

# *Making a Difference at the University of Plymouth*

A project for i-dat by Lucy Kimbell, October 2004

The Royal Mail's vans say they 'deliver value'. Funny, I thought they delivered letters and parcels. Value is something that organisations keep talking about. They try to deliver 'shareholder value' or 'customer value'. They describe their culture and its 'values'. These ideas are communicated on business cards, in employee training programmes, at customer interfaces. Corporate strategists spent a good deal of the 1990s seeding business with these ideas, limping through the dot com bubble and out the other side into a context in which they, and their practices, still have currency despite recent critical attention<sup>1</sup>. Along the way public institutions, non-governmental organisations and the education sector absorbed the techniques. They, too, now create value. And all this value creation needs measuring and assessing, an iterative performance through which organisations keep themselves busy.

Do organisations exist apart from the individuals who form them? When I observed how some organisations function I became interested in how individuals responded to the contexts in which they were embedded and which they helped produce. I noticed that some of the people I knew who worked in large corporations (or in small companies who had dealings with bigger ones) – often struggling with making sense of what they were doing there – would use a phrase that sounded purposeful. "I want to make a difference," said the woman running a headhunting operation in the City of London. "I want to make a difference," declared the man in charge of customer service for an airline. How much of a difference could they, or I, or anyone make? What were the implications of attempting to make a difference without considering the political and social context in which one decided to act? In this phrase, a sort of corporate mantra for the depoliticised, I heard a desire to make or find meaning, to instantiate self-worth, to make visible individual value.

These ideas gradually developed as I began an artist project at i-dat, a research group at the University of Plymouth, one of a number of activities I group by the title 'I measure therefore I am'. Like other higher education institutions, Plymouth is adopting the behaviours and characteristics of a corporation. It seemed a good opportunity to develop a project that disturbed these day-to-day realities in a semi-public context. Combining a live event, a real time digital system in a university building, audio, email and the web, 'Making a Difference at the University of Plymouth' offered audiences several ways of engaging.

The project was sited in a new building, Portland Square, for two weeks in October 2004. It made use of a digital system, Arch-OS, designed by i-dat and built into Portland

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Mike Power, "The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification", Oxford: OUP, 1997 and Marilyn Strathern, "Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy", London: Routledge, 2000

Square. It employed the following components of Arch-OS which other artists and composers use in quite different ways:

- It has a powerful sound system designed by Adrian Ward with 56 speakers installed in the public spaces of the building;
- It grabs ambient data from 3000 sensors around the building; and
- It has Ethernet points located in the public spaces.

Using Arch-OS and some extra electronics<sup>2</sup>, visitors to Portland Square had the ability to 'make a difference' to what went on by pressing a button on a wall plaque located in one of the atria. Each button press triggered a sound to play through the speakers throughout its public spaces. What people heard was the (pre-recorded) voices of people who use the building saying "I want to make a difference". Over the fortnight, individual voices combined to form a chorus of many layers, in a crescendo from wanting to make a difference to really, really, really wanting to make a difference. In addition, the system counted how many people made a difference in this way. The results of this data-gathering were presented on the web with graphs showing activity for a given day, and for the whole two weeks. Finally, each button press triggered an email to the Vice-Chancellor, saying someone wanted to make a difference, a symbolic puncturing of the university's administration. Badges saying "I made a difference" were distributed to those who had participated at the launch event, at which the V-C unveiled the plaque and became the first person to make a difference.

A public art project that could easily be mistaken for a management initiative, 'Making a difference at the University of Plymouth' exceeded my initial hopes. People pressed the button (starting with the cleaners at 6am) and, more excitingly, they laughed as they walked away from doing so. Others looked puzzled and amused to hear voices in the atria and corridors. Other people noticed the seven vinyl texts positioned around the building inviting them to 'make a difference'. Students waiting outside a lecture theatre watched the plasma screen which displayed the latest graphs from the website. The research group who commissioned the project found themselves much more visible within the university since they had to account for this interference and the noise. The website's graphs revealed how and when people were directly engaging.

The text on the wall plaque asked 'Do you want to make a difference?' Pressing the button indicated the affirmative. There was no opportunity to say you didn't want to make a difference. How could anyone not want to?

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<http://www.i-dat.org/makingadifference/>

<http://www.lucykimbell.com>

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<sup>2</sup> Software development by George Grinsted; electronics by Erik Kearney