



“Effective collaboration requires time and difficult conversations”: Patrick Darcy and Lucinda Steggles of batyr on narrative change and youth mental health

Ambika Samarthya-Howard

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Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What is your approach to youth mental health, and from your perspective in Australia, how is that positioned in relation to the other people in the Co-Lab?

Patrick Darcy: batyr's existed for 13 or 14 years. batyr was founded based on reducing stigma. We play upstream.

We won't prevent every young person we engage with from going through mental health challenges in their lifetime, but if we can equip them with the tools and the language, they will know how to talk to their friends and family, where resources are, and how to get help. We intervened so they know how to talk about it and where to go, even if it doesn't fully prevent a crisis.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Is the alternative to upstream meaning medical attention?

Patrick Darcy: Downstream of us are organizations that exist specifically for therapeutic purposes and crisis. We partner with them, meaning we engage with any young people irrespective of where they are on their journey.

We're clear on the fact that we will get young people in crisis to the places that can support complex mental health, but that's not us.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do you relate to the three buckets with resilience, agency, and belonging?

Lucinda Steggles: We could have been in any bucket, but the reason we were in the belonging bucket is because we do a lot of work around creating supportive

communities, and equipping young people with skills to support their communities and friends.

Our particular intervention is a digital product to train young people how to share stories of their mental health journey, and how to draw out the hope, positivity, and resilience of their help-seeking journey.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Please tell me an example of one of the digital products.

Patrick Darcy: There are two main dimensions to what we do. Our theory of change is about how to equip young people to go into different contexts and train them to safely tell their mental health stories.

The stories are moderated to ensure that they're safe and that we're protecting the young people whom they're engaging.

OurHerd, which the ICONIQ grant is funding, is the digital platform where we have the stories that we would tell in the school environment through the same storytelling structure, for which we have evidence that it works.

The prerecorded content of the storytellers shows up like a social media feed. It allows young people from anywhere around the world to engage with those stories.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What's been the most common thread that you've seen?

Patrick Darcy: You see a lot of the predeterminant factors of mental health show up in those stories: domestic violence, child abuse, socioeconomic factors, cultural and heritage-based factors, and cultural stigma. A strong theme that we see come through is definitely the challenge of navigating the system.

We have a structured, proven methodology for training them to tell their stories. The magic in what we do is that young people communicate with young people. I couldn't stand up in front of 14-year-olds and have them listen, but a 16 or 17-year-old could.

Their narrative flow talks about going to their GP, not feeling comfortable because it was clinical, and not understanding the form so they gave up. Young people need services to navigate the system. Another thing that pops up is cultural heritage; Australia is a multicultural country.

The stigma and mental health literacy have improved in the 14 years since we existed, but it's worsened in certain cultural pockets. Many young people feel like they can't talk to their families because they're of Indian heritage or Asian heritage. It's not allowed to be discussed. They're more isolated than they would've been 14 years ago.

We also underestimate young people. They're developing faster because they have access to vast information.

There are also generational misunderstandings. Our government banned social media for under-16-year-olds, and it reinforces that point for them.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Besides providing them a platform both in-person and digitally, you said you helped them shape the story. What does that look like?

Patrick Darcy: It's not narrative building; that's their story. It's about safety and ensuring that we don't trigger or re-traumatize someone who's telling their story.

We won't moderate out the truth or themes, but if you are going to talk about difficult situations, the storyteller has their own guardrails in place to protect them.

We need to check they're not in crisis when they come to us. Most of it is associated with ensuring that there's some protection for the storytellers themselves.

In schools, there's obviously an important structure from two perspectives: the safety of the young people, and the years of program evaluation to understand the differences in language change and its impact on our results.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What is something your program evaluated, like a small tweak that creates a different impact? Would it be a choice of a word?

Patrick Darcy: The young people in the audience need to see themselves in the young people who are up there. The role of the teachers is important. We need to create a space that doesn't feel like school, and the teachers have to allow the students.

We have to establish different rules for those couple of hours, because the young people need to feel like the teachers aren't there as teachers. Young people have very different relationships with their teachers, and so we need to ensure that the space is held.

There is a structure to the way young people tell their story. We're not trauma dumping, but we show how to navigate through a path that does not always lead to a positive outcome. That's not how mental health works, but at least the story articulates tools.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What's been your biggest challenge?

Patrick Darcy: We have more demand than we can fulfill in schools. The Australian school system, particularly public education, is under immense strain. We are needed more than ever, but it gets harder for the schools to get us in.

The teachers are time-poor, and we have to resource ourselves as an organization to take on more of the administration. That's a challenge.

Another opportunity and challenge is how we show up digitally. Digital is an incredibly important and complex part of our future; not all social media is bad, nor is it all good. Not all reasons young people have phones are bad, nor are they all good.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What do you consider a partner, and how do you work with them?

Patrick Darcy: We work closely with the government; they fund our school programs, and they were the seed funding for our digital initiatives. The government knows that organizations like batyr play an important role online.

Because we are reaching broad groups of young people in the upstream prevention space, partnerships are essential. We know what we do well, what we don't do, and aren't going to do, but the journey of a young person is complex.

In the Australian partnership ecosystem, amazing organizations are doing amazing things, and we get focused on that, but it can create fragmentation. There are still opportunities to nail what a good partnership looks like in the sector.

We deeply partner with many Australian organizations because they provide something we don't.

I'm fascinated by the Co-Lab and its intentionally cause-driven, highly selective, and curated approach to the organizations it brings together to have a global impact. How do we work better together? How do we get out of our busyness and engage? I asked if we could meet them all and see how we can make the whole greater than the sum of the parts.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: The mental health space is saturated, and all of you identify as parts of a sector, but also as a specialty. What do you need from each other?

Lucinda Steggles: Effective collaboration requires time and difficult conversations. For example, if two organizations consider merging due to overlap, that would need many conversations. The biggest challenge I observe in the sector is that the CEOs and senior executives of mental health organizations are time-poor.

There's a shortage of funding in mental health. Resources and salaries are tight, and CEOs like to navigate patterns; they try to get funding, manage turnover, retain staff, and manage operations. The collaboration piece falls down the level of priorities because CEOs have to keep moving the organization forward.

What is needed is funding for resourcing to have conversations and a consultancy that steers organizations through potentially difficult collaboration conversations.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you think about non-funding partnerships, what would your organization need from someone else?

Patrick Darcy: It's hard to remove the funding piece for not-for-profits.

Many of us in the Co-Lab produce content to help young people. We all create similar content to get funding, because we need our individual logo on it, and make it clear that it's batyr's.

If there were synergies to give us all funding, we could come together and share resources and content.

We pioneered a model that trains young people to go into communities and schools, but they're now only coming through the batyr vehicle. What if we don't need boots on the ground in other countries, and just train partners on how to do that training?

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How are you trying to scale? Are you looking for partners in different countries to do your training?

Patrick Darcy: Training locally and culturally relevant storytellers when the app is available in other countries is hard from Australia. We don't mind if some partners have our technology, and if they could train the storytellers to put their videos on that platform that have all the cultural nuances and language nuances managed.

In terms of our in-person programs, we have enough to do in Australia with a crisis that's worsening.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do you know what you're doing is working, and how do you define impact?

Patrick Darcy: Over many years we have a team dedicated to evidence collection and evaluation. We have partnered with universities, research labs and PhD students to do long-term evaluations of our impact. We've invested heavily in it, because when you are upstream, it is less measurable. The only way we've been able to get to the level of funding that we've got is putting quite a lot of rigor around how we evaluate our impact and our programs and the data we collect back from young people after we've delivered a program.

Lucinda Steggles: We have a theory of change that we developed with one of the leading research evaluation institutes in Australia that's called the Center for Social Impact. We worked with them on a consultancy project five years ago where they created our theory of change and impact evaluation framework. That's highly regarded because of who we partnered with in creating it. We measure all our outputs against our theory of change, and look to our ultimate impact that we are working to achieve.

We've done randomized control trials with three independent universities to show that our school programs have significant impacts. We've been recognized for the impact evaluation work that we've done and for being advanced in our approach given the size and growth of our organization.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You said you have seen less stigma in the last few years. What do you think has caused that decrease in stigma? Is the goal to have

less stigma in five years or to have less youth mental health issues in the community?

Patrick Darcy: The government over the 14 years has invested more through need to do so, and set up parts of the government dedicated to mental health and youth mental health.

As soon as you establish something with a label in government and you're investing, you're talking about it. Relative to when batyr was founded 14 years ago, there are so many more organizations in the sector because the need is worsening in the sector that is focused on mental health literacy, content, community and conversations.

In Australia, we've done a pretty bloody good job over the last decade from the sector, from the government, from school curriculum trying to do their best, just at least talking about it. It's been a multi-pronged attack.

The reality is when you look at suicide — that's the number one cause of death for people under 25 in Australia — it is worsening. We're seeing in the data that the mental health crisis is starting to head to younger ages.

Although we've succeeded in some regard our mission around stigma reduction, the crisis itself is worsening. What that means for batyr and the partnership strategy that we're driving at the moment is, we need to get a little bit more surgical. We are now focusing our content creation and our in-person programs less metro and more regional.

We need to get a bit braver in the way that we're thinking about partnering. That's where the partnership stuff becomes interesting. It's not a collaboration in a nice sense, like getting in a room and chatting. There needs to be a system we develop, which is, we can be two organizations, but the second we are about to leave that group of young people, we need to hand them to this straightaway as if we were the same organization.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: I don't feel that it's a deep sense of competition being the reason why things aren't happening. I feel like there needs to be a bit more connecting of the dots.

Patrick Darcy: That can be funding-driven. For example, a funder comes and says, "We were considering giving you some money, and we'll give you a bit more, but this has to be structural. You have to show us how you are deploying this, that this is not a collaboration, this is a system." The funding comes in to enable that, which is different to collaboration. It's closer to merging the organizations, which you don't need to do, but there's got to be that system in place.

Lucinda Steggles: With the international collaboration piece, we're all working in different countries. Some of those countries are culturally similar to us, and some are culturally, economically, politically very different. It's more challenging to see collaboration opportunities with countries that are culturally or politically or environmentally different to us, but that doesn't mean they're not there.

For us and certainly in the Australian context, funding is one of the biggest challenges we face in doing more of our work, reaching more young people, and being better at collaboration. Someone's called it the Hunger Games. There is some competition that happens because there's not a great deal of funding, particularly in the prevention end of mental health.

One of the challenges that we've been talking a lot about lately is restricted versus unrestricted funding. That's what's really great about the Iconic grant, is the unrestricted nature to a degree. It's been incredibly valuable to us that there is more freedom in how we use that money, particularly as we need to evolve from what we're hearing from young people.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: It's the work of systems change. How are the youth involved with how they tell their stories or with your programmatic work?

Patrick Darcy: Heavily. We have young people on our board. We have a young person advisory group that sits just off the board. Our workforce is young, and obviously, our storytellers are young people. We are also, as part of systems change, investing quite a bit more into advocacy over the next couple of years. We are a unique platform for that in the sense that we have thousands of young people coming, talking to us, and telling us their stories, and we engage in schools. To some extent, we have an obligation to amplify those voices into the sector and government for systems change.

We are in the midst, at the moment, of going around nationally, to about 700 young people under the age of 16. We are not delivering our normal storytelling programs. We're just listening. It's a large scale exercise to listen then advocate.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That's you listening to the young people, and then trying to figure out a government advocacy strategy after that?

Patrick Darcy: I've already been talking to ministers, and they're like, "You need to come and tell us what you're hearing. We don't get that access."

It's not just government advocacy. It's part of refining and defining what we do as well, and ensuring that we keep having impact. More listening enables us to ensure that we know what we need to deliver, and it also gives us a platform to advocate.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What's a lesson you've learned or something you've done that perhaps you'd do differently?

Patrick Darcy: Creating the system to continue to listen to young people cannot be a one-off or a nice-to-have. It needs to be a systemic part of the way that an organization like ours functions.

Then, as a metaphor for the answer, I was speaking to a young person a couple of months ago who said; "Don't moderate out my truth."

We've got to honor that. Don't start an organization like batyr if you are not willing to allow the stories to be told. They need to be moderated to an extent around safety, but you've got to be brave, and your board's got to be brave.

We were founded to say the stuff other people were not willing to say, and now we've still got to be able to say the stuff that people are not willing to say, and let young people say the things that adults would tell them not to say. That takes a fair bit of organizational courage. If you're not brave enough, then what you end up doing is having these moderation systems that serve us, not the young people.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Thank you both.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is Solutions Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer. She strategizes on communications, metrics, impact, product and technology, leveraging platforms for the network and creating cool content. She also leads the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of SJN that uses targeted research and analysis to identify and interrogate what's working and what's not in a particular sector or field. She has an MFA from Columbia's film program and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Prism.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*