poetry and the spoken word; and life stories or ‘telling your story’. It is this last area the authors contributed to and this paper focuses.

‘Tell Your Story’ and The Aylesbury Estate

Our rationale for the use of life stories as a catalyst for social innovation begins with life histories. Defined as “…how people make sense of their past, how they connect individual experience and its social context and how the past becomes part of the present” [4], life stories can be conceptualised as a process of sense-making and eventual coupling of individual and collective contexts and experiences. Interestingly, this process is shared by transformational learning: “At the heart of transformational learning is meaning-making — the act of ‘making sense’ of an experience” [5]. As Cranton elaborates, transformational learning is the process by which "...learners construe, validate, and reformulate the meaning of their experience" [6]. Integral to this process is critical reflection on experiences, which Mezirow suggests is the force that leads to perspective transformation [7].

The shared ground of life stories and transformational learning - the links between individual and collective experiences, the use of the past to reconfigure thinking about the present and future, the need for critical reflection and the act of meaning-making - was seen to provide a common language for engagement and social innovation. Indeed, McLeod and Thomson’s [8] discussion of research employing life stories to understand social change highlights the necessity of innovation: “the simultaneous and symbiotic operations of social reproduction and innovation, [which] connect the intimate operations of family life to the social and economic landscape within which they are situated.”

The philosophy of the ‘Tell Your Story’ programme centred on a series of themed workshops that employed life stories as a channel for transformational learning. Using the process to foster a positive vision for the future Aylesbury Estate, the programme intended to cultivate an understanding of the importance of change that recognises and is sensitive to local history, alongside the value of innovation and learning for the Estate.
Research Approach

Participants
Participants were past and current residents of the Aylesbury Estate, South London. Residents were invited to attend workshop sessions to contribute their life stories through Creation Trust and a number of existing residents on the Estate that have strong links with University of the Arts London. These relationships built upon previous staff and student projects, establishing reciprocal trust. Participating residents comprised a mix of ethnic backgrounds and ages – note that participants tended to be first-generation Aylesbury Estate residents. It was agreed that those under the age of 18 years would be excluded on ethical and practical grounds (i.e. obtaining informed consent).

Design Methods & Process
Fields of human-centred design, participatory design and service design informed the multi-disciplinary approach used. These design fields have contributed to the development of methods, tools and approaches for eliciting stories and actively engaging individuals in a co-design process. The term ‘scaffolding’, is central to way the workshops and tools for engagement were designed. It has origins in education [9] and cognitive psychology [10], where learning is supported by the construction of temporary structures to provide alternative routes to problem solving and to enable cooperative learning. Reciprocity is key to scaffolding [11], bringing individual knowledge, stories and experiences to activities facilitating the learning, understanding and transformation of the collective group. Sanders’ work in co-design is also significant, describing ‘scaffolds’ as a way to promote ‘collective generativity’ among ordinary people and designers [12].

The design tools employed in this project (a set of designed postcards, printed with photographs to evoke past events e.g. The Queen’s Jubilee or workshop themes e.g. future) operated as ‘scaffolds’, enabling residents to express their thoughts, feelings and dreams. As familiar, tactile objects they were used to facilitate conversation and trigger the sharing of personal experiences. The workshops (each typically recruiting 10 residents and spanning 2 hours in duration to full day events) were structured as follows:

1 / Stories through making
Stories through making, examined the potential of everyday activities for story-telling. MA Design Writing Criticism students from London College of Communication, University of the Arts London, joined residents from the Aylesbury Estate for an afternoon of bread-making, resulting in an exchange of stories, traditions and cultures. This workshop informed the students’ understanding of personal narratives and the potential value of a shared dialogue.

2 / Stories from the past – It’s all about food
Everyone has a story to tell about food. Exploring the different ways to collect and record stories, residents of the Aylesbury Estate were asked to bring a keepsake relating to their life story. Becoming ethnomethodological tools [13,14] used to trigger and elicit stories, the keepsakes complemented the postcards provided as tools for conversation. Documenting objects and conversations, an online collection of stories was created.
3 / Remembering the past for the future
Remembering the Aylesbury Estate, residents were invited to create a ‘wishing tree’ for the future. Writing their ‘future wishes’ on postcards, residents’ dreams, hopes and messages were placed on the ‘wishing tree’. Displaying these online, the use of the Internet for story-telling and creating inter-generational conversations was examined.

4 / Craft and the Aylesbury Estate
This workshop provided an exploration of the crafts that exist within the Estate. Craft-related keepsakes operated as triggers for the exchange of stories from across the world, culminating in the creation of a blog that illustrates the array of crafts and traditions that lie at the heart of the estate.

5 / Transformation on the Aylesbury Estate
How might past experiences of transition act as a catalyst for future change? Photographs documenting residents’ experiences of transformation were used to spark conversations about change on the Aylesbury Estate. Placing these photographs and stories online, ‘blogging’ was introduced as a method for continuing this dialogue.

These co-participatory workshops were designed to build upon one-another, each time examining themes of significance to residents’ life stories in more detail (Figure 1). Residents suggested developing a blog as a receptacle for the life stories and as a point of exchange across the generations between those that currently reside on the Estate and those that have since moved away. The programme culminated in two widening participation activities that built upon the craft and blogging elements of the workshops.

Themes from the ‘Tell Your Story’ Workshops
Clustered around three key themes, the life stories elicited, captured the sense of loss and disconnect of the local community that currently occupy the Estate. Reflecting upon the past, residents’ hopes for reconnection captured their vision of the future. As the constraints of this paper preclude detailed exposition, what follows is a series of extracts which relating to each theme, give the reader a sense of the discourse.

1 / A Lost Community
Focusing on the sense of loss associated with the changing face of the Aylesbury Estate, one MA Design Writing Criticism student reflects: “Things have changed over the decades, and some residents were saddened that the Estate was getting anonymous.” One resident’s interpretation of the causality underlying these lost communities relates both to the dispersion of communities beyond the Estate “It used to be that my daughter lived around the corner - but it’s not like that now”, and that “The pace of life now is so quick” (Resident A). The changed nature of modern life has directly impacted the Estate:

“People don’t stop to have a chat on the street anymore…everyone seems to be in a rush all the time. Parents aren’t walking their kids to school anymore and instead drop them off by car where there’s little chance for conversation.” (MA student)
19th Feb 2010
Craft and the Aylesbury Estate

Researchers from the Research Unit for Information Environments (University of the Arts London) joined residents for an exploration of the crafts that exist within the estate. Craft-related keepsakes operated as triggers for the exchange of stories from across the world, culminating in the creation of a blog that illustrates the array of crafts and traditions that lie at the heart of the estate.

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Figure 1: Extract of Workshop Process

As this student continues in their reflection, the opportunity is hindered further by the fact that “There are lots of new foreign residents with language barriers and different cultural backgrounds which makes it harder to get to know them.”

These times sit in stark contrast to residents’ early memories of life on the Aylesbury Estate. For Resident B, who recalled “My fondest memory – the Silver Jubilee party in 1977”, the Estate as it exists today could not be more different:
"We had a street party for the children in the afternoon and in the evening a knees-up for the adults ... Every week, two of us used to go around and knock at every door in the three blocks of flats. We would collect money – so much per child to pay for the children’s party." (Resident B)

The act of knocking on doors and the exchange of conversation in addition to the event itself provided the glue for a socially cohesive community. Events such as the Estate’s Christmas party, which continues to this day, were noted to “work[s] from time to time” before residents retract into “his / her own world” (MA student).

2 / Thinking About the Past for the Future

Recounting the past operated as a tool for residents’ preparedness of the imminent change on the Aylesbury Estate. Recalling the area prior to the construction of the Estate during the 1960s, Resident C noted: “I am not saying it was utopia, but it was a community. You didn’t have big blocks.” Reflecting on this sense of community, Resident A recalled: “All of this area used to be made up with small streets with small terraced houses and a few flats - also lots of shops i.e. butchers, bakers etc. People knew each other.” In a similar vein, Resident C reminisces:

“I remember it when it was all houses before they built the Aylesbury Estate. I lived in one of the houses that got pulled down. So have seen the process from the start. There used to be a canal, which is a pond now just beyond Albany Road. We used to play there ... I would love to look at some of the archival stuff from the 60s. The lovely Victorian houses - just streets of them. But you have to move with the times.” (Resident C)

This acknowledgement of the necessity to ‘move with the times’ was underscored by a need to understand the change process: “It’s just interesting to see the process. And it is going to change again!” (Resident C).

Concerns about the architectural vision of the Aylesbury Estate were justifiably shaped by this past. On the new developments in and around Elephant & Castle it was inquired, “Where do the local come into that? It feels like we are being marginalized. It looks like luxury housing. Things like that are going to be the future” (Resident C). The incongruence of ‘luxury’ tower blocks with residents’ desire for housing enveloped with open spaces, points toward a more modest vision of the Aylesbury:

“I would like to see lots [of] trees, open green spaces, parks for the children and gardens for the older people. But most of all lots of Council Housing. This is my wish for the future of the Aylesbury Estate.” (Resident B)

Indeed, this humbling dream of The Aylesbury is matched by the need to keep local amenities, exactly that - local. Recounting the change in daily activities Resident D reflects: “Shopping was done locally at Bird Market in East Lane. Nowadays, you can still eat healthily and cheaply if you buy things locally. It’s sad to see Mums buying processed food at giant supermarkets.” Reflecting residents’ preference to keep things local, Resident E stated “I still go to the market now. Every Saturday. I go past St.
Peter’s Church to Walworth Road and shop along there and then come home through East Street and get my meat from the English butchers there." As Resident F echoes - “Sometimes I buy Nigerian food from East Street market – You have everything here. But 10 years ago we would have to had gone to East London.”

That East Street market has formed the heart of life on the Estate is hardly surprising, selling childhood delights such as “Sarsaparilla – It used to be our Coca-Cola” (Resident G) and providing a source of entertainment:

“I remember there was a man in the market in chains and a sack who had to get out in so many minutes. There was a man selling puppies and kittens and a shop that sold toys or something that used to sell little chicks.” (Resident E)

“My daughter on a visit to East Street Market (Walworth). The picture taken by a street photographer who always had monkeys to the delight of the children. My daughter is holding onto a plastic bag containing goldfish. She’s very happy. Photograph taken circa 1962.” (Resident H)

These life stories draw attention to the importance of retaining a sense of the local traditions and daily practices in the Aylesbury Estate as it is regenerated.

3 / Opportunity: An Exchange of Cultures

This perceived loss of cohesion and desire to retain the traditions that provide the fabric of the Estate, formed the impetus for new forms of social exchange. Recognising the cultural multiplicity of the Aylesbury, Resident I remarked, “It’s like a melting pot”, a point acknowledged by other residents “London now - you can never say you are a Londoner. Rightly so, we are multicultural” (Resident A). Using the workshops as a channel to celebrate the diversity of the Estate provided new opportunities to bind the Aylesbury community. The bread-making workshops marked the beginning of this dialogue:

“Each of us brought a bread recipe and the most important ingredient from our own culture. For example, someone brought rosemary for an Italian bread recipe and another brought a German wholegrain bread recipe and a jar of pumpkin and sunflower seeds. Some of the Aylesbury ladies brought their own recipes as well. These recipes were left in a small box in the community hall as a gift to the residents.” (MA student)

One resident of Nigerian origin provided the recipe for Agege Bread (named after the city Agege in Lagos State, Nigeria), produced by cutting and frying the dough in small pieces. Gizanda, a popular pastry made from sugar, flour and coconut was imparted as the cornerstone of Jamaican life that has infiltrated into the fabric of the Estate, as Resident J notes: “Everyone eats it back in Jamaica. You see them in takeaways. It is like a snack.”

Conversations also took place in relation to the crafts that reside on the Estate. The process of using jute leaves to create fans and baskets, as is traditional practice in South Asia, was presented. Whilst the source of this tradition resides outside the UK, it was interesting to note Resident F’s observation of the availability of jute on East Street
market: “A traditional fan like this is used back home because our countryside still has no electricity. Jute can be found on East Street Market – they cut it and sell it” (Resident F). Artefacts of this sort provide a mirror through which to view the strong cultural heritage of the Estate. Other traditions included the Kente Scarf: “It’s a traditional scarf from Ghana in Africa. This is a silk scarf, but we have hand-woven scarves too. It’s a cloth as well that can be wrapped around your body” (Resident K). This prompted others to recount their own life stories… “My family worked in the textiles industry. My brother and Dad had a factory. I saw how they made this cloth when I visited the factory” (Resident F). Pockets of learning ignited by recognition of these traditions, provided the impetus for local skill-based exchange: “I learnt crochet from a Filipeno lady who lives next door to my house. In return, I showed her how to embroider.” (Resident F).

Learning Impact

Capacity for change

“As residents realise they have a story to tell and opinions worth hearing, we believe their confidence will grow, enabling them to have a greater say in shaping their own future.” [15] - This rising confidence was evidenced most strongly through resident’s participation in the workshops, and a growing willingness to share life stories and learn about new ways in which they might be captured and disseminated. This process has been integral in helping residents both celebrate the Estate and critically reflect on the change as individuals and a collective. Lasting social innovation, provides the capacity to change behaviour and build capacity, it is the intention that the workshops will have operated as a source of motivation for residents.

Transformational learning

Kaleidoscope was developed to increase the number of adult learners who could access learning through local facilities and progress further along the route to employment. The ‘Tell Your Story’ workshops contributed towards transformational learning in three key ways: (i) engaging residents in a dialogue about the ways in which their stories can be captured and shared; (ii) aiding skill development by learning about online environments such as blogs; and (iii) encouraging involvement in training in local educational facilities such as London College of Communication as a part of widening participation — how to create a blog / how to screen print.

A capacity-building programme by intent, detailed evaluation of impact in the early stages of transformation is inherently challenging. The population of a blog with stories from the Aylesbury used in our thematic analysis (http://tellingyourstory.wordpress.com) and residents’ attendance at widening participation workshops most aptly hints at the transformational learning that has occurred. Indeed, for some, this programme of social innovation was noted to have been instrumental in sparking a taste for further learning “I just like taking pictures. I would just like to learn more” (Resident I). Transformation of this type echoes what Freire names when he speaks of what it is ‘to be fully human’ [16]. He describes how the pursuit of acting upon and transforming one’s world enables one to move towards new possibilities of a fuller and richer life, both individually and with others. For others, the effects have been more pragmatic and far-reaching:
"Aylesbury is my home … People from other boroughs when they are passing they are frightened of the big buildings and think it isn’t a safe place to live. But it is a very safe place to live, because of activities, and things to keep people busy the crime rate has fallen very much." (Resident L)

The completion of the Aylesbury Estate Kaleidoscope Project in March 2010 has also made evaluation of lasting social impact difficult to assess. We urge future government-led initiatives akin to the Aylesbury Kaleidoscope programme to give consideration to the provision of a framework through which lasting impact might be tracked.

In terms of sustainability and long-term empowerment we also gave consideration to what we might change about our methods and outcomes to create long-term impact. For instance, the aim of the blog was to document the workshops, but more importantly to share some of the rich life stories as told and visualised by the Aylesbury residents. It was hoped this would serve as a catalyst for further exchange beyond the workshops, encouraging dialogue and commentary from across the generations (residents – their children – and their grandchildren). Indeed, the proposition that “Design for social innovation is shared. It’s plural. It goes beyond self” [3], lay at the heart of our thinking. Reflecting on this approach, we ask whether self-sustained long-term skill learning, or empowering existing community membership to take ownership of the blog and maintain it throughout the transformational journey of the Aylesbury Estate might have better facilitated the longitudinal potential of residents’ learning. Our learning as individual researchers revealed the importance of trust, respect, tolerance, history, the value of an individual’s story, and as a research community based in Elephant & Castle, the importance of collective experiences to locate both residents and researchers in a shared dialogue. We are also acutely aware of the limitations of targeting an audience that was mostly first generation residents and of the need to make the workshops more accessible for those whose first language was not English or who spoke little English.

Conclusion

This paper has provided insight into a social innovation project employing life stories as a catalyst for transformational learning on the Aylesbury Estate at a moment of great change. A rich experience for residents, students and researchers alike, we hoped the project would have formed stronger lines of communication: future research will seek to continue this dialogue, this time focusing on the documentation of residents’ individual life stories. Thus, whilst championing the view that transformational learning and the methods employed can improve a society, we balance this with an acknowledgment of the need for this to be situated within a continuing framework of engagement.

References


