

***‘Life Chances: creating alternative visions of the future of family welfare through co-produced fictional writing and performance’***

**PI Dr Debbie Watson (School for Policy Studies) and the Life Chances (ESRC funded, Productive Margins project) <http://www.productivemargins.ac.uk/projects/low-income-families/>**

**Summary/Overview**

Our stall at the Utopias festival was concerned with showcasing research that we have been engaged in with community organisations and community research volunteers in Bristol and Cardiff. This Life Chances research team co-produced understandings of families in low-income settings using arts based practices including jewellery making and fictional novel writing to explore different futures; this included a utopian narrative.

Using fictional characters and storylines developed in workshops, at the festival we facilitated performative interactions with audience members engaging in the Life Chances floor based ‘game’ using the concentric circles logo of the project. This involved giving each audience member a card with details of one of the characters in the novel, and, dependent on answers to questions about their situation, participants moved from one position to another in the circles, representing their ‘life chances’. This generated discussion, enabling people to explore and trouble individual ‘Life Chances’ in respect of income and status and the systems relating to these. Participants were also able to view and make jewellery/ life chances badges.

As part of our stall we also exhibited provocative renderings of the Government’s Life Chances propaganda images as posters and take away postcards. These were also used as a source of discussion with participants.

We also provided two half hour performances which comprised original music, songs and spoken word poetry, composed and written by members of the Life Chances research team. The performance also included readings from the novel.

**Participation**

It is difficult to say how many people interacted with our stall over the three days but we had a continuous flow of interested people and ran the Life chances game maybe 10-15 times each day with up to 10 participants at a time, as well as attracting an interested audience of onlookers.

**Outcomes of evaluation**

There was no formal evaluation during the festival. But we did some process participatory evaluation with our research team and volunteers shortly after the festival and the volunteers in particular reported that they felt the activities have worked incredibly well with the audience. They noted that particularly that the Life Chances game had an impact on members of the public, helping them re-consider the life chances of different people in society.

## **Learning/reflections on the activity**

As a team we are keen to further develop the Life Chances game into a commercial/ training/ educational product and our volunteers are keen to be involved. The activities at the festival are being further developed in a range of dissemination events- see below.

## **Summary of any feedback received**

- Emotional engagement and personal impact on members of the public by taking part in the Life Chances game
- Interest in the jewellery from members of the public, including how it was made and where it could be purchased
- Interest in images in posters, postcards, leaflets and alternatives to Government thinking
- Interest from practitioners and academics in the festival audience about the project process and outcomes

## **Details of any follow up activity which have occurred or are planned**

1. As a direct result of the festival we are named on an AHRC catalyst fund application for a CC learning lab led by Deirdre Figueiredo, Director of Craftspace and the Open University and The Glass-House Community Led Design Prototyping Utopias led by PI Dr Katerina Alexiou. We are also keen to work with Craftspace to explore how to set up the creative enterprise making jewellery which our volunteers are keen to develop. We have just received confirmation that this collaboration has been funded and will be meeting in October 2016 to commence the Learning lab activities.
2. As part of a wider Productive Margins initiative we will be applying under the AHRC Connected Communities follow on fund to develop emerging creative communities from three of the Productive Margins projects that showcased at the festival. The overarching research question for the bid (in preparation) is 'how to sustain open-ended creative collaboration once entering into creative economy space?'
3. We are exploring dissemination of the Life Chances novel and the project with the BBC, including the possibility of an audio publication.
4. We are looking to publish the Life Chances novel in hard copy and exploring publishing options.
5. We are working with the Bristol mayor to consider ways in which the project methods and outputs can be adopted and developed by the new administration.
6. We are planning events in Bristol, Cardiff and London to further disseminate the Life Chances project to policy makers and we will be using resources and methods from the Utopias festival.
7. We will be part of a Bristol University public engagement festival in November where the Utopias stall will be re-created in Bristol for public dissemination of the project.