TRANSCRIPT: SOCIAL RESPONSE CYCLE RESOURCE

SECTION TWO RAPID RESPONSE TO SOCIAL NEED

When I began with the germ of an idea for Mothertongue, I knew that if I wanted to have any chance of seeming credible to funders, colleagues and clients, I would need to be able to gather evidence, first evidence of need and then of effectiveness of the service.

I was motivated to set up a service, by the observations I had made while working in an educational capacity with a Multicultural Learning Centre. Although I did not have a therapeutic brief, students wanted to talk to me about very troubling experiences as soon as they felt some kind of trust with me.  In common with many people I had encountered in my work for other social projects, they experienced need, hardship, isolation and marginalisation which inevitably impacted on their emotional and mental wellbeing.

There appeared to be no therapeutic service available locally, which was meeting the need these students displayed. The gap, which I observed, for an appropriate culturally and linguistically sensitive counselling service, was also observed by others. I felt pretty helpless when I thought about this gap, and about health inequalities generally. But I also believed that a solution involved action, in the form of a service.

The activity of starting a service also required me to find a method of meeting needs quickly. The people who wanted to talk to me at the education centre were in need in the here and now. I wanted to find a way to set up and offer some service quickly without the long delays produced by extensive periods of planning, extracting evidence of need and consultation. I had very little experience, at the time, and so I took advice. I was advised to begin by recruiting a consultant to conduct a feasibility study for the service. I had never done anything like this before and it seemed a good idea to act on the advice I had sought. However, as time progressed, I noticed three things about the feasibility study:

It cost money (which could have been used for delivering a service)

It was time-consuming (it delayed our ability to start offering a service to people who were already distressed)

It told us what we already knew

And this is why I started to look for another method which could help us to review, to plan and to evaluate. Of course, you need to have evidence that what you are doing is needed and that it is effective and ethical. That is where formal, funded research is often used. And if there is already evidence available then it makes sense to use that. But formal research is very costly, and it can also be experienced by communities as a form of extractivism - a kind of data mining activity (Phipps, 2013:19).

I wanted to find a process which was based on reciprocity rather than one which was based on acquisition of data. I wanted to work to the principle that data does not justify the service, the service provides the data. I thought about how to gather evidence and to respond quickly to what was discovered, by offering some service, in a proactive way, while at the same time gathering evidence of need and of effective ways of meeting the need. Evidence obtained in the Social Response Cycle is practice-derived. It is derived from the real, lived and living experiences of participants while they are receiving a service.

My main thoughts behind the development of the Social Response Cycle were, that we needed: first, speediness of service provision, second, a better use of resources, third, to build on what we already knew (and. not reinvent the wheel), fourth, to ensure that evidence would be credible if it was derived from what we observe as well as from what we measure, and fifth, that evaluation and assessment needed to be continuous relational processes.  The Social Response Cycle attempts to deal with the need for obtaining evidence while providing pilot services and projects quickly. This approach keeps at its centre the union between thinking and doing – the conceptual and the behavioural. Quoting Manivong Ratts again and applying his words to this context: “What we are trying to do is connect the two in practice.” The Social Response Cycle can be used to set up and deliver a full-blown service, or for projects such as the production of a training video, or to set up a support group or a creative activity. I have used it to set up different sized initiatives including: a counselling service, a small mental health interpreting pool, an art group for newly arrived school students, reflective support groups for interpreters and Colleagues Across Borders, a small international project.