Community Participation in Festivals –

An Appreciative Inquiry Approach to Research

Paper

14th Canadian Congress on Leisure Research

Thematic areas:

Community Development (e.g., municipal recreation, community resources; building community)

Methodology and Research Design

Preference for presentation format:
Formal presentation only

Learning Objectives:

- To employ an Appreciative Inquiry approach to fieldwork
- To recognise what is important to a community within their current culture and values

Community Participation in Festivals – An Appreciative Inquiry Approach to Research

Introduction

In event and festival management research thus far, problem-solving approaches have been applied to a range of case studies. Many festival organisers, however, might feel reluctant to talk about organisational issues and difficulties with a stranger. In this paper, I therefore propose an Appreciative Inquiry approach to fieldwork in order to identify organisational best practices.

This study investigated participation by members of the South Sea Islander community in Bowen, Queensland, in the project *Behind the Cane*. *Behind the Cane* was one of many regional community cultural development (CCD) projects organised by the Queensland Music Festival in 2011. CCD describes "a range of initiatives undertaken by artists in collaboration with other community members to express identity, concerns and aspirations through the arts (...), while building cultural capacity and contributing to social change" (Adam & Goldbard, 2001, p. 107). *Behind the Cane* was organised over a three-year period through collaboration between the festival organisation, the regional council and the South Sea Islander community in Bowen. Bowen is a small town with a population of approximately 8,000 people located in North Queensland. The project told the history of thousands of South Sea Islanders being kidnapped ('blackbirded') and brought to Queensland to work on sugar cane farms between 1863 and 1906 (Docker, 1970; Graves, 1993). Almost all the cast on stage (except for a few 'white' cast members) were descendants from South Sea Islanders, representing their own family members—great-great grandparents, uncles or aunts. The aim was to make them feel proud of their family, to tell their story and all the challenges they had to face in the past and to a certain extent still have to face today. During the creative development process, interviews were conducted with community members and their voices were made heard in the piece. The work was very emotional and confronting for participants and audience members, but cast members felt proud of their ancestors and that their story was finally told. The performance was presented at the Bowen Soundshell which features an outdoor stage next to the beach. There were three performances, each with approximately 120 people on stage: a band, choir, children's choir (from three different schools), actors and dancers. The event was free. Over the three nights, there was a total audience of about 8,000 people coming not only from Bowen but also surrounding towns, such as Proserpine, Ayr and Mackay (personal communication, July 2011).

In terms of organisation and creative development, the piece was put together by two writers (who themselves conducted the interviews with community members), two composers, a director, designer, and a production and technical team on the ground (all contracted by QMF). Over the three years, they worked closely together with the South Sea Islander community and the regional council and made several trips to Bowen. The QMF permanent staff was involved in that process as well. The entire production team then moved to Bowen approximately three months before the show and from then rehearsals took place every day. The festival team organising this project faced several challenges. The topic was difficult to explore, the team did not want to step on anybody's toes; moreover, working with an unprofessional cast required time and patience, while the festival was running on a different

schedule and had to meet funding, marketing and other deadlines. Careful negotiation and collaborative decision making over a period of three years was practised by festival staff members; they did not exercise power 'over' the community or impose their ideas upon them but rather let the community tell their own stories and make their voices heard, as I have argued elsewhere (Stadler, 2013). Although challenging at times, these processes are necessary in order for community members to feel ownership of the piece and to support the festival (Clarke & Jepson, 2011; Kay, 2000).

Methods

Applying ethnographic research methods (participant observation and in-depth interviews) over seven months allowed me to immerse myself in the festival experience, to become an insider to the organisation and to critically investigate issues and challenges from the team's perspective (O'Reilly, 2005). I participated in meetings, rehearsals and similar events from February – August 2011, as well as helped out with day-to-day tasks at the festival headquarters in Brisbane and different local venues. In particular, I spent a week in Bowen during the rehearsal period for *Behind the Cane*, and another four days for the *Behind the Cane* performances. Field notes were taken during and after all observations describing the settings, events, informal conversations with participants as well as my own feelings, challenges and learning process. I also conducted 28 in-depth interviews with festival members in a range of different roles – permanent as well as seasonal staff members, board members, artists, contractors and members of the communities. Eight of these interview participants were associated with the *Behind the Cane* project; some were interviewed before, others during or after the festival. In the interviews, in informal conversations as well as during the observations I paid particular attention to my participants' roles, experiences with the festival and participation in the project from their different perspectives.

The research process was difficult at times; while I became an insider to the festival organisation, I remained an outsider to the South Sea Islander community in Bowen. I was aware of the delicate topic and afraid of being disrespectful. I soon realised the importance of my ethnographic approach, especially when some community members did not want to do recorded interviews. However, I met with them for a coffee or we had an informal talk backstage about the project and about their background. Valuable information was thus gained, but in a 'safe' setting without risking stepping on their toes or damaging some of the relationships that the festival team had built over such a long period of time. Not using formal research methods was crucial in this situation in terms of gaining trust and respect with the participants. I noticed and reflected on the issue of power as a researcher and how sensitive research can be, particularly with people from other cultures (Bondy, 2013; Davies, 2008).

An Appreciative Inquiry Approach to Research

Reflecting on my experience, I also started to unconsciously apply an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach to research which enabled me to frame up questions in an appreciative rather than stereotypically negative way (cf. Michael, 2005). AI was developed in the field of organisational management and focuses on stories about positive experiences whereby challenges and problems are turned into opportunities for learning (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999).

In his doctoral research, Cooperrider developed the principles of Appreciative Inquiry based upon social constructionist underpinnings (summarised from Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999):

- The organisation needs to be understood as a living, human construction where relationships are the locus of knowledge, and the world is made sense of through the power of language (the constructionist principle);
- Inquiry and change occur at the same time (the simultaneity principle);
- The organisation's story is co-authored by all its members; stories are sources for learning and interpretation (the poetic principle);
- By creating positive images of the future, current behaviours and actions are positive too (the anticipatory principle); and
- Positive questions and stories provide momentum for change (the positive principle).

It is "a collaborative and highly participative approach to inquiry" (Yoder, 2004, p. 45). The AI approach builds on the best successes of an organisation within its current culture and core values (Thatchenkery & Chowdhry, 2007; Van Tiem & Rosenzweig, 2006; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). This is not to say that problems are ignored; however, Appreciative Inquiry reframes problems into opportunities for learning by focusing on the organisation's strengths and achievements (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999; Thatchenkery & Chowdhry, 2007). Conflicts and problems may still arise throughout the Appreciative Inquiry process, but rather than analysing and aiming to solve them, they are turned into opportunities for collaboration and reflexive thinking (Van der Haar & Hosking, 2004; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003).

Appreciative Inquiry is therefore mainly used in management practice as a step-by-step process to identify 'what is', 'what might be', 'what could be' and finally 'what will be' (Thatchenkery & Chowdhry, 2007). However, the process is also improvisational, only loosely structured and highly adaptable; it is different for every organisation or community and evolves and continuously changes based on what is important to its members (Finegold, Holland, & Lingham, 2002; Raymond & Hall, 2008). In initial interviews, and also throughout the entire process of AI, positive stories are shared about what people value, what is important to them and what they hope for in the future (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999). Story-telling and language are hence important dimensions of the AI process, which I realised would fit nicely with my ethnographic approach. Sarah Michael (2005) therefore suggested using AI as an interview tool for field research where an emphasis on stories can provide valuable insights into a community's values and beliefs. She found that through asking her participants to tell positive stories, they "(…) were eager to tell their stories; offered dynamic and unrehearsed information; and spoke more openly, with less defensiveness or fear of reprisal" (p. 226).

The approach has been widely applied in a range of different organisational settings as well as in tourism and hospitality research (Koster & Lemelin, 2009; Maier, 2008; Raymond & Hall, 2008) and community development (Finegold, et al., 2002; Morsillo & Fisher, 2007). However, to the best of my knowledge, it has not been used in festival and event management research thus far. While I did not aim to go through the entire AI process, I continuously reflected on how the AI principles influenced the way I interviewed my participants and worked together with the team.

Discussion

By asking my participants and members of the South Sea Islander community for positive stories, I gained trust which allowed them to openly discuss with me their (hi-)stories and experiences with the festival organisation, at times elaborating on issues and challenges without being asked – or forced – to do so. For example, questions included 'What was your best experience with QMF so far? (and why)?;' 'How does it feel working with other community members/with the festival team for the first time?;' 'Do you feel you belong to the community?;' 'Can you describe the friendships and relationships you have developed with other members of the community?'

One member of the South Sea Islander community, for example, recounted in an informal conversation how proud she was to be part of the show:

> When I ask Karen how she feels about working with QMF, she says she is very grateful to QMF for putting on a show about her family's and the community's history. She really enjoys being part of this so far and thinks her great great grandparents would be very proud of her. She now is a mother of three herself and spent all her life in Bowen. Just like the rest of her family; "Bowen born and bred," as the script says. Karen thinks it is important to tell their stories and to help other people in Bowen understand where the South Sea Islanders came from and what they've been through. She says, QMF is giving them a chance to do that. (field notes, 28/06/11)

The participant felt comfortable talking about her feelings towards and experience with the festival organisation thus far. She felt proud and excited to be part of the festival. Without asking her whether there were any problems along the way, she then went on to describe how difficult it was for the community to learn to trust QMF and to open up. According to her, there were a few "stand-offs" (field notes, 28/06/11) between QMF and the community along the way which could only be resolved through careful negotiation and collaborative decision-making. In my field notes I reflected on the benefits of my research approach at this stage:

> I had two very interesting interviews today, as well as a chat over coffee with Maria (…). I am so excited about the festival now that I keep on asking questions about highlights so far, about why THEY are so excited. It seems to work, participants enjoy sharing their enthusiasm and excitement more so than just talk about problems and issues. I do see and hear about those as well, but mostly they feel comfortable talking about how proud they are to be part of QMF and the show (field notes, 04/07/2011).

Realising how many positive stories I was able to collect – as well as experiences about difficult situations and issues – through specifically asking positive questions, I later applied the same strategy in more formal interviews with the professional festival team in order to identify best practice examples of working *with* different communities. For example, I asked one of the senior festival staff members about how they were building relationships with members of all the different communities.

> RS: I noticed that the relationships you have with members of the South Sea Islander community are really good. How do you build and maintain those relationships?

> I think... the first thing I'll say is that there is NO substitute for getting out there and going to visit people and looking them in the eye, shaking their hand and saying, "We are going to do this." Making promises that you keep. (interview 5)

Positively framing my question gave this participant an opportunity to reflect on and make explicit what staff members were doing well. He felt comfortable sharing his insights about

their embodied practices of working *with* the community. He went on to describe a situation where a staff member from the previous year did not believe in the festival vision and CCD principles, which had caused several problems along the way. Without being asked to describe the challenges, he confessed that "sometimes it's a struggle" and that "it's really hard" (interview 5).

Implications

AI as a research tool offers novel ways of thinking about asking positive questions and hence building trust and rapport with participants. In turn, power relations and hierarchies between researcher and participants can be broken down. AI as a field research tool can be applied to a range of different leisure settings and with different communities in order to recognise what is important to them (within their current culture and values). Rather than merely emphasising a problem-solving approach, it can also be used to identify organisational best practices.

Reflecting on staff members' as well as my own experiences with the *Behind the Cane* project in particular, provided an opportunity to make explicit the organisation's strengths and what they are doing well in terms of working with 'others' in different communities. The challenging nature of this project was recognised by staff members as important to reflect on in terms of learning from this experience of community cultural development. In future projects, I propose using the AI approach to fieldwork more consciously and comprehensively. This means the researcher together with as many organisational members as possible going through a step-by-step process of,

1) discovering 'what is' (identifying the current situation),

2) creating 'what might be' (creating future-present scenarios),

3) declaring 'what will be' (prioritising actions) and

4) making 'what will be' real (creating an action plan).

In festival organisations, going through this process at different points of the festival life cycle can provide a more comprehensive picture of how members of the organisation collaborate and work together and how they envision the future of the organisation. Festivals are celebrations; they celebrate people, the arts, music, culture and community in specific places and times (Getz, Anderson, & Carlsen, 2010). An acknowledgment of festivals as spaces of celebration and respect for others (within the team and within the communities they work with) is vital to the success and continuous development of the organisation. 'Celebrating'—through Appreciative Inquiry—the way an organisation works is therefore in the spirit of festival management.

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