

Case 8

‘Spoken’: new cultures of co-operation

Interview with Moussa Amine Sylla, Community Organiser at The Selby Centre, Tottenham, London

‘**Spoken** is an approach that encourages people who don’t normally have a voice and who are not used to talking in public to do so, in a supportive context. Spoken takes the form of a community-based event where local people can express themselves, and have an audience who will listen and respond. The overall ambition of Spoken is not just to share experiences and cultures but to create new cultures of cooperation. Spoken is therefore about mixing and speaking with people from different backgrounds. At any one event we might have people from the community, council officers and politicians and sometimes corporate organisations as well. It’s about mixing different cultures – third sector, urban, business, politics, arts and more.

‘For example, when the company Converse came to the last event, both Converse and community members found it hard. The community members didn’t find Converse very warm or open; and Converse were very protective of what they were doing there, so found it difficult to collaborate and come up with a shared approach. This led to lots of conversations about what creativity is, who was in charge in creative terms and who needs who. The idea was to create a new culture of cooperation, but what we didn’t have on this occasion was much mixing. Spoken is designed to be a space where these and other kinds of cultural clashes and shocks can be created in nice ways, with the goal of generating new forms of collective learning and intelligence out of diversity.

‘Every encounter with other people, new cultures and new situations is an opportunity to learn and we can learn most from each other in spaces where spontaneous, organic and passion-driven exchanges can take place. Community activities of this kind can play a massive part in developing people’s self-empowerment, raising self-esteem and in starting to connect people so they can do more with others in the community.

‘Formal education can take you towards specific learning outcomes, but not necessarily prepare you for these kinds of encounters. And if you’re not prepared, then you’re also not ready for this kind of informal learning to happen – these situations really can result in a kind of volcanic eruption of new learning! Such learning that can often be extremely valuable in community situations, as it can help break down some of the barriers which can often block people from developing – this might mean creating new personal understandings, beginning to organise in the community, re-entering formal education or taking control of your life in another way.

‘Informal learning in the context of community organising processes can also be much more inclusive than formal education often is – not least because it doesn’t need to take place behind four walls and at set times. Spoken is fundamentally about resourcing connection and creatively in order to learn together and collectively build in the contexts people are living in, it’s about fostering forms of social enterprise that have both the planet and people in mind. The process is therefore about using people’s knowledge and experience to learn about and respond to the social challenges they face. The aim is to think collaboratively about how people can generate their own development, including their own economy and environment.

‘So although Spoken isn’t always about creating knowledge that’s going to be recognised by formal education and employers (e.g. qualifications), it is undoubtedly about creating knowledge and practice that’s immediately useful in people’s own lives and settings. Having said this, after taking part in a community organising process, people do often go back into formal education. And when they do this they usually do so with a different spirit, because they want to go and have a better sense of what they want from this.’