

Darwin 200 Radio Series Evaluation Report

1. Introduction

This report describes findings from qualitative research to evaluate the Darwin Radio Series - a University of East Anglia (UEA) collaboration with Future Radio, to mark the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth. The series was supported by CUE East, as part of the Beacons for Public Engagement programme.

The evaluation was carried out by The Research Centre, City College Norwich between Sept 2009 and Oct 2009 and contributes to the overall evaluation of CUE East (Community University Engagement East). It was understood by the researcher that this activity was offered as an 'experiential' or 'hands-on' learning opportunity to complement the Public Engagement Practitioners Programme, which was commissioned by CUE East for its Public and Community Engagement Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programme 2008/09. Consequently, the evaluation approach was designed to seek feedback on the impact of the activity from a participant perspective, in terms of what learning or other professional development benefits were brought to those involved.

2. Background

The Darwin Radio Series was a five-part documentary which aired at 3pm every Sunday between the 26th July 2009 and 23rd August 2009. The series was written and produced by Dr Laura Bowater from the School of Medicine (MED) with support from Dr Kay Yeoman from the School of Biology (BIO) (hereafter the activity leaders), with post-production and editing support from the team at Future Radio. It featured contributions from 21 academics and postgraduate researchers at UEA, working in a cross-section of academic schools, including: Biological Sciences (BIO); Computing Science (CMP); Medicine, Health Policy and Practice (MED); Film and Television Studies (FTV); Literature and Creative Writing (LIT); Political, Social and International Studies (PSI), and; Social Work and Psychology (SWP).

Contributors were recruited through a mixture of word of mouth and more targeted publicity strategies, such as direct email approaches to Faculty members and a lunch-time CPD session that focused on opportunities to get involved in public engagement. After initial contact had been established, each contributor met with one or both of the activity leaders to talk about their area of expertise, how this fitted in with the overall programme framework and what questions they may be asked. In

some cases a second meeting was held or correspondence continued before a time was arranged to pre-record the interview at the Future Radio studios.

At the studio each contributor was taken through the list of questions that they would be asked, allowing them time to think about potential answers and to help ensure these were pitched for the station's target audience, which specifically includes listeners in the more deprived wards of North Earlham, Larkman and Marlpit. Then the interview took place, with one contributor taking on the role of interviewer throughout the series. As the interviews were pre-record there was opportunity for retakes if required.

The final programmes were edited so that a number of academics featured on each, with linking commentary in between. Podcasts of each programme can currently be downloaded of the Future Radio website (www.futureradio.co.uk).

3. Methodology

The research methodology was qualitative in nature and designed to elicit contributors' views on the main outcomes for them personally, specifically in relation to firsthand learning. It consisted of a series of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with the two activity leaders and a sample of five contributors who were purposively selected to cover the breadth of academic schools and different roles or grades represented in the overall group.

Each contributor interview began with them being asked to describe a bit about themselves and their role at UEA. Following on from this, the contributor was asked about how they got involved with the activity; their motives for participating, and; what they personally took away from the experience, including any specific learning or professional development outcomes. Each interview concluded with a question about the potential for organising similar activities to encourage participation in public engagement and learning through direct experience.

The interviews lasted between 30 minutes to one hour. After each interview, recordings were fully transcribed, forming the basis of the thematic analysis applied to the interviews. A selection of relevant quotes has been presented to illustrate each theme derived from the interview data. Contributors have not been identified by academic school or faculty due to the low number participating from some of these.

Methodological limitations

After undertaking initial interviews with the activity leaders, it became apparent that there was a difference of opinion between the activity leaders and CUE East regarding the main aim of the Darwin 200 radio series. From the perspective of the activity leaders, the starting point for the radio series had been to coordinate an interdisciplinary public engagement activity rather than to deliver professional development. It was only after the activity was underway that the potential for providing experiential learning transpired. CUE East, on the other hand, believed that the activity was delivered as part of the Public Engagement Practitioners Programme and, therefore, counted towards its CPD delivery.

As a result of this difference, the evaluation did not have a clear set of aims and objectives against which the activity could be assessed. Moreover, the data collection embarked upon was only intended to canvass the views of those directly involved in the activity (as per a basic outcomes-based CPD evaluation which had informed the evaluation design) and did not include feedback from listeners about the accessibility of the programmes or an indication of listener numbers (as would be necessary for a project evaluation). Consequently, this evaluation was limited in scope.

4. Findings

This section presents key findings from the research. It became evident as the interviews progressed that contributors had differing levels of previous public engagement experience. Some had been very active in initiating and undertaking public engagement, while others tended to participate in activities “...*now and again*”.

All those interviewed (n=5) had previously undertaken public engagement of some form. However, for four interviewees this was the first time they had been involved with community radio, and for two this was the first time they had been to a radio studio.

4.1 Motives for participating

A range of motives for participating were cited, with all contributors stating that it had been a combination of two or more of those recorded (Table 1) that had persuaded them to get involved with this specific activity.

Table 1: Motives for participating in the Darwin Radio Series

Motive	Explanation
Timely nature	The activity coincided with the 200 th anniversary of Darwin's birth
Working with the activity leaders	Some contributors had worked with the activity leaders before and were keen to do so again, others were encouraged by their enthusiasm for the project
Working with Future Radio	Future Radio is a community radio station based right on the doorstep of UEA, so provides a good link to the University's immediate local community
Professional development	The activity provided a good opportunity to gain experience of radio and for "... <i>bolstering the CV</i> "
Enjoyment of public engagement	Some contributors were enthused by public engagement and the opportunity to talk about their research or subject interests.
Interdisciplinary	The activity involved a range of academics from UEA, such as "... <i>scientists, philosophers, sociologists, and many others.</i> "
Moderate input	Involvement in the activity was not perceived as a huge time commitment

4.2 Nature of involvement

Interviewees were asked to describe their involvement in terms of number of hours spent on the activity and interaction with the activity leaders, contributors and Future Radio. Most contributors said that their overall input had been moderate, with estimates ranging between three to five hours. Indeed, one interviewee commented: "*From our point of view it was easy. We just had to go up there and talk to them.*" However, it was a very different story for the activity leaders, who said that the series had taken a lot of time and dedication to pull together - far more than either had anticipated.

Most contributors met with the activity leader(s) on two occasions: firstly to discuss topics and ideas for the interview and secondly to record the interview. None of the interviewees met with other contributors as part of the experience, with the exception of the activity leaders and interviewer¹. However, some had spoken about the experience with other contributors they already knew. There was a strong indication from interviewees that they would have liked the opportunity to network with other contributors. One interviewee commented:

¹ As noted earlier, one of the contributors took on the role of interviewer throughout the series.

“No I didn’t meet the people from other schools. In fact after listening to some of the programmes I thought it would have been nice to actually. I was listening to them and I was thinking ‘crikey’ I didn’t know we had a department that did that or that they could talk about Darwinism.”

Yet there was also pragmatism about the difficulties in facilitating this. One interviewee commented:

“There would have been some more value in networking with the others but it’s difficult in that situation, with certain time slots, and lots of people to fit in. It’s not really conducive for that.”

The time spent at Future Radio was largely confined to the studio, without much opportunity to take a look round or meet the staff and volunteers that work there. That said, all appeared to leave with a good impression, as one contributor commented:

“The studio I thought was really impressive. I thought it was really really good, very professional. And they did a good job up there. They had mastery all of the stuff that was there.”

Some even said that they would now like to work with Future Radio. This is discussed further in the next section.

4.3 Individual outcomes

Overall interviewees really enjoyed the experience and many commented that they would like to participate in similar activities in the future. For a small number the activity provided opportunity for new learning through experience, such as “...being interviewed in a studio environment and seeing how that worked” and working with community radio, as “...something like Future Radio is a very different experience to other radio experiences”. However, for most the experience had been an opportunity to hone existing skills relevant to public engagement, in particular, those needed for interviews. Comments included:

“...well I don’t know about learning but just definitely practicing - how to answer questions succinctly and in a rounded way, so you start somewhere, say something, and then you stop. Because that’s an incredibly important skill for all sorts of things.”

“I mean you can never have too much practice of interviews.”

“I think we all should take every chance we have to do this type of thing and practice, and also just trying to speak fluently without saying to many

‘uhms’ and ‘arrhs’ and just saying things - because there are all sorts of ways that’s useful.”

One interviewee also discussed how the experience had helped to build confidence in their own knowledge to talk about issues concerning their wider subject area and not just those related to their specialist niche:

“A lot of people are usually very weary going out of their comfort zones and talking about general things in their subject but it is so very important understanding why evolution is important to everyone. So I think having heard what other people said on the topic who are knowledgeable, I would not be so scared responding to the more general questions in a more public context.”

As noted earlier, one positive outcome for most interviewees was that they were now keen to be involved in other public engagement activities of a similar nature. Indeed, most of the interviewees said they would like to work with the activity leaders again, and two stated that they would be interested in working with Future Radio - one on their own public engagement activity and the other to link with postgraduate training.

A couple of the interviewees made reference to the personal benefit of the programmes being made available to download as podcasts from the Future Radio website. This provided a tangible output that they could use to evidence their public engagement. Although one interviewee was concerned about how long these would remain on the website.

The activity leaders themselves said that they had gained a lot from the experience. The interdisciplinary nature helped them to build networks with a diverse range of people from across UEA, while the experience had also highlighted the development, production and editing stages required to make a radio series.

In summary, outcomes varied depending on the background and prior public engagement experience of the individuals involved. Notwithstanding, the experience had been a valuable one for all those interviewed. As one interviewee who had previously undertaken a lot of public engagement commented:

“I think there is a lot of value in the experience, and I think there was value for me and people who are even more experienced than I am.”

4.4 Feedback on the radio series

Most of the interviewees made comments about the final radio programmes that were aired. Overall, contributors were very happy with the quality, content and flow of the programmes. One interviewee commented:

"I thought they did it very cleverly [tied the programmes together]. It made it a far more interesting programme than just talking heads - you know, just focusing on one person."

Yet some had, at first, been sceptical about the quality of a series produced for community radio:

"I think the programmes were well put together, so it was a professional job. I wasn't sure whether it would be or not because with community radio you never know what you are going to end up with."

Some had even heard positive feedback from friends and colleagues about the programmes. Comments:

"A lot of people have said to me 'wow that was really good, I really enjoyed it' and yeah great for Laura and Kay and I think it has worked really well."

"...it was well organised and Kay and Laura did a terrific job of pulling it all together. I think everyone who I've spoken to who did it was pleasantly surprised."

There were a couple of comments about areas for improvement, such as repeated content in some of the final programmes. One interviewee said:

"When I heard the programmes I thought they were very good. There were a couple of times in their editing where there were a couple of bits though, questions that were repeated, which was a bit unfortunate because that just doesn't sound good."

There were also some concerns about the number of people that had actually listened to the series and whether it was accessible for the target audience. However, this was beyond the scope of this evaluation. Comments from interviewees included:

"I am a little bit dubious in terms of the audience and whether anyone listened."

"We did talk about who will listen to this and how much penetration it would have because some people did talk... you know, I didn't even know what they were talking about. So the people who the radio broadcast to, what would they really think?"

"I noticed there weren't many comments on the website but then I don't know how many programmes usually get comments."

4.4 Potential

At the end of the interviews contributors were asked whether they thought it was useful for public engagement coordination staff and/or public engagement champions to organise new opportunities like the Darwin Radio Series, in which a cross-section of academics and students can take part in, to help increase involvement in public engagement. Unanimously, all interviewees were in favour of providing opportunities for staff and students to engage, as otherwise they thought only the most committed and motivated ones would engage with the public.

"Oh yeah, yeah, this is definitely the way to get people involved. I was amazed about how many people said yes. Well not amazed but there was a much higher take up than I thought."

"It certainly helps when you're pushed for time just to be able to go do your small bit."

Yet, they also considered it important to provide support for staff and students to find or create public engagement opportunities themselves.

"It's great if you are invited to come in and contribute to something but you may have your own idea of something you want to do, so you need opportunities as well as support to do it yourself."

It was also suggested that there was a great challenge in identifying projects and themes with a broad, interdisciplinary appeal like the Darwin Radio Series.

"In terms of attracting people to go and do it then you need to have a theme which is going to appeal."

"The nice thing about something like this project is that round a theme like Darwin you can draw lots of people in..."

Interviewees were also asked about the potential and value of organising and facilitating public engagement activities to provide experiential learning for staff and students. There was, in fact, much support for this, even though this had not necessarily been the primary purpose of the Darwin Radio Series. Comments from the interviewees included:

“Definitely – for some of the less experienced people involved I’m sure it would have been a very useful learning curve for them and a lot less oppressive than standing in front of the TV camera or going to Radio Norfolk studios.”

“What this does is gives you an opportunity to practice in a real life situation and because it’s recorded if you do bog up then you can get over that. So yes - it would provide great experiential learning.”

However, a question was raised as to whether such a diverse range of academics would have become involved with the activity if they had been invited to participate for the purposes of CPD and experiential learning. The response from interviewees was mixed as to whether they would have or not.

Interviewees appeared to inherently link experiential learning with postgraduate students and early career academics, whom they believed such opportunities would be very useful for:

“I organise some of the training for postgraduates and what has been reinforced by this was the importance of how much fun it is to go and do some studio work. And maybe that is something they can do and I can contribute to that.”

Conclusion and recommendations

It is challenging to draw conclusions from this evaluation due to the lack of a clear primary aim against which the research findings could be assessed. On the one hand, the end product was an example of a well produced, interdisciplinary public engagement activity, which brought the UEA a step closer to its immediate surrounding community by getting a range of academics off-campus and on to the community airwaves for West Norwich and the wider Norwich area. However, as audience feedback was not built into the evaluation design it is ambiguous as to how much penetration the series had and how accessible the content was to the target audience. The findings also highlighted a lack of opportunity for networking between contributors, which would have helped to enhance the interdisciplinarity of the series and potential for future collaboration.

On the other hand, there has been some positive outcomes for those that contributed, albeit many of these were not intended when the activity first began. These included the development of communication and interview skills, experience of a radio studio, confidence building and a heightened interest to participate in similar engagement activities. Even those that said that they had gained little new from the

experience, other than it being another opportunity to be involved in public engagement, at least had something they could add to their public engagement profile and tangible evidence of this in the form of a programme podcast.

The key learning points from this evaluation have been developed into a series of recommendation which have been set out below.

Recommendations

- The primary recommendation from this evaluation is that the aims and objectives of any activity and/or professional development support by CUE East (financially or otherwise) should be clearly understood and agreed by CUE East and the delivers, from the outset. This will enable successes and learning to be effectively measured and evaluated.
- The findings indicate that whilst experiential learning could form an important component of public engagement professional development, further exploration of how best to package and promote this would be required.
- If a public engagement experiential learning model is to be developed alongside the CPD programme, then consideration needs to be given to the time and resource required to plan and coordinate such an activity.
- Building in opportunity for reflective practice during the learning activity is an essential component for experiential learning.
- Look to include opportunity for dialogue and engagement between contributors in interdisciplinary activities, to encourage future interdisciplinary working as a longer-term outcome.