

Dick Penny, Managing Director, Watershed Media Centre
***Imagine an arts sector which works collaboratively to deliver
excellence and engage the public ...***

Dick Penny is a producer, manager and consultant in the creative sector and is Managing Director of the Watershed Media Centre in Bristol. As a theatre producer his credits have included 'Scaramouche Jones', the one man show with Pete Postlethwaite, adapted from Raymond Briggs' 'When the Wind Blows', which toured internationally. He is playing a leading role in Connecting Bristol to deliver a digital inclusion strategy and has been Executive Chair of Bristol Old Vic since 2008. He has overseen Watershed's transformation from specialist cinema to become a communications and knowledge hub for the creative industries, innovating at the intersection of society, media arts and technology. Recent digital projects are located at www.dshed.net and collaborative innovation projects at www.ished.net

Watershed is an organisation which works in partnership with its audiences / visitors, with other creative organisations and with businesses from other sectors to join up cultural enterprise in Bristol. Dick gave delegates a flavour of the Watershed's 10 year journey. Their examples and experiments have been written up as case studies over the years, most recently in the advice given to the Local Government Association on how local authorities could invest in the creative economy. Dick believes the main reason the Watershed keeps being written up as a case study is because they keep doing things.

[Note: the films shown by Dick Penny in this presentation are online at www.watershed.co.uk]

A tale of digital disruption

Much of what Watershed has done has been driven by necessity, the need to learn to live in its city, and use Bristol's strengths. That's why the presentation is titled '*a tale of digital disruption*'.

Although the Watershed has built itself a reputation as a digital innovator, in many ways it's just that it has been lucky to have bright people on the team that keep spotting opportunities. For example, there is a url: <http://watershed.tel/>, something that Oliver, the head of IT, heard about and introduced. It's a good way of distributing contacts as it works using the Domain Name System (DNS). It can be used to send information to mobiles, so a text of what's on today can be sent to people who have signed up. It would be useful for people to try it out and see how well it works; it's no good if Watershed is the only one using it.

And this makes an important point about any new technology: everybody needs to use it in order for it to become useful to everyone.

In the beginning...

In 1998, Watershed was a traditional arts centre with a couple of cinema screens, a photography gallery, education department, café/bar and of course the usual battles between cinema and photography, or educators wanting to do their own thing.



In 1999 we hooked up to broadband (150mbps) via a closed network being run by Bristol University computer science department. This was an experiment to see what the media industry could do with a high-speed bandwidth link, but it also made Watershed realise that the world was about to change. It got us very excited and we tried to encourage people to engage in this new medium so a project called '*Electric December*' was devised. It was structured like an advent calendar, with people asked to make virtual chocolates. The participants ranged from local schools to Aardman Animation and the BBC. Conceived as a one-off project, Watershed published content as a reward to the people participating and to encourage them to share with each other, so they would learn from it. *Electric December* is now an annual event.

[Dick showed a range of films here that are online at www.watershed.co.uk as examples of what can happen when creative people come together, use what's to hand and think out of the box]

Digital technology has pushed Watershed into spaces they wouldn't normally expect. As technology is always new, it is constantly pushing Watershed to innovate. For example, it was realised that many projects required a great deal of new material to be produced and shown outside the creative programme. This was creating many new relationships. The team therefore realised that they had to try and find out who all these people were: audiences, collaborators, participants. This process helped them understand how they were perceived and what they represented.

People had, and have a very strong affinity for the idea of Watershed; the team realised that it was on the same journey as many other people, and they began to trust the audience. This is a hard thing to do, because it is natural to want to put your own ideas out there. In turn this caused the team to ask itself several questions:

- Who are we?
- What is Watershed?
- What does it mean?
- What does "media centre" mean?
- What does art mean?

Everyone has these conversations, but Watershed was creating more products to distribute and publish and more of this was online, although it wasn't the intention to have an online gallery at that time. Responding to this, Watershed created a space called dShed, and it has become a classic museum store room. (<http://www.dshed.net/navigation/>)

Mixing it up

[Dick showed another film, a pastiche on the stereotypical French rural drama, made by a couple of lads in Bristol and shot in Somerset]

As a result of this film, Watershed got to know the two filmmakers, showcased their work and then introduced them to people (and has continued to work with them on projects). That is, Watershed knows the local talent and also knows how to persuade this talent to engage with the audience as well as producers.

Mixing it all up is important, but just as the soup becomes richer, an organisation's role in it becomes increasingly complex. In Watershed's case, it helped drive forward its redevelopment. As a result of all the changes, the team was increasingly aware that the building (converted in 1982) was no longer fit for purpose. In addition, a great deal more money was being spent than was being earned because of the increase in activity. Once funding had been found to redevelop the building, much time was spent figuring out what Watershed was good at, and what it was doing that no one else was. It was time to make some choices.

Watershed decided that although it was interested in photography, with a strong group of exhibitors, booked out darkrooms and sold out courses, this would be dropped so as to focus on digital work. This was a digital media world we didn't yet understand but we recognised the inevitability of its growing importance.



This transformation didn't happen overnight or in a vacuum: months were spent working with other people in the city to relocate the darkrooms (to a much better environment) and a member of staff was placed with the new people for six months to get them up and running.

Nonetheless, the focus changed to the moving image and digital work; Watershed was one of the first cinemas in the country to have full digital capacity. It can still use Super 8 and double headed 16 mm, so digital hasn't replaced everything, it just makes the world more complicated.

Watershed wasn't just refurbished, but significantly changed. As we now had an appreciation of audiences' and artists' expectations, it was clear that we had to keep the doors open. This was achieved through spacing the building work out over a two year period. Although this was hard at times for everybody (especially the two days when they were digging out the lift shaft), Watershed learned to be more honest about its modes of communication. Sometimes we forget and start putting the adjectives in again, at which point we beat ourselves up and get conversational again.

Joining it all up

The refurbishment and these experiences pushed Watershed to become a more joined-up organisation, because we had learned that people valued the *whole* organisation. There was a painful process of bringing the programming team together as one, and we received

criticism for not having a dedicated education team. However, everything had to be about learning and creating a learning environment.



We understood that we were not just making and selling products, but offering an experience. As part of the capital project the public space in the building was flooded with free wireless, which transformed the spaces. Suddenly the social space became an active space where people did business, where people were not consuming, but getting active.

Watershed began to push the idea of innovation and persuade people to go further. A young people's group was set up on a website called eShed.net that they run themselves. Again, Watershed just provided the space and means. Last year eShed made a European-wide project and went to Brussels to talk about it. We also organised a project called Electric Village which brought together people from across the city, all walks of life, talking about and making creative representations of their city, and then coming together to talk about it.

It's not about the product, but the experience.

Watershed needed to understand what it was that people valued about the institution and at the same time to find a means of articulating what the staff believed. So in 2007, it reprised its independent research and held a series of staff workshops. The approval ratings which came back from the research were ridiculous but revealed that people felt Watershed represented a way of thinking and behaving and had a range of values with which they wanted to be associated.

The workshops led to five core values being identified:

- People Led
- Entrepreneurial
- Make Things Work
- Open and Honest
- Celebratory

The one that required most work was "celebratory" because people felt guilty if work was fun. However, Watershed is good at giving collaborators, partners, visitors, customers and participants fun experiences, so we are working at being friendly to one another as well.

Watershed decided it had to step out of the art world and get into another business space where it could do what other people wanted, with the organisation being the glue in the middle. A new offshoot was launched; the iShed Community Interest Company, which delivers cultural brokerage, connecting organisations, knowledge and research through collaborations across the media, arts and technology sectors. This also allayed the fears of traditional funders that Watershed was spending money on innovation with people who might not be artists.

It's all very much about the exchange: the idea of putting on a play, a film or whatever sparks something in a person that gets them thinking and conversing; they take this on into the next day or the next step in their lives.

In 2008, the Creative Economy Programme started to publish case studies on innovation and 'next practice'. Not only did Watershed recognise the language, but felt validated in what it had been doing. It is natural to need a bit of validation, and so this keynote is offered in the spirit of sharing ideas.

The team is constantly asking itself how it can keep renewing and continuing relationships: nobody wants to be on their own. What the arts does, is bring people together to create fresh conversations and encourage new thinking. Technology, if used appropriately, can encourage people to be more social and collaborate around what matters to them. So although digital is disruptive, it is positively disruptive.

At the moment, we are trying to understand what it is that drives the business, how we make choices, trying to reconcile the balance between making money (which we all have to do) and the purpose of making money. At the moment, Watershed believes it's also about making meaning, making meaning to you, about the world, in whatever way necessary.

Watershed Media Centre is now made up of three different companies:

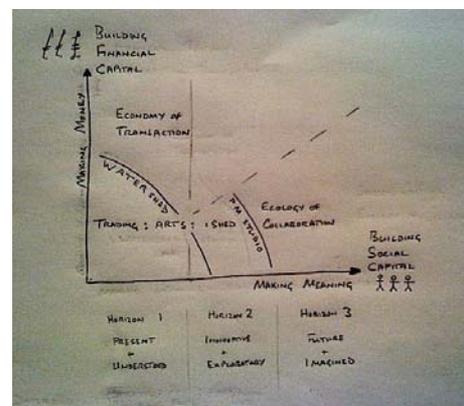
- the arts trust is relatively conventional, but operates at regional level
- the trading company operates commercial activities like catering and conferences
- iShed, which is about innovation

At the moment, we are trying to learn how to cycle the meaning back into moneymaking and the money back into the meaning. It's a work in progress.

Horizons

Working with Graham Lester, Watershed is exploring the application of time horizons from the world of financial planning. Horizon One is the dominant model and we all know what it means. In Horizon Two, people know there's a new world out there which we need to push forward into and innovate within. Horizon Three is a far out, imagined future.

Watershed can identify with this model; we often feel cross because we can't quite articulate and imagine this Horizon Three future and feel that Horizon One is always trying to pull us backwards. We're always trading transactions in Horizon One and pushing ideas into Horizon Three, but then getting it all shaken up. Watershed is about providing spaces where things can happen. It doesn't really matter whether they are physical spaces, intellectual spaces or virtual spaces.



We are increasingly moving into a world where it's fresh thinking, new ideas and new ways of doing things that are going to drive both the economic and social economy. Technology is an enabler, but we are people, analogue beings, who like to get excited.

Watershed is still learning and this is what I'd like you to take away:

If you keep learning you will find that your organisation is more interesting and people will want to join you.

Questions

What about the lo-fi, hi-fi crossover? The Watershed was saying that it was easier to deliver innovation through digital arts and moving forward, but didn't see the potential in moving forward with lo-fi arts. Isn't real innovation actually engaging the darkroom procedure in an innovative digital way, so the two are collaborating, instead of ditching one set of skills? Is there not a danger that we will have a digital overload and nobody will understand what a darkroom is? Shouldn't we be engaging those two things so that they work together more?

DP: The reality for Watershed is that we have finite resources and ultimately had to make a choice. If an organisation wants to do something new, unless it has a lot of money, something else has to stop. Watershed still works with photographers and still has lots of photography resources. Although Watershed has certain strategies, they never have a strategy about being X or Y, just working with people. What's more, we didn't have enough resources to do it properly, whereas we felt we could do digital work excellently. Digital is not some kind of nirvana, it's just another technology, albeit probably the biggest shift since the printing press.

Do you have any thoughts on how you create this open social space for people to experiment and innovate in but stop it becoming cliquy or closed off to people that don't jump straight in?

DP: Watershed doesn't have a specific way of dealing with this; most of the projects are collaborative and we try to run them through open calls. We recently launched a new sort of programme of commissions, called Media Sandbox. People were invited to come to a full day where they were tasked with pitching their ideas at each other and coming up with the criteria for the judging panel to select their proposals. So the community of interest came up with the criteria.

People didn't all know each other, so it seemed to be a successful way of bringing in new people. Watershed's new media studio is only used on a short-term, project by project basis, so there is a steady turnover and connections with new users.

Finally, Watershed always insists that every commission shares the learning with the rest of the community. Another thing that keeps the team honest is that the cafe/bar is a very open space, and we all do work in it, having meetings, etc. So people will come and grab you to talk about things, ask what's going on. Having said all that, there is no doubt that cliques are created, you just have to break them, and move on.