



Richard Ings reports on the LifeCrafts Conference held earlier this year by the Thames Valley Partnership.

Tales from the river bank

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It is so beautifully designed out of wood and glass that the River and Rowing Museum in Henley on Thames looks as if it could float, should the spring floods prove exceptionally vigorous this year. Devoted to the culture of boats and messing about in them, this unpatronisingly interactive museum is also 'home of the Wind in the Willows', the children's classic by Kenneth Grahame, and has a delightful exhibition bringing this book to life which conference delegates dip into during a busy and very creative day in March, organised by the Thames Valley Partnership.

The day is called, aptly enough, LifeCrafts. Sue Raikes, outgoing chair of Thames Valley Partnership, retells the apocryphal tale of friends on a riverbank seeing people flailing in the water and rescuing them as they rush past until at last someone thinks to ask why they are falling into the river in the first place. Heading upstream is what characterises the Thames Valley Partnership mission and the work that most of the conference delegates are engaged in – probation officers, early intervention workers, teaching staff from Pupil Referral Units, staff from Youth Offending Teams and youth workers – all of them trying to catch

vulnerable young people before they tip over and drown.

It is a day of metaphors, most of them watery. The creative programmes and projects that are discussed and celebrated here are, indeed, life crafts – vessels providing both recovery and skills and resources for life. New ideas for documenting and evaluating this arts-based work are launched today, with a fair wind behind them. People who have not met before buckle down together for workshops in photography, writing and textiles under the captaincy of professional artists, becoming in the process members of a crew – one reason for holding such a conference is that it provides a place where people from different professions can do something that, on their own, they just wouldn't or couldn't do. And that makes them stronger too, 'joined up' in a way that is often talked about but rarely achieved – river-worthy, having been perhaps – like Mole – a bit nervous of dipping a toe in.

Bravery is a theme introduced early on by Jan Paine, now Head of Young People & Access to Education at Oxfordshire County Council, but who speaks mainly from her experience as head of a PRU in Slough. The 'fear

factor' surrounding such institutions and the young people they house is a bit like that felt by Mole when he asks his new friend Ratty what "lies over there", pointing to "woodland that darkly framed the water-meadows". It is, of course, the Wild Wood, where not everyone is as nice as the river-bankers – particularly the "others": the weasels, stoats and foxes. "They are all right in a way", concedes the Rat but "they break out sometimes... and, then – well, you can't really trust them, and that's the fact".

If class politics has become a bit less crude since the period in which Grahame was writing, there is an abiding and widespread suspicion and fear surrounding those people – especially young people – who have drifted out of the mainstream and who challenge authority, sometimes violently. The only way to keep them in check, it seems, is to have Badger at the heart of the Wild Wood, whose name is used to strike fear into naughty children. In fact, although they can be unpredictable and intimidating, walking the cocky walk and talking the talk to the teacher's face, such young people are at bottom, Jan reminds us, deeply vulnerable individuals. Ironically, the very opportunities they need to

rescue themselves from sinking lower in esteem and agency – the trips out, creative activities, lessons that involve exciting experiments with Bunsen burners or craft knives – are denied them. For these 'corridor children', school becomes even duller and less enjoyable, with fewer and fewer chances to socialise and participate until at last they dismiss their lives with a defensive shrug of the shoulders and "...whatever".

Jan earned her reputation as a "dangerous and stupid woman" (a parting shot from a teacher's resignation letter) by challenging all of this and all the assumptions lying behind it. Pupils went on trips, worked in groups rather than one-to-one with a teacher and got into creative activities with almost anyone who wasn't a teacher – from chefs to painters, film-makers to athletes. They opened an art gallery in the school where not one piece was damaged or defaced. They stopped smoking. They celebrated Christmas – "it depresses them" had been the common wisdom – and lo! parents turned up to support their children. All the result of bravery – trying new things, being optimistic, wanting to find things out; accepting failure as a possibility but not fearing failure – and, above all, never giving up. And perhaps remembering that Badger would not have countenanced being used as a threat, as he was in fact "rather fond of children".

Arts at the heart

In arguing the case for arts-based methodologies with funders and policy-makers at higher levels, the Thames Valley Partnership provides an unusually persuasive model: while most organisations making such interventions have come out of the arts sector, and might be perceived by more sceptical outsiders as having a vested interest in developing new 'markets' for their services, Thames Valley Partnership was established in 1993 as a way of combining the resources of organisations from the statutory, voluntary and private sectors to find long-term, sustainable solutions to problems of crime and social exclusion and it is only over the last six years or so that it has made a decisive shift and put 'arts at the heart' of its approach to community safety. That means it discovered for itself the power of the arts as a practical solution to a practical crisis.

Still, however, comes the cry from those sceptics: Prove it! There is no shortage of storytelling and narrative available in the archives – and today Thames Valley Partnership is launching a new website, created in partnership with the Creative Junction (the new face of Creative Partnerships locally); called A Different View, this is a toolkit resource that will enable even those at junior levels of project management to capture the salient experiences, challenges and achievements of those taking part. Its framework of questions, with space for inserting young people's comments and so on, will be hugely helpful in documenting attitudinal change: demonstrating how such projects change hearts and minds – how they offer the public as well as teaching and care staff a different view of young people, and give young people a different view of themselves and their potential. For those less convinced by such testimony, for those who number-crunch and who question the arts sector's rhetoric of transformation, Thames Valley Partnership is now trialling an intriguing new data-based approach to demonstrate the value of its work.

SROI – Social Return on Investment – is a way of measuring the monetary benefit of an organisation's work and was devised in the United States. The Vodafone UK Foundation, which has put a lot of money into social change, is funding a pilot here in the UK. Tania Wickham, who has been working on the trial, takes the audience through a process that ends with a neat formula: in the case of the Urban Beatz project at Beaconsfield School, for example, even a conservative estimate shows that for every pound put into the project, nearly £3 of social costs has been saved. The calculation is based on setting the cost of the intervention against the monetary impact of doing nothing – if, as in this case, one can demonstrate that there has been a substantial improvement in pupil attendance and effort, this can be set against the costs to the education system of exclusion and truancy, the costs of unemployment between 16 and 18 and so on; although Tania did not include them in this study, crime and healthcare costs could also be factored in. This is another toolkit, soon to be on-line – another weapon in the arsenal of persuasion.

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But for this conference, the most persuasive argument for the arts is made by Everything Stopped, a twenty-minute film distilled from a dance project in a PRU in Barnet, a London suburb. Conceived and funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and presented to the conference by arts consultant Nick Randell, it presents an authentic glimpse into the nature of such interventions, not shirking the difficulties but charting the astonishing way in which participants learn and grow through the process.

By the end of the day, there seemed to be a unanimous feeling that the conference had been a great success. One delegate told me:

I loved it – there wasn't a dull moment. I learned practical skills – and realised I don't need great resources to do this kind of work. The talks were inspirational, as was the film. We really need to use the arts more in our work.

This delegate turned out to be an Early Intervention Worker, involved in crime diversion work with younger people, trying to prevent them ending up on a Youth Offending Team – working upstream.

Although the tide seems to have shifted over the last few years in favour of this area of practice, with serious funding flowing into the national Creative Partnerships network to develop it, older organisations like Thames Valley Partnership that have grown organically out of local communities and their needs still seem to be struggling for sustained support. Even taking a wider view, tides are also notorious for going in and out, and – given the distinct tang of change in the political weather at the moment – it seems wise to keep working hard to stay afloat. In this respect, the LifeCrafts conference provided vital ballast. ■

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