Sharing learning: Cauldrons and Furnaces / Crochan a Ffwrnais
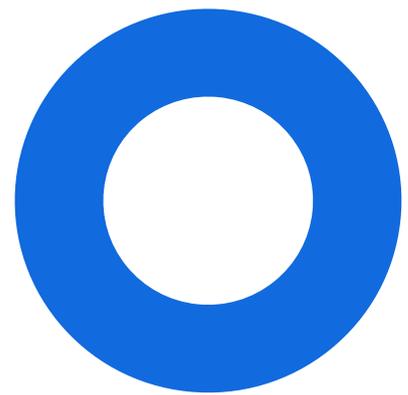
CENTRE FOR CULTURAL VALUE

Managing multiple agendas and ownership in complex, large-scale projects

"My older, wiser, more cynical self would ask my buoyant, enthusiastic, younger self if I should have asked a fundamental question before this all began… Whose project is this?"
Clare Williams, Director of Cauldrons & Furnaces

What's the story?

12 years ago I embarked on one of the largest freelance engagements of my life. I was to co-ordinate an ambitious partnership between the [Arts Council of Wales](#) and [Cadw](#), the Welsh Government's heritage arm. The four year project was called Cauldrons and Furnaces / Crochan a Ffwrnais, and was funded by the Legacy Trust UK, as part of the 2012 Cultural Olympiad. The ambition was 'to tell extraordinary stories in extraordinary places' and involved eight projects in six Welsh castles (Denbigh, Flint, Laugharne, Harlech, Caernarfon, and Caerphilly), a palace (St Davids, Pembrokeshire) and an ironworks (Blaenavon, Welsh Valleys).

As Project Director, I was tasked with finding delivery partners who would galvanise young people to respond creatively to the stories of their local monument. The idea was that these stories would be told through visual arts, craft, storytelling, dance, drama, music, film and digital technology and would culminate in a series of exhibitions and performances at the designated heritage sites in the summer of 2012.

Hindsight is a great thing. My older, wiser, more cynical self would ask my buoyant, enthusiastic, younger self if I should have asked a fundamental question before this all began: Whose project is this? Was it owned by the heritage sector who were managing the project; by the local authorities and local arts organisations who were delivering the individual projects; or by the London funders? It wouldn't have mattered if only it hadn't mattered SO much to all the players involved. Failure to ask these questions was the root of four years of low level friction and frustration, and jostling for ownership between various funders, organisations and authorities.

Mabinogi at Harlech Castle,
Photo credit: Ben Davies

What's the learning?

I have outlined some of these questions below that arose from managing relationships throughout the project: with the heritage sector, the communities taking part, and the funders. I have also identified some key learning points related to event delivery, community engagement, and evaluating the success and legacy of the project.

1. Managing relationships with the heritage sector

Key questions:

Why did a government heritage organisation sign up to be part of the Cultural Olympiad in Wales?
- Was it a genuine passion to engage with young people and the arts? Or was the staging of some big events in summer 2012 involving thousands of young people a convenient tool for meeting their targets for increasing visitor numbers?
- Did they understand that having hundreds of school children traipsing through their monuments might upset the tourists?
- Did the staff have the time, skill, or will to work on such a large-scale project? In fact, did they even all know that it was happening?

Key learning: Event delivery

Events in ancient monuments need event management expertise. The delivery partners were selected because of their effectiveness as project managers and their skill at delivering workshops in their communities. The skills required for project management are different to event management: **great project managers don't necessarily make great event managers.** None of the delivery partners had ever mounted a large-scale production in an ancient monument and many became unstuck – some logistically and some financially. When there is no seating, power, toilets, disability access, or broadband, and when nothing can be stuck in the ground or attached to the walls, events can cost a shed-load of money. The cost of mounting an event for one day can far exceed the cost of an entire four-year project!

2. Managing relationships with communities

Key questions:

Why did local stakeholders want to be involved?
- Did the local authorities and arts organisations sign up to be part of this project because they wanted a slice of the Olympic action or because they wanted a share of the cash?
- Were the delivery partners shoe-horning Cauldrons and Furnaces into an existing programme or were they shoe-horning an existing project into Cauldrons and Furnaces?
- Were the monuments simply dramatic (and free) backdrops for local authorities to showcase their existing community arts programmes?

Key learning: Community engagement

If community engagement is a priority, then project planning and delivery needs to provide opportunities for participation and flexibility to fit the needs of each context. One delivery partner (a community arts organisation) deliberately set out at the beginning of the project in 2008 not knowing what the 2012 result would be. They allowed their project to grow organically. They took a few wrong turns and went down a cul-de-sac, but in the final few weeks drew together all the strongest elements of the project to share with an audience. The performance was patchy but the commitment and sense of ownership that the participants felt was palpable.

By contrast, another project (managed by the local authority) knew exactly what they wanted to achieve. This was both their strength and their weakness. The hundreds of young people seemed like puppets in the grand master plan. The end result was spectacular, but the actual creative input of the young people was minimal and the engagement of the community was incidental. These two examples demonstrate that we can measure success very differently.

3. Managing relationships with funders

Key questions:

Unsurprisingly, what Legacy Trust UK wanted from the project was for there to be a legacy. But a legacy for who?
- Did they have a genuine commitment to young people and the arts or were the projects a tool for promoting their own brand?
- Were they more interested in the participation targets or in the artistic work being produced?
- Finally, as £40,000 of Legacy Trust UK's money was designated to each of the eight projects, being matched (and sometimes exceeded) by the local authorities, how would this affect whose agenda took precedence?

Key learning: Evaluating 'success'

Numbers don't tell the whole story. 26,000 participants over the 4 years of the project with 1,400 performing to an audience of 12,000 at 17 live performances. 60 exhibition days, 900 costumes, 7 dragons… the list goes on. So was this an unqualified success? Unfortunately, the success of Cauldrons and Furnaces was largely measured quantitively rather than qualitatively. What the stats don't reflect is the enormous sea-change of local people no longer seeing the iconic Welsh monuments as symbols of English subjugation of their ancestors – but as arenas which they can reclaim, and where their own stories can be told. In the words of a 15-year-old girl in Caerphilly: 'Since I was little, I have looked out of my bedroom window at the castle. Since Cauldrons and Furnaces I can now walk into the castle rather than around it'.

For me and many others, this is what made Cauldrons and Furnaces a project of immense and lasting significance. All the jostling for ownership between the various funders, organisations and authorities had come to naught. The monuments (and the projects inside them) belonged wholly to the communities and young people.

Additional resources and information

'Cauldrons and Furnaces' was a partnership between Cadw, the Welsh Government's historic environment service and Arts Council of Wales. Cauldrons and Furnaces was part of the Wales-wide project, 'Power of the Flame', which was funded by the Legacy Trust UK to create a lasting impact from the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games by funding ideas and local talent to inspire creativity across the UK.

You can watch a Arts Wales video about the project here and a highlights video from CADW Wales here.

Access to Legacy Trust UK evaluation reports can be found here.

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