

The Battle of Stanhope 1818 (The Bonny Moorhen)

A mix of planning, improvisation & adventure!

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Abstract

In September 2011 Jack Drum Arts (an arts collective based in rural North East England) was awarded Adult Community Learning Funding (ACLF) to help drive a consortium project (under the name of Drama in the Dale) to develop a community play. The story behind the play was of huge significance to the people who would become involved in it.

Six months later, when the play finally was performed in an agricultural shed converted into a theatre the Northern Echo said: *"TWO years will linger in the memory of Stanhope, County Durham – 1818 and 2012"*. 1818 is the date of the story that the play was based on and 2012 refers to the date that the journalist saw the performances. On the opening night Councillor Dennis Morgan, Chairman of Durham County Council, said: *"The community endeavour benefit of Drama in the Dale cannot be measured it must be counted as priceless."*

The project was a huge success in many ways. In bottom line terms the community play enjoyed 3 sold out nights. But there's more to it than that: several people made significant personal journeys, problems were surmounted, lasting bonds were forged and a story was told that participants have taken to their hearts.

At the CIRN conference 2011, Steve Thompson gave a short presentation about the project and spoke of the ambitions for it. The reality exceeded those early ideas and in particular the Community Informatics element was very well taken up, enriching the process, content, communication and learning. The project's core ACLF funding did not fund Thompson's role. The Community Informatics element was funded by an AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) Connected Communities project in partnership with Exeter University: "Issue Based Creative Clusters" (IBCC). This paper will tell the story of the community play from inception to performance and will seek to investigate what made it work and why.

Introduction

The essence of the modern community play is that it tells a story taken from a community's past. Typically the historical setting will be factual while the actual story may be fictitious, but nevertheless makes use of authentic material, and if the play has resonances with today, so much the better.

The community play in this instance was entitled "The Bonny Moorhen", a text which Jack Drum Arts had commissioned from writer Jim Woodland more than 15 years previously and performed as a four-hander. "The Bonny Moorhen" tells of the events leading up to and surrounding a localised conflict known as The Battle Of Stanhope, which took place on December 7th, 1818. The Napoleonic wars had come to an end reducing the demand for lead for bullets; lead mining was an important industry in Weardale so dire poverty ensued. To make ends meet the lead miners took to hunting the 'bonny moorhen', which is a red grouse. Shute Barrington was the Prince Bishop of the day and in the Palatinate County of Durham the Prince Bishop was the ruler and master of the County with both secular and

religious powers. The Prince Bishop was displeased with the poaching lead miners and contended that only he was allowed to hunt the grouse. He assembled an army of gamekeepers and bailiffs and sent them into Weardale to apprehend as many of these poachers as possible. They captured brothers, Charles and Anthony Siddle, and proceeded to take them back to Durham City. They stopped for refreshment on the morning of December 7th 1818 in a pub then known as the Black Bull (now known as The Bonny Moorhen). Charles' and Anthony's friends, family and associates descended on the pub and an almighty battle ensued in which the Prince Bishop's men were defeated and put to flight.

To put things in perspective we should consider the harshness of a lead miner's life with children as young as 8 years old being employed as 'washer boys' and a short life expectancy for all those who worked in the industry. Set against this grim industrial enslavement there was the wide-open beauty of Weardale, and the freedom of the 'bonny moorhen' to fly over the land unimpeded. The Prince Bishop's actions, meanwhile, sought to limit the freedom of the people in Weardale. Men who had worked in the harsh conditions of the lead mines from early childhood were unlikely to be cowed by the Prince Bishop's gamekeepers, and this might explain why the gamekeepers found them so difficult to apprehend, and then having apprehended them, found them so difficult to retain in captivity.

So, this was the story that the community play would tell. Effectively the project began in October 2011 and because of funding conditions the performances needed to take place before the end of March 2012. It was therefore decided that the play would be performed over the penultimate weekend in March and an agricultural shed in Stanhope would be converted into a theatre to accommodate the shows.

Website and Communications

A steering panel was formed to guide the project and first met in September 2011. At this meeting it was agreed that Thompson would set up a production website and establish electronic communications for the project. There was a need to facilitate good e-communication between members of the steering panel, partners, participants and the creative team as well as the general public. It was found that the majority of the people involved had access to email so an electronic mailing list would work well. A Groupspaces <http://groupspaces.com/> account was set for the group. The account was free and it seemed that it would meet the group's needs, as the premium Groupspace accounts did not kick in until over 500 memberships were required.

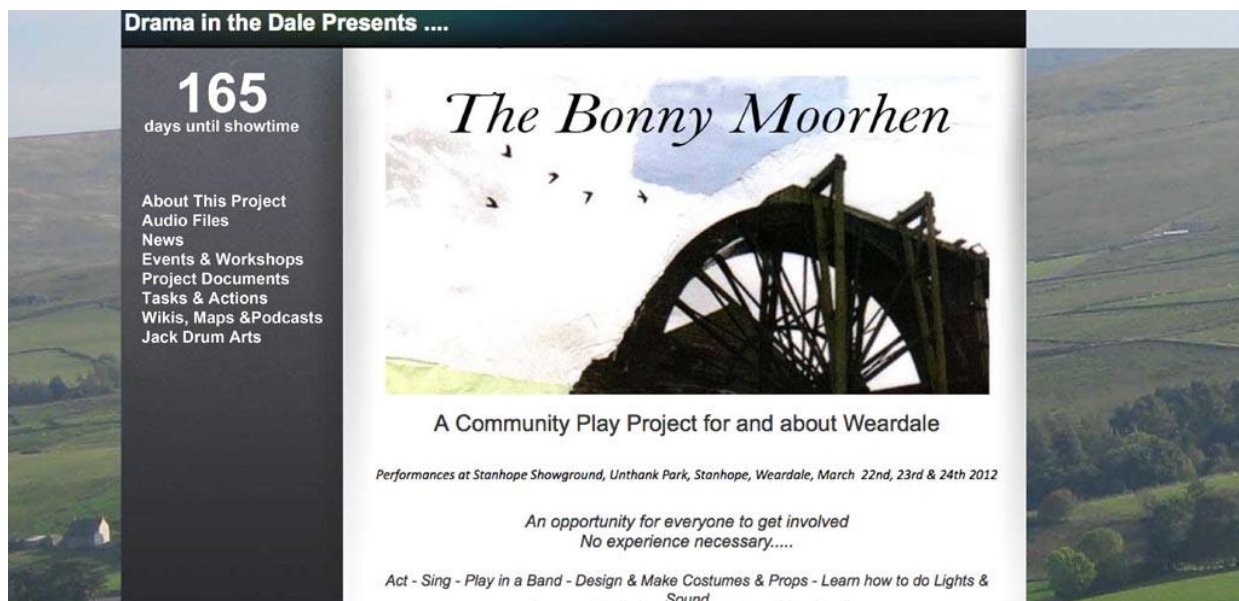
The real value of using Groupspaces as a listserv was the ability to create sub-lists. Therefore the project was able to create sub-lists for Creatives, Workshop Participants, Steering Group and so on. Some messages were targeted at particular groups and others were sent to ALL recipients. Most of the e-lists were announcement lists meaning the communication was one way but the sub-list for the steering group was set up as a discussion group meaning a reply to a message went to all the members of the group. This was a useful addition to the monthly meetings and helped move the project forward. Another useful aspect of Groupspaces email lists is that it can be set to archive all communications. This archiving feature was set to ON for all communications throughout the project. Groupspaces has other functionalities that could be extremely useful such as file and image sharing, discussion forums, and a wiki as well as other functionalities such as the ability to charge a subscription to members. However, these functionalities are dependent on the user going online and getting a (free) Groupspaces account. Experience has proven that this feature is rarely taken up so we chose not to promote it to the Drama in the Dale group. All the members of the e-lists received messages into their inboxes and no further action was required by them. The messages contained unsubscribe information should they wish to cease receiving the communications but few did this. It is also possible to allow people to subscribe themselves to the sub-lists but generally people were added as the project collected their email addresses.

Towards the end of the project Groupspaces changed drastically. It had been deemed fit for purpose on the basis of their terms and conditions. We would only need a premium account if our user base exceeded 500. At its peak the subscribers to the various Drama in the Dale e-lists was a little over 200. Clearly if we

grew beyond 500 we would need a premium account but we had judged that should this happen the project would be clearly big enough to warrant a premium account. However Groupspaces changed their policy so that free accounts only allowed 50 users. The first tier of premium accounts allowed 200 hundred users which the project had already exceeded so we would need the second premium tier. The leap (downwards) from 500 to 50 users is somewhat drastic. Thompson complained to Groupspaces that they had used a “Bait and Switch” tactic, encouraging people to build a user base on their free platform and then switching so that most users exceeded the restrictions of a free account. The company refuted this, pointing out that they had developed their product massively. It is indeed an excellent product and their service is good but the reduction from 500 to 50 maximum users is extreme. Furthermore, much of what Groupspaces had developed was not being used by Drama in the Dale participants because, as we’ve said, there was no take up on the forums, etc. There was slight difference of opinion on this with the partners. Jack Drum Arts decided to pay for the premium service and use it for their other projects too meaning the Drama in the Dale e-lists still remain but Thompson no longer recommends Groupspaces and seeks alternatives when working with other community groups.

Notwithstanding the mechanism used, e-communication on this project was good, enabling participants, creatives and the steering group to engage in the process to support project development. A further sub-list kept ‘interested’ people and important local organisations informed, keeping the door open for new people to join the project at any stage.

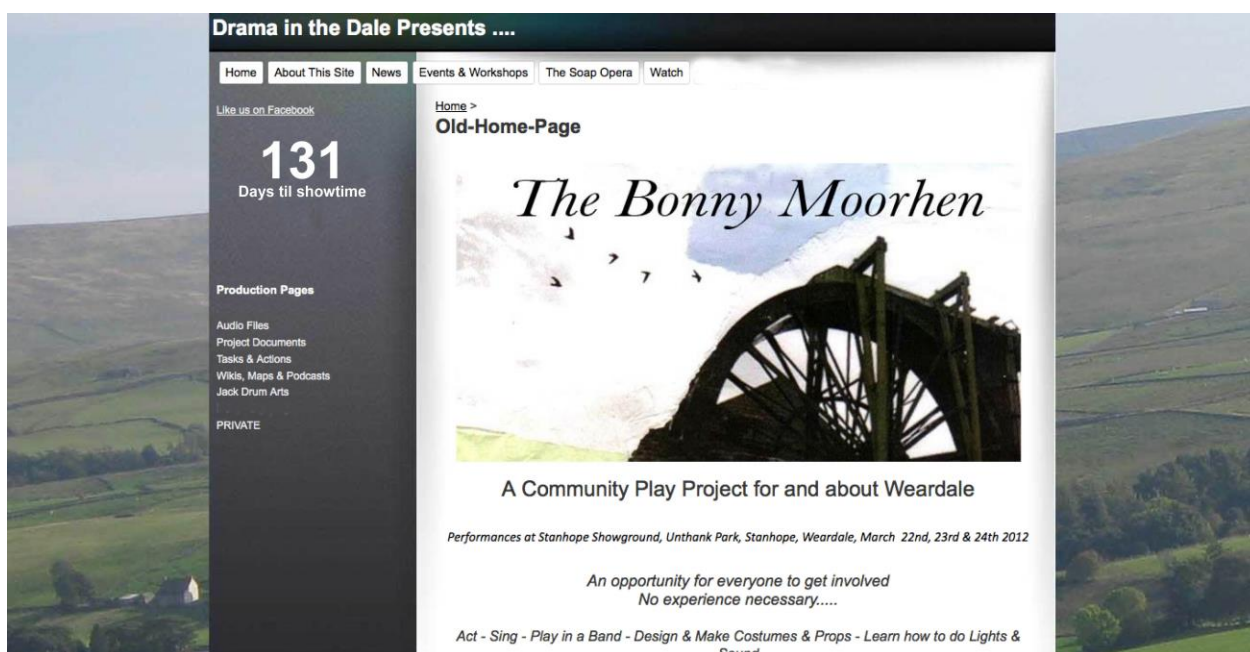
At the first steering panel meeting it was also agreed that a production website was needed. The purpose of both the email list and the website was to assist the development of the project. The website would serve the purpose of publishing the minutes of the steering panel, distribution of scripts, lyrics, etc, and publication of diary dates for workshops, rehearsals and meetings. At that same steering panel meeting it was also decided that the shows would take place in the last week in March in order to adhere to funding conditions. We were therefore able to put an “x days until showtime” countdown timer on the site. The image below shows how the original website looked with 165 days to go until showtime.



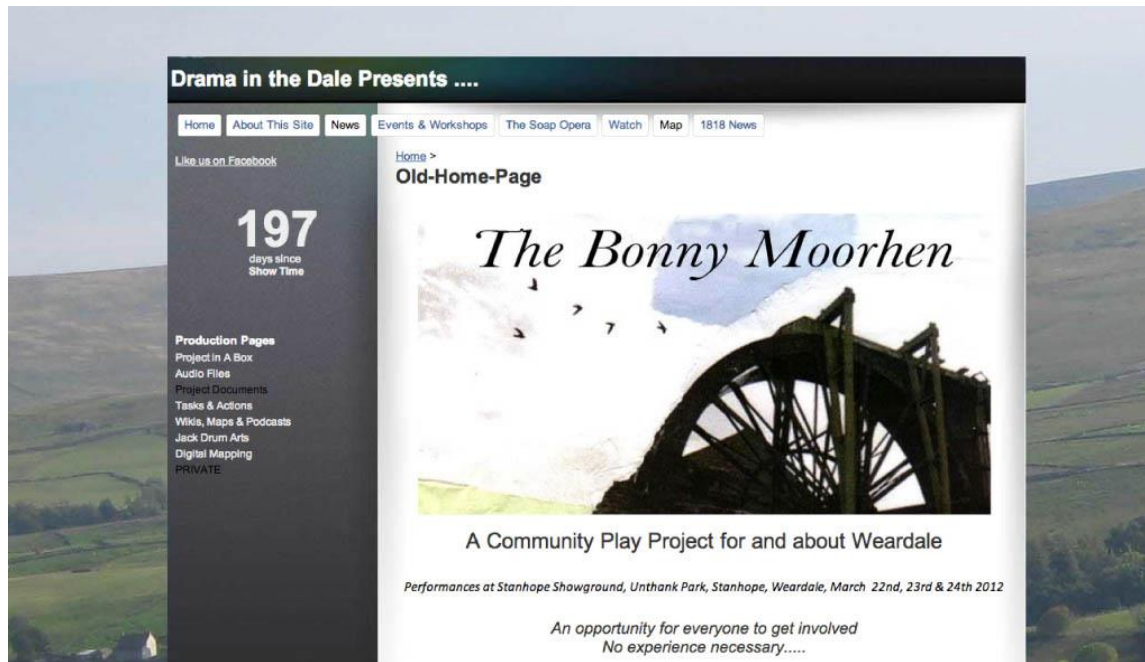
“Google Sites” was used to produce this website as this product provided the kind of functionality we needed. Furthermore, the site was built within Teesside University’s Google Apps Education Edition as this meant we could produce user accounts and memorable passwords for participants. This had the added value of creating user accounts for workshops using a memorable password system - see <http://bit.ly/magicpassword>

Early editions of the website declared: *This site is specifically to assist the production of the Community Play by providing a document store, an events calendar, audio files and other resources. Along with other additional digital activities provided by Teesside University's Digital City Innovation in partnership with the University of Exeter it is supported with "Connected Communities" funding from the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC)*

At the next steering panel meeting it was agreed that the project needed a public facing website and not simply a project website. Google Sites is useful for some things but does not produce great looking websites. The big problem with the original website was that there was no way to display visuals in an attractive way. The project was beginning to generate excellent images so we needed to address that issue. We therefore installed a WordPress on the Jack Drum Arts' web space and then configured it to look very much like the Google Sites website. Menu bar links were interwoven between the two sites so that they appeared to be simply one site. The rule of thumb was to have public facing pages in the horizontal navigation bar and production pages in the left hand menu bar. This worked well and the site was beginning to be used by the participants for the purpose it was designed, namely to assist the production. The image below shows this website in its second iteration (with 131 days to go).



By this time we had added a second WordPress installation as we had decided to produce a soap opera (or rather a 'Lead Opera') called "4 Pence a Day" which was to be a Vodcast and so another WordPress installation was needed to drive that. The soap opera WordPress install had the same visual configuration with interwoven menu bars. Later, yet another WordPress installation was added and intertwined to add further functionality and you can see the final website in the image below. This extra WordPress was needed to host 1818 News. This was to be a period newspaper produced by students at Wolsingham Comprehensive School.



An extra page was added, using one of the WordPress installations, to accommodate the digital map that was later developed. Finally the website was running with one Google Site and three WordPreses. We conducted a poll of people using the site and they all said they believed they were interfacing with just one site and not three and so it was deemed the development was a success.

Four Pence A Day

We discussed different ways to foster wider community engagement and in particular how we might provide a further digital element. It was decided to involve local school communities in producing a ‘Soap Opera’ that we could screen on YouTube. The storyline of the soap opera would follow the lyrics of the song “Four Pence a Day” which tells of the rigours endured by the washer boys who worked for just 4 pence a day. Seven local primary schools took up the offer to work on the ‘Lead Opera’ on the understanding that parents and carers would be encouraged to join in with the production process.

A new WordPress installation was added to the website in order to provide a channel for the ‘Lead Opera’ “Vodcast” and was fashioned and embedded to look like the rest of the site. Each episode was triggered to go live at 15.00 on Tuesday afternoons over 7 weeks. The first episode of the ‘Lead Opera’ went live at 15.00 on January 17th. To gain greater publicity we laid on a reception at the school where the first episode was produced, Witton-le-Wear Primary. Before an invited audience of parents, grandparents, school governors, local press, funders and all the pupils at the school, we watched the trailer and then at exactly 15.00 we watched the actual episode (see below). The event was also attended by Councillor Dennis Morgan and Mrs Morgan, the Chair of Durham County Council and his wife.

The series of regular Vodcasts produced a great deal of local excitement and also helped build anticipation for the actual performances of the community play. There was a slight issue of YouTube being blocked in schools but this block was lifted to accommodate this podcast thanks to the pioneering efforts of Wearhead Primary School, one of the participants in the ‘Soap Opera’.

1818 News

1818 News was devised as a period newspaper project produced in a fashion that might have been used if ‘blogs’ had existed in 1818. A ‘hot-seating’ session was set up at Wolsingham Comprehensive School, with a news reporter from the Northern Echo in attendance, as a means of

introducing year 8 and 9 pupils (ages 13-14) to journalism techniques whereby they would interview characters from the story in order to create content for a contemporary blog.

About 10 members of the cast agreed to take part in the session. Their brief was to appear in both costume and in character and to be interviewed by pupils who were to take the role of investigative reporters circa 1818 trying to make good newspaper stories out of the tumultuous civic situation in Weardale at the time.

The actors had already spent several months ‘workshopping’ the story and its characters and had recently been assigned the roles they were to take for the production. Therefore they were well versed in the history of the period, the possible points of view of the various individuals and agencies involved in the events, as well as their own character's outlook. Indeed, this was the first time that their characters had appeared in public, outside the confines of the rehearsal room! The actors had enough background knowledge - and therefore confidence - to inhabit the roles they were playing easily and naturally. The participating children, in turn, quickly suspended their disbelief and began to ask all sorts of questions of the characters. What gave the event added poignancy and relevance was that all the participants were discussing their shared local history.

The articles produced by the students were illustrated and then released onto the 1818 Blog at a rate of one every two days, almost like a “text podcast” and the release of these articles ran all the way up to ‘show time’.

The Anniversary

On December 7th 2012, the occasion of the 196th anniversary of The Battle of Stanhope, a small group of cast members and children from Wearhead Primary School assembled at The Bonny Moorhen (formerly the Black Bull Inn) in Stanhope to perform a re-enactment of that event in the very pub where it had taken place. Thompson's role that day was to grab footage and publish to the web as soon as possible but he was also called upon to play the pub landlord. Apparently on this day in 1818 the pub landlord came downstairs to see what all the commotion was and, being mistaken for a gamekeeper, was struck with a rifle butt in the head and the belly. Thompson asked the director how he was to take a rifle butt to the head and belly, as he had not participated in the stage combat workshops that others had enjoyed. The director simply replied, “Take it like a man Steve!” This was perhaps the moment that Thompson ceased to be a digital supporter and an impartial observer and “went native” actively becoming part of the community play. That evening all the participants partook of a poachers' pie supper in the pub. The re-enactment was posted to YouTube immediately producing the reaction that follows.

The Battle of Schwarzlackenau

Having seen the YouTube footage of The Battle of Stanhope re-enactment Franz Nahrada, Director of GIVE research lab in Vienna said the following.

The story sounds familiar to me. We had a similar case as, for the revitalisation of our village spirit, we re-enacted in 2009 the “Battle of Schwarzlackenau”, the first battle (or rather skirmish) where Napoleon's troops were defeated here in Jedlesee 1809. We made the story more realistic to show how “little people” were crushed in the feuds of the mighty, sought their own way of escaping and paid a high price. The play was written by Karl Danninger of “Schnittpunkt Jedlesee”, the local cultural association I had founded here.

It is most interesting to think that lead mined in the Weardale area may have been used to make bullets fired in Franz's community.

The Show

The 3 performances of “The Bonny Moorhen” (March 22 - 24, 2012) marked the culmination of 7 months of dedicated preparation by about 70 people, whether as performers, technicians, front-of-house staff and administrators. The show was witnessed by about 350 people (mostly inhabitants of Weardale), featured in local TV and radio programmes as well as a BBC series, “From Dale to Sea – A Great British Story”, and was warmly reviewed by local press with a preview feature in The Guardian On-line (a respected national newspaper).

The cast and musicians had already had the chance to perform the show in the venue during the dress rehearsal, but in the final half-hour before 'curtain up', as the audience entered the theatre, marvelled at the transformation of the agricultural shed and took their seats, the excitement backstage was palpable. The actors stood or sat around in their costumes, some chatting quietly, others peeping through curtains and gauzes watching the theatre fill up to capacity.

All three performances were delivered with zest and aplomb. There were of course some technical glitches, but the energy of the cast and musicians soon had the audience enthralled as they brought to life the story of Billy Bell and The Battle of Stanhope, an event that had happened nearly 200 years ago in the villages and on the fells surrounding the purpose-built auditorium, the Unthank Theatre.

The local nature of the tale and the predominantly local voices telling it gave the performances an extra edge. The sharing of this most local of tales, amongst descendants no doubt of the people originally involved, featuring places familiar to all, in a brief community of some 400 people in a converted agricultural shed right in the middle of a dark Weardale night: this is what gave the performances the final dust of magic.

Director, Paddy Burton, in reflective mode, said:

For me the most transformative experience was that of being present in what became an act of witness. The local nature of the tale and the predominantly local voices telling it gave the performances an extra edge. I was proud of the fruits of my direction, but also humbled by the communion that was going on before my eyes.

A Celebration

The team met the day after the final performance for a family day of celebration at St Thomas's Hall, the place where most of the rehearsals had taken place. One of the activities involved a long blank piece of paper spread over several trestle tables. Everyone took a hand in describing the timeline of the project and what it meant to them. This timeline drawing can be seen online at <http://ditd.wikispaces.com/Timeline>

Digital Mapping

Although a digital map was begun during the project it was felt that there was more potential in this activity than had been fully explored. Therefore a series of digital mapping sessions was held at Wearhead School over the summer months for a mixed group of adults and families. This was funded by Jack Drum Arts' well-being project, funded by an NHS Arts on Prescription scheme (AOP) and known as 'Colour Your Life'. The activities included learning to work collaboratively on research topics relevant to the history and heritage of the Dale and also how to upload text and images to tell stories about important places on a Google map. Some of the learners began to add personal information such as places of birth, etc. The sessions were both

instructive and convivial with learners bringing food to share and enjoying each other's company. Some of the learners had accessed other Jack Drum Arts' AOP sessions but for a few it was the first time. One female learner was able to bring her children, including a young disabled boy, and include them in complementary ICT activities. A new AOP client, who had played a major role in the play and later revealed that he suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) completed the course with lots of peer support. He is continuing his involvement with this same group of people in other ways, strengthening his social networks in the area where he has recently moved with his wife.

In Conclusion

On September 19th 2012 the final meeting of the Drama in the Dale steering panel took place. There was a formal handover to a newly constituted committee, made up largely of participants who took part in the community play. The aim is to form a Social Enterprise to take the group forward and produce more Dramas in the Dale.

The project was hugely successful on several levels. The play was performed to capacity houses on all three nights. The project earned many accolades and an iconic photograph taken during the rehearsal process won a national photography competition as part of Adult Learners' Week. From an AHRC perspective the project demonstrated that ICT and digital tools can greatly enhance a traditional medium (a community play). The email list was used to great effect by many members of the cast, creative team, participants, technical workers and project team. The website was also used to good effect both as a production tool and as a promotional medium for the project. Many people participated in content creation. In a SWOT (Strengths, Weakness', Opportunities & Threats) analysis conducted with the steering panel the website and ICT presence of the project was seen as one of its greatest strengths. People engaged with the ICT because they were very engaged with the project and the ICT aspect had particular relevance to them. The story behind the play had huge local relevance for them and the ICT aspect supported that. The digital add-ons enhanced the project and some people participated in many of them or just a few. The online 'Soap Opera', the 1818 Blog and the Digital Map all added value to the core activity, the community play. Drama in the Dale had/has a Facebook page and content from the website(s) is aggregated and fed into the page. Many of the participants have Facebook accounts and have engaged through that; overall, many people engaged in several different ways using ICT's. All of the digital communication and publishing devices produced by the project survive and the website counter continues to count but now it is showing days *since* showtime !

Web References

Project web site: www.dramadale.co.uk

Thompsons research blog: www.dramadale.ageofwe.org

Facebook Page: <http://www.facebook.com/dramadale>

Project in a box: <http://ditd.wikispaces.com/>

Jack Drum Arts: www.jackdrum.co.uk

The Magic Password: <http://bit.ly/magicpassword>

Thompson, S. D. (2011). The Magic Password <http://bit.ly/magicpassword>