

Involving young people through film and animation

By Valerie Dunn



I am a researcher working on young people's mental health at the University of Cambridge, Department of Psychiatry. I work as part of the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Collaboration for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care (CLAHRC) East of England, which brings together researchers and service providers to carry out applied health research to improve services.

My work focuses on mental health of young people leaving local authority care. Initially our consultations with young people about the research were informative for us but not engaging for young people. We needed to find a more innovative way to involve and interest young people in our work.

When we started our next project, devising a mental health training course for foster carers, it was essential to include the authentic experiences and opinions of young people. We decided to try film-making – about which we knew nothing!

My first step was to contact the Cambridgeshire Film Consortium, a not-for-profit film education organisation. Trish Shiel, the manager, was very keen and engaged the professionals, hired the equipment and studios and provided the cinema for the premiere screening.

We made our first animated short film, My Name is Joe, in 2012. The project was hugely enjoyable for everybody, adults and young people learned from each other and worked as a team. The film had immediate impact. As a result, the young people suggested topics for two more films, effectively setting the

research agenda themselves. In 2013 we made Finding My Way, about leaving care, and last year we made Our House, about living in children's homes.



For each film we held initial taster sessions where we visited Just Us groups, youth groups in the region for young people in care. The aim was to describe the project, enthuse young people and attract volunteers by experimenting with recording equipment, meeting the team and watching a selection of animated film snippets to illustrate the endless possibilities of the medium.

Overall 24 young people, aged 12–23, from foster care, residential homes, semi-independent and independent living, took part in the project. A core group of three were involved throughout the three years and became a central part of the team.

Most of the work took place during four-day animation summer schools in Cambridge. Through creative workshops, games and discussions young people worked closely together to explore the issues and think about what they wanted to say. Then learned a range of film, animation and sound techniques and brought their ideas to life. These workshops gave young people the time, space and skills to explore sensitive issues safely and creatively.

Although one of the main aims of the project was to produce relevant, high quality films, the production process was equally, if not more, important: we wanted the young people to learn, to work together, to feel safe, to explore ways of expressing themselves and to be fully engaged and excited.

The young people felt the creative workshop approach was vital to the success of the films in helping them to really think about what the important issues were: "It's a must to get the ideas bouncing around, it's not boring like just sitting

talking.”

Michelle Dean, who runs activities and groups for young people in care in Cambridgeshire, pointed out that our creative and enjoyable approach was very inclusive and attracted young people who were often reluctant to join in routine activities. This is an important consideration for research too as it is always a challenge to involve so-called hard-to-reach groups.

Since taking part in the project one young person has completed a British Film Institute (BFI) Academy short film course and was singled out for special mention by the expert panel after the course. She plans to study special effects at university: “It [the project] gave me a little bit of hope in a way that I can do something with my life ... Before, I thought I wasn’t good enough and now I think I can achieve something in life. It was a confidence boost and it’s helped in many ways.” Another young person is working towards music college with continued mentoring from a member of the team.



The young people won a BFI documentary award in 2014 and were finalists in the national Children and Young People Now Awards in November 2014. The films have reached a wide and diverse audience with 10,000+ views on YouTube. They are used all over the UK to train foster carers and social workers.

This very loosely-structured method relies on establishing close, trusting relationships where adults and young people work closely together. It’s democratic and the outputs can be uncertain. As a researcher it can be a challenge to remain objective. The work has been hugely enjoyable, moving and memorable. I have a deeper understanding of the issues facing young people in care and why they deserve an enormous amount of respect.

We plan other creative projects with young people in care, depressed teenagers and young people using mental health

services.

You can see the films along with short Behind the Scenes films which show the teams at work:

My Name is Joe www.youtube.com/watch?v=ArBjWe3IWs0

My Name is Joe: Behind the Scenes
www.youtube.com/watch?v=o17AHhi_fus

Finding My Way www.youtube.com/watch?v=L1qZggHoFmM

Finding my Way: Behind the Scenes
www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgPu_iHZvL4

Our House www.youtube.com/watch?v=fs-RVgsFfcA

Our partners are Cambridgeshire County Council Young People's Participation Service and Youth Offending Service, Spellbound Animation, Cambridgeshire Film Consortium, Sonic Sound Studios and Andy Dunn (film maker).

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