Creating Community Cohesion: The Power of Using Innovative Methods to Facilitate Engagement and Genuine Partnership

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National policies implemented at local level require marginalised community groups to work with public sector agencies and professionals. It can be a significant challenge to work across these boundaries. This article explores how creative and visual methods can be used to support people from so-called 'hard-to-reach' groups to articulate complex thoughts and ideas, and communicate their experience of living in their communities. Examples are drawn from the authors' recent work in the north of England on regeneration and social cohesion, in which university staff collaborated on separate projects in partnership with – and driven by – community groups.

Introduction

In many spheres of public life, partnership arrangements between public bodies and the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) are expected as a major vehicle for delivering public policy objectives, enhancing democratic participation and building community (Audit Commission, 1998). Partnership processes need to find ways of encouraging engagement and participation, and they face challenges concerned with power and legitimacy. These issues are particularly acute in relation to the involvement of marginalised community groups. In this article, we aim to explore the contribution of different creative methods in forging meaningful partnerships between universities, the VCS and health and regeneration professionals working to strengthen community cohesion. In particular, we will illustrate the use of storytelling, creative writing, visual methods (film, and photography) and table top board games. Following this discussion, we summarise the key advantages of creative methods of engagement across traditional boundaries.

Watson (2003: 16) suggests that a recent shift in higher education policy and practice, in favour of moves towards greater public and community engagement (HEFCE, 2006; Wellings, 2008), represents a fundamental shift in values and purpose for universities:

> In terms of community it presents a challenge to universities to be of and not just in the community; not simply to engage in 'knowledge-transfer' but to establish a dialogue across the boundary between the university and its community which is open-ended, fluid and experimental.

In response to this challenge, we experimented with the use of creative methods of engagement within a wider university–community engagement project – Urban Regeneration: Making a Difference (UR-MAD).

UR-MAD was a four-university,[1] collaborative project funded by the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE). The UR-MAD consortium received the Times Higher Education,

Management and Leadership Award in 2010 for Community Engagement. In addition to facilitating inter-university collaboration, the aim of UR-MAD was:

> To address key urban regeneration challenges in the North of England though interdisciplinary collaboration between the partner universities and practitioner organisations, particularly in the public and voluntary sectors, and to enhance their collective impact on society. (UR-MAD, 2006: 1)

> [reflecting] The need to tackle the real, complex problems facing communities in the Northern region, where social, economic and physical infrastructure issues are closely inter-twined. (UR-MAD, 2006: 3)

In order to participate in UR-MAD, staff from the universities were required to collaborate to work on separate projects in partnership with – and driven by – community groups. The authors were responsible for managing and delivering sixteen projects within UR-MAD, all in partnership with VCS organisations, and all focusing on the twin themes of community cohesion and urban regeneration. Most of these projects adopted innovative and creative methods of engagement. In the next section, we summarise the project activities and challenges, and explain the theoretical concepts that informed our approach to meaningful engagement and partnership. Then we take examples from specific projects to explore the processes we used. Finally, we draw on these examples to discuss the benefits of these creative processes of engagement for bringing together policy makers, academics, practitioners and members of the VCS.

Range of activities and partnerships

From the outset, academics in UM-MAD recognised the suspicion of universities held by VCS groups. Universities were seen as places that people did not get involved with. Potential community partners were harsher in their assessment of the challenge (Kagan and Duggan, 2008: 7).

> We don't believe you want a genuine partnership. With academia, it never feels as if the balance is right because knowledge is power and academics tend to have a kind of knowledge which is conveyed in a language which seems to be more powerful than the language used in communities. Our language is as valuable . . . and is the meat of the very work you produce.

These barriers to partnerships and to engagement are similar to those in other areas of community engagement, involvement or participation. Indeed, van Winden (2009) makes the link between university–community engagement and forms of participation used in other spheres, as reflected by Arnstien's (1969) ladder of participation, in which the higher up the ladder the more likely is empowerment and the lower down the more tokenistic participation will appear and the more likely it is to contribute to disillusionment (see Brodie *et al.*, 2009).

   The challenge for us – as it is for other engagement practices – was to find ways of engaging with the VCS that would bring people together across traditional boundaries in ways that were meaningful, enjoyable and where possible empowering; and would be capable of engaging people beyond those direct participants. The standard tools of

academia – talk, chalk (or contemporary equivalents) and written reports would do none of these things in the context of partnerships with the VCS, and may, indeed, underpin *dis*engagement. As a consequence, we encouraged the use of different and varied methods of engagement.

Williams' (1954) classic work on culture reminds us that cultural identity and difference is to be found in the mundane, the everyday experience of people's lives. The methods we will go on to describe built on such implicit understandings of the everyday through familiar cultural mechanisms, such as art, storytelling, conversations, creative writing and photography. The methods also enabled sharing such understanding – of enabling people to encounter the mundane of other people's lives. Not only does this shared activity generate insight into self and the other (at individual or group levels), but it leads to a transformation of how people see themselves as cultural and social actors.

Vygotsky's socio-cultural and activity theory might provide a useful framework for understanding the processes involved (Stewart and Kagan, 2008). Van Vlaenderen (2004: 136) summarises the activity theory perspective:

> Activity theorists argue that in order to understand the nature of the interaction between people, one needs to focus on the joint activity in which they are involved. Human behaviour is seen as socially and culturally mediated towards a purpose, obtaining meaning within a social context.

To develop new practice (in our case greater engagement), there needs to be alignment between social, cultural and historical factors. Social factors or relationships include the ways that project workers work with different participants and address issues of support, facilitation and power. Cultural factors include the ways things happen, in our case the creative and innovative processes, and the extent to which these are understood as legitimate cultural processes. Historical factors include the current context in which the activities take place, resources available and so on. Thus, the involvement of artists, with specific expertises, and researchers provided new resources to inject into the projects. Of central importance in activity theory is the product (or object) of the activity (in our case the films, anthologies, magazines, game solutions), which emerge from the activity itself and lead to changed relationships between those involved. These techniques were used as a means of creating interest and motivation, and thereby of involving people and gaining their participation, and/or as a means of working together in new ways across a partnership, delivering a research, training or developing project, and/or as a means of communicating messages arising from projects more widely.

Figure 1 illustrates how the creative processes of engagement contribute to co-created cultural practices.

We now describe some of the processes used in more detail.

Creative and innovative methods of engagement

There is a range of different creative and innovative methods of engagement, many of which revolve around participatory arts (Holding, 2008).Here we will focus in turn on the use in individual projects of storytelling, creative writing and visual methods (film and photography). Then we discuss how we developed table-top board games as a way to achieve wider engagement and critical thinking about the issues that emerged from the projects for the many VCS organisatons that participated.
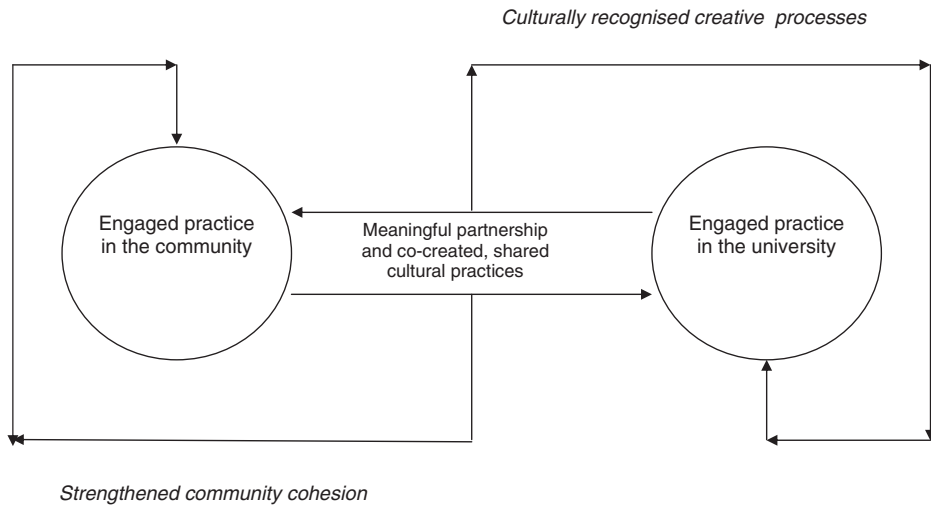
Figure 1. Creative processes of engagement leading to co-created cultural practices across the partnership.

Storytelling

The telling and sharing of stories is well understood by people of all ages across many different cultures. In some cultures, it remains a traditional form of highlighting dilemmas and resolving conflicts within communities (Chin and Rudelius-Palmer, 2010). It is a means of capturing and celebrating achievements from the past and ensuring they stay alive over time (Langellier, 2010). Stories can be reproduced in written or visual forms or can remain as spoken connections between people. Storytelling featured in a number of projects in different ways. One of these projects was entitled 'Active and positive parenting: intergenerational conflict amongst the Somali and Yemeni men'. It sought to find ways of resolving intergenerational conflict amongst Somali and Yemeni men. The project arose from longer-term work on migration, identity and community cohesion with one of the project partners, Building Bridges (Fatimilehin and Dye, 2003). The issue of intergenerational conflict amongst men in the communities had emerged as a growing problem for families and communities and, through extensive consultation with community groups, it was agreed to work together across the generations to share experiences and create greater intergenerational understanding. Members of the community were keen to employ what they saw as traditional cultural mechanisms, namely storytelling (see Ahmed, 1996) in sharing experiences. There were two stages to the project: the first was a sharing of life experiences across the generations, and the second involved some further creative activities exploring identity, culture and conflict. Storytelling featured in the first stage for both communities and the second stage for young Somali men (young Yemeni men worked to make a film during the second stage, as discussed below).

Some meal-based narrative workshops were organised which enabled younger and older men to come together and to share narratives or stories of their experiences crossing cultures (see, for example, Denborough, 2008 for accounts of collective narrative work building on techniques originating in narrative therapy). They prepared both 'concern'

(of difficulties experienced) narratives, and 'solution' (or positive retelling of the story) narratives. Other people (mostly public sector professionals) were involved in the event as 'witnesses', whose role was to facilitate feedback that resonated with the hopes, values, dreams, strengths and coping strategies revealed in the stories and discussions. Through this use of storytelling, different partners were brought together, including community members, our project workers, and also some of the professionals working in the area whose relationships with the communities had, up to this point, been strained. In addition, the younger and older men gained new understanding and insights into each other's life worlds. One of the younger men said, 'Today made me feel sorry for the fathers and I realised the difficult times they go through.'

An older man said, 'The cultural and psychological effects struck me – I felt sympathetic and frustrated listening to the sons' story and how difficult life was. It is painful to hear, I felt touched not realising how much the children suffer.'

The professionals involved also gained new understanding. As one of the professional witnesses said, 'I had no idea that two stories could co-exist. Usually generating solutions does not leave enough space for negative stories . . . [here] both positive and negative stories were present.'

These narrative workshops, although an effective means of engaging people using culturally appropriate methods, took a great deal of organising beforehand, and also on the day, in terms of continuing to encourage attendance, particularly amongst younger men. Everyone who attended reported enjoying the sessions, although they were often emotionally demanding. Furthermore, the young Somali men were motivated to go and consider the issues through further creative writing workshops and the production of a magazine.

Creative writing, journalism and magazine production

In order to continue to explore issues of identity across cultures and generations, the young Somali men opted to produce a magazine, building on the initial storytelling activities. The young men worked with a publisher to design the layout, and to research, produce and write articles that ranged from information about Somalia and its history, childhood and family traditions in Somalia, childhood experiences of their parents' generation and 'advice' about how to handle the pressures of life in the UK for older and younger Somalis. They learnt some basic interviewing skills and conducted some interviews with older men who were able to tell them about their lives as children in Somalia and about some of the cultural traditions. Just as in the narrative workshops discussed above, these interview encounters brought younger and older men in contact with each other in a new space, beyond the usual familial spaces characterised by conflict and difference. As magazine journalists, the young men were able to interact positively and constructively with men from the older generation and vice versa. A high-quality magazine was produced that is a source of pride for all members of the community and is being used for wider educational purposes. The experience was summed up by one of the young men:

> The project was enjoyable. We all wanted to do something interesting, finding out about things, about how the community came about; when we came here and what the situation was like. Meeting fathers regularly we are gaining more knowledge. The more we talked to fathers the more we found out. (Kagan, 2008: 34)

During the process of producing the magazine, the young men faced a number of challenges, including an incident wherein one of their friends was murdered. There was a danger this would stall the project. However, in large part due to the strong rapport that had been built up between the project workers and the young men, and the trust that had grown between them, it was possible to include different groups' reactions to the incident in the magazine. Thus, the young men were able to turn their sorrow and anger in a productive way. Not only was the process one that engaged, but the creative activity tapped into further experiences of crossing cultures and gave voice to a group of young men that would not otherwise have been heard. They too were left with new skills and with a high-quality product they could 'own'. The impact of the magazine as it is used for training and educational purposes continues beyond the life of the original project.

The second use of creative writing is illustrated by 'Writing Lives' – a creative writing project which was aimed at young isolated women.[2] A creative writing workshop was offered to young women who were predominately single mothers who were isolated through lack of esteem or confidence. The workshops focused on the themes of communities, maps, identity and belonging and used pen-to-paper and spoken work techniques. Through the workshops, the women built up trust with each other and with the poets. This empowered the group to take risks in their learning and in their creative writing. Over time, their confidence in sharing ideas, feelings and created work grew. An evaluation of the project reported:

> Some of the young women spoke of the project as a space that enable them to be creative, to step outside of the routine in an existence that largely deprived them of this freedom . . . [they] were encouraged to develop their use of language to reflect on and re-engage with their local community. (Froggett *et al.*, 2008: 5)

The workshops gave the women a different, safe space to be themselves and 'do' culture. This space was one that was free from responsibility and encouraged reflection. The women enhanced their literacy skills, critical thinking and practical writing skills. In addition, this form of engagement built cultural capital (understanding, awareness and knowledge), enabling the participants to look at themselves and their communities differently.

As part of the workshop, each session was also filmed in two ways: (i) through a static camera that was placed in the corner, and (ii) by a hand-held camera operated by the workshop participants, capturing what they thought important. The use of the hand-held camera was particularly interesting as some group members wanted nothing to do with this (either as camerawoman or by being filmed) until relatively later on. It was clear that as their confidence grew in relation to their membership of the group and the poetry they produced, so their willingness to participate in the visual aspects of the project increased. Some of those unwilling to be involved in the filming early on, later demanded control of the camera and directed others about how they should capture them, themselves, on the film.

In this project, creative writing and sharing of fictional or autobiographical stories was the tool of engagement. Following the initial set of writing workshops, the women worked with a book artist, and a book art exhibition was held in the library at the centre of the local regeneration area, thus promoting wider engagement.

In all of these examples, engagement and involvement was facilitated by the storytelling process. As a result of participating in the storytelling, those involved not

only contributed to community cohesion and regeneration processes, but they also acquired skills: of story production, refinement, listening, feedback, narrative production and reproduction. Many of the participants have also talked about their experiences to other community or academic audiences and this has added an additional dimension of engagement and skill.

Most importantly, what these examples illustrate is the importance of creating safe and alternative relational spaces; that is, of physically departing from familiar places and people and meeting with others in a new space, with a new reason to develop relationships around creativity and storytelling. This is an important lesson for engagement of the VCS, and one that is often overlooked in engagement practice.

In addition to voice and pen-to-paper methods, visual methods were also found to be useful. Whilst these can include a number of visual methods (see Banks, 2001 for visual research methods), we are going to discuss film and photography.

Film

We saw that film was a part of the 'Writing Lives' project. It was the major vehicle of engagement for some of the other projects. One of them was 'Record from the Outside',[3] which explored migrations, victimisation and identity transformations through film making (Knudsen, 2008). The project set out to involve marginalised individuals within the local ethnic minority communities of a small town in gaining skills necessary for them to make documentary films. As the evaluation of the project pointed out:

> Reaching out to 'hidden' communities is a difficult job but the project did well to attract the participants it did . . . [participants] felt that not only had they learned something valuable about media production, but that they had learned something about their community, and . . . made new friends and acquaintances . . . beyond their own ethnic contexts. (Knudsen, 2008: 2)

Indeed, an informal, intercultural–cultural group continued to meet after the end of the project.

In this project, people from different local international communities were invited to take part in a series of workshops in which they talked about their experiences of living in Britain as foreigners, racial identity as second generation citizens and other issues close to their hearts. They learnt about film theory and various techniques of film making and editing. They were encouraged to think about the locality and life in the local area and to explore the local area through filming. As they did this, they met many local people through interviews and filming. Not only did they make documentary films about identity, home, racism and life in England, they also learnt skills, worked with students and got to know more about the possibilities of universities – and some enrolled for university courses!

Five high-quality short films were produced and through their national distribution (including one being shortlisted for an international documentary film festival), wider engagement was achieved.

Following the narrative workshops described above, young Yemeni men decided they wanted to continue discussing migration issues and do this at the same time as making a film about being young, Yemeni and Liverpudlian. They worked with a film production company and members of the university–community project to write the script and produce the film. The film consisted of a number of different sketches and a

variety of film and production techniques were used, including talking heads, 1930s style public information broadcast and role-played scenarios.

In the course of making the film, the young men learnt some basic interviewing skills and interviewed older men from the community. In the same way as with producing the magazine for the Somali youths, this gave opportunities for intergenerational encounters in new, safe spaces, away from the normal conflicts of everyday life. The young men worked in groups to explore the complexity of their experiences and gained a fuller understanding of the diversity and differences in their experiences of being young, Yemeni and British. The film employed humour to good effect and, again, this offered different and safe ways of communicating what were often painful experiences of older generations. The film has been shown to groups of the wider migrant and host communities (including public sector workers) and has been part of a continuation project that compiled an educational resource for wider distribution. Not only did making the film maintain participants' interest and motivation, it also enabled them to develop skills and to produce a high-quality product, which they could own. The use of film for engagement in this context was highly successful. At one of the wider community dissemination events, at which the film was shown, one of them said:

> We got together with the film director to talk about the issues and then made the film. I know some teenagers with problems with families, and when their fathers see the film, they may learn about their children and different ways of communicating. (Kagan, 2008: 35)

Most of the young men involved in making the film also took various parts within the film. They did this willingly and with a full understanding and control over what was included. Nevertheless, when the film was being shown at a public event one year later, one of the participants (who had been twelve at the time of filming) was upset about seeing himself in a sketch where he was playing a 'father' with traditional attitudes. Whilst the film was a useful tool for engagement as it was being made, and continues to be, as it is shown to different audiences, the issue of permissions might need to be revisited on a regular rather than one-off basis, to ensure all participants have the opportunity to give ongoing consent for the film to be used (or not). This would apply to all uses of film as a tool for engagement.

Table-top games

Across the individual projects discussed above, and the whole UR-MAD project, a number of complex issues facing VCS organisations emerged. Between forty and sixty VCS groups, including, for example, residents' associations, development trusts, cooperatives, sports and leisure voluntary groups, schools, youth clubs, migrant associations, women's groups, arts projects and advice and information projects, were directly involved across the projects. However, the issues they gave voice to touch the concerns of many more. To capture some of these issues and to encourage wider discussion and engagement with them through training and education, we have created a number of table-top (or floor!) games.

Simulations and games have been used in training and development activities in a number of different arenas (e.g. Smalley and Saunders, 2000; Dearling, 2002; NEF, nd; Yonas *et al.*, 2009). We called our games, '*games for participation and conscientisation*' (Kagan and Duggan, in press). Following Paulo Friere (1973), we think of them as 'codes'

to stimulate discussion and collective awareness or 'conscientisation' (Hope and Timmer, 1999). The games are card and board games, in familiar formats, designed to stimulate discussion and ideas and to explore strategies for change. The advantages of games are that they: are non-hierarchical, can accommodate between six and sixty people playing simultaneously in groups, can help build relationships as they are played, can stimulate ideas across professional and life course boundaries, can take place in a safe environment where it is possible to experiment with ideas, and are nearly always good fun! As long as the rules are easy to understand, and not too many groups members harbour desires always to win at all costs (in most of our games there are no winners), games not only engage community members, but also professionals in creative and effective ways. One of those who had played the games in an international workshop commented (Kagan and Duggan, in press), 'Encourages discussion and reflection – makes you think outside the box.'

Experiences of the games reflected the dynamics of the group – some groups changed rules. They also raised issues of competition and cooperation. As tools for engagement, they build on everyday cultural practices of games and include familiar everyday formats that seem to have widespread applicability: most importantly, they are fun. Just as many table-top games can be played within families, so the games for conscientisation transcend age and background.

Discussion

We have given an overview of some of the different creative and innovative methods that have been used to enable meaningful engagement and partnership between universities and parts of the VCS. It is worth considering why it is that they might be effective. Why might innovative methods facilitate engagement and community cohesion? The different methods we have presented above illustrate a number of common features:

- a flattening of existing hierarchies and levelling of power relationships;
- the importance of collective work for generating critical awareness;
- the creation of new relational spaces – new ways for people to come together and meet in different physical and relational spaces;
- the stimulation of new ways of seeing people and places;
- the stimulation of ideas and thoughts linked to the capacity to relate back to concrete realities and living situations;
- the generation of aesthetic products that contribute not only to the skills and esteem of those direct participants, but also to wider engagement across group boundaries and community cleavages;
- the empowerment of participants through confidence building, skills acquisition and the development of collective awareness;
- the awareness that the processes were fun and enjoyable, but capable of touching and helping people resolve deep-seated emotional issues.

It may be enough to simply suggest that because they are fun, generate new relationships in safe contexts, involve skills development as well as different forms of communication across social divides, these methods facilitate engagement. Barker and Weller (2003) argue that 'fun' is a central factor in developing child-centred research methods and this might equally apply to methods of engagement more generally. Figure 2 illustrates
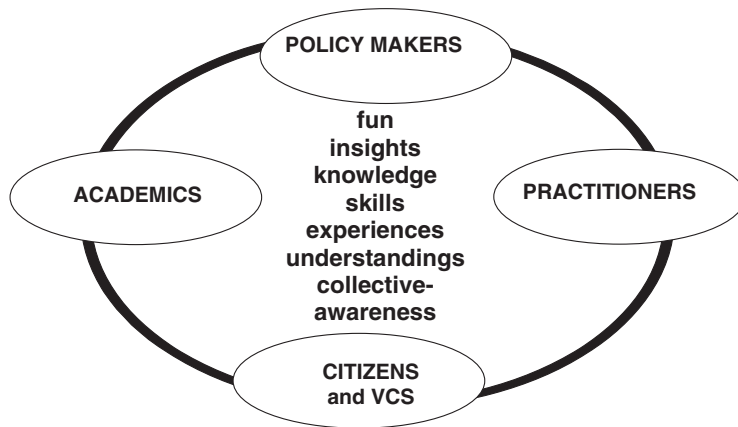
Figure 2. The Benefits of creative methods of engagement bringing together policy makers, practitioners, academics and the VCS.

the benefits of creative processes of engagement for bringing together policy makers, academics, practitioners and members of the VCS. Perhaps we, in universities and other public bodies, need to pay more serious attention to the fun element of engagement and partnership if we want and expect those who will freely be giving up their time to work meaningfully with us.

Conclusion

We have drawn on our experiences of managing and delivering university–community engaged projects that focused on community cohesion in the context of urban regeneration. We have described how storytelling, creative writing and visual methods facilitated engagement with our projects, but also between groups within our projects. These processes all share a number of features which contribute to the gaining of insight, a shift in communication action contexts from closed to open contexts, and contribute to new ways of being as a result of the activities themselves. In addition, they are capable of engaging many more people indirectly as the products of the engagement processes themselves become the magnets for wider involvement.

There are many examples of community art increasingly being used to engage diverse communities, particularly in the context of regeneration (see for example, Holding, 2008; Sarkisson and Wenman, 2010), and Hawkes (2001) goes further to suggest that culture as a vehicle for engagement and participation is a core pillar of sustainability more generally. What we have presented are some concrete examples of different methods and have attempted to explain why it is that they might be useful in the context of universities engaging with the VCS – not just over social issues like community cohesion or urban regeneration but also, for example, in public engagement more widely (for example, Eames, Mortensen, Adebowale and Iudicissa, 2009).

These creative and innovative methods can enable the three key ways of living together, outlined by DCLG (2008): a shared future vision and sense of belonging; a focus on what new and existing communities have in common alongside a recognition of the

value of diversity; and strong and positive relationships between people from different backgrounds.

Notes

1 Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU); University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN); Salford University and University of Northumbria with Bradford University an associate partner.

2 This project was led by Gaynor Bagnall from Salford University, working in collaboration with others from UCLAN

3 This project was led by Jeongmee Kim from MMU with a sister project being conducted at University of Northumbria. This discussion refers to the MMU part.

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