Using Theatre and Performance for Promoting Health and Wellbeing amongst the 50+ Community
An Arts-informed Evaluation

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Abstract: There is increasing interest in the use of arts-based media to improve the health and wellbeing of the older population. Whilst there have been a number of initiatives in this area, there have been relatively few arts-informed evaluations of such interventions. This paper worked with a local theatre to design an evaluation that was an arts-based intervention. What is novel about the approach adopted here is that not only was the study user-guided, but the study also adopted a new and emerging form of arts-informed inquiry, which offered clarity to the evaluation that is not seen in some of the earlier methods available. The findings of the study indicate that theatre and performance provided opportunities for diverse marginalised members of a community to connect and participate in a shared activity and transform their views of themselves and others in ways that were beneficial for health and wellbeing.

Keywords: Arts-informed Inquiry, Evaluation, Older People, Wellbeing

Introduction

In recent years there has been growing interest in the contribution of the arts to the health of communities and individuals, and there has been increasing interest in the value of the arts in addressing significant social issues (Arts Council England 2007; Clift 2006; Clift et al 2006; Clift et al 2009). Yet the evidence base about the effectiveness of interventions targeting social isolation requires strengthening (Dickens et al 2011), in particular when considering (measurable) means for elders to develop interpersonal relationships that can enhance self-esteem, wellbeing and social inclusion (Sviden, Tham, & Borell 2004). Thus there is a need to conduct robust studies that provide evidence of the importance of successful aging and maintaining an active lifestyle physically, mentally and socially (Health Development Agency 2004).

This paper presents an evaluation of an arts-based intervention (called the Creative Gymnasium project) that examined the benefits of drama and arts activities for improving and maintaining the health and wellbeing of isolated and marginalised adults aged 50+ in Coventry, UK, funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. The Creative Gymnasium project aimed to build on research and practice for older people in a city centre population that were more difficult to reach and engage, such as those living alone and those with disabilities. The way in which the project was designed and delivered is provided as well as the methodology of arts-informed inquiry (Savin-Baden & Major 2013). The findings are presented and discussed and recommendations for practice are made.

Literature

There is a broad range of literature that suggest that artistic activities improve the lives of older people in enhancing health, quality of life and function, for example, through gardening, music and dance (Batt-Rawden & Tellnes 2005; Greaves & Farbus 2006; Kilroy et al 2007; Daykin et al 2008). Health gains are also evident through the use of music and singing (Skingley and Vella-Burrows 2010). More specifically theatre performance has been used to stimulate discussion of problems depicted by older adults and their possible solutions (Palmar & Nascimento 2002).
the UK creative activities and health are an integral element of Government policy and health guidelines (Department of Health Arts Council England 2007; National Arts Policy Roundtable 2011; National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence 2008; Social Exclusion Unit 2004). Yet despite research interest in the value of arts for health, the field is relatively under-developed, not least due to the inherently complex and subtle nature of artistic and creative endeavours, which include:

- The huge range of art forms
- The individuality of different healthcare and community settings
- The diversity of individuals participating in projects
- The range of health issues that might be addressed (Clift et al 2009:13)

A range of retrospective and prospective studies have gathered evidence to capture the perceived benefits of art programmes. For example, using dance in patients with chronic heart failure (Belardinelli et al 2008); examining social and psychological wellbeing with children with communication difficulties (Barnes 2013); using art to improve young people's wellbeing using a social capital approach (Hampshire & Matthijsse 2010); developing artwork with patients whilst on renal dialysis (Rowe et al 2011) and with people who use mental health services (Stacey & Stickley 2010). These studies demonstrate how arts projects have provided a valuable means of opening up engagement in new ways of expression; encouraging people to participate in ways that are creative, rewarding and inclusive. However, as noted in reviews conducted by Macnaughton et al (2005) and Clift et al (2009) few studies identify direct measurable health gains which are required to convince policy makers of the need to adequately support the arts and health sector.

The Project

Building on the research and literature, this project sought to explore the impact of arts-based activities, particularly the use of theatre and performance on the elders' lives using a combination of qualitative evidence and quantitative evidence for measurable change. Ethical approval was granted through Coventry University Research Ethics Committee (P1362/28.09.11).

The Creative Gymnasium project involved the use of a drama intervention, delivered in stages by a city centre theatre company, over a 12 month period:

- Stage I – Recruitment and convening of the groups
- Stage II – Developmental workshops
- Stage III – Resources to be made available

A professional theatre practitioner was employed as project manager to deliver the staged intervention. The project was promoted widely through local media, Age UK networks (a UK based charity) and community groups, sheltered residences, churches and charitable organizations, where ‘taster sessions’, were offered which led to weekly developmental workshops. The evaluation of the project was undertaken by researchers at Coventry University.

Methodology

Arts-informed inquiry (Savin Baden & Major 2013) was selected as a means of evaluating the project from both participant and stakeholder perspectives. As researchers engaged as participants and observers within the inquiry process, a conscious decision was made to follow guiding principles underpinning this approach which included:
1. The research is guided by moral commitment  
2. Knowledge is generated through the work  
3. There is a strong focus on reflexivity  
4. Accessibility is a strong focal point  
5. Diverse forms of quality are celebrated together  
6. There is a sense of authenticity (Savin-Baden & Major 2013)

**Project Participants**

Data used in this paper was gained from four participant groups, both female and male with ages ranging from 50+ to 80+, namely:

- A city centre group, who met for 20+ weeks¹ at the Belgrade Theatre (n=25)  
- A sheltered residential home, workshops delivered over 10 weeks (n=8)  
- An Asian Women’s group who met for 12 weeks in a local suburb (n= 18)  
- A group of out-patients receiving dialysis treatment (3 workshops) (n=4)

**Data Collection**

A range of methods were used to collect accounts from the 50+ group. This included qualitative data collection as outlined in Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method of data collection</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant interviews/focus groups</td>
<td>20 minute interviews/focus groups undertaken with participants at the start, interim and end of the workshop programme (Interviews n= 10 Focus groups n=3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant observation of workshop sessions</td>
<td>To observe the interaction, and also to participate in the creation of the interaction as a participant observer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethno drama</td>
<td>To illustrate participants’ experiences through development of written scripts and reflections of their realisations through story boards, creative writing and art work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing of artefacts and use of photography</td>
<td>Visual data to capture participant perspectives including homemade crafts, sewing, needlepoint, dress jewellery (in particular from the Asian women), postcards, poetry, drawings, photographs and storyboards.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Quantitative data were collected via the *Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)*, a health outcomes framework tool, recommended by the NHS Confederation

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¹ This group met for a longer period of time as they developed and performed ‘Shine On’ a formal theatre production which was performed at the theatre and went on a local tour
(2011), administered at the beginning and end of three workshop programmes (see Table 2) to gain statistical data to measure population-level progress for wellbeing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>No. Completed Initial</th>
<th>No. Completed Follow-up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Residential housing group</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City centre group</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian women’s group</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


It is important to note that the WEMWBS performs well against accepted criteria at a population level and that the WEMWBS was developed to enable monitoring of population health. It is therefore recognised that the scale is likely to appeal to those evaluating mental health promotion initiatives, because of its positive focus (Tennant et al 2007). In terms of this study it is acknowledged that relatively small numbers of participants completed the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed across the separate groups and cross over themes and outcomes were compared. Interpretive interactionism (Denzin 2001) was adopted to analyse the data which meant the research teams’ focus was on understanding the logical structures of participant meaning making, which provided a focus for the interpretation. As the researchers were often also part of the group activity, the analysis took into account the intellectual and personal presence of the researchers within the process, as suggested by Cotterill and Letherby (1993).

A Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test calculation was performed across three groups (city centre, sheltered housing, established community group) to assess pre and post test scores to calculate effect size and any statistical significance. In addition, a Kruskal-Wallis H test was performed to calculate how the groups compared, and if any differences in pre and post test scores could be attributed to other factors related to the three groups.

Plausibility

While validity and trustworthiness have provided a base for researchers to document the integrity of qualitative research, we argue for the notion of plausibility, which we suggest is at the heart of what the researcher must strive to do. In short, it is important to present a plausible case of research contexts, participants’ stories, or participants’ experiences of phenomena. Plausibility, defined here as the need for in terms of conceptual framing, design and a clear location of methodology, methods and data interpretation (following Major & Savin-Baden 2010). What is also vital is honesty about what is taking place in the research process. Qualitative research is not about tidying up the edges of data and cleaning it to make it fit. It requires that the researcher is honest about the relationship between the design, the process and what is, and is not discovered. Art emphasizes the unique and immeasurable aesthetic qualities of a particular work. Yet art is also characterized by consistent formal patterns and structural elements that can be generalized beyond the experience of individuals (McNiff 1998). The translation of art experiences into descriptive language can present a number of challenges to the art-based researcher and the research team recognised that artistic knowing was not something that could always be reduced to language and that there was considerable truth to the phenomenological declaration that ‘the original text is perception itself’ (Merleau-Ponty 1962:21). As a result, four art-installations using participant data were developed. The installations befit the principles of arts-informed inquiry including issues of authenticity and accessibility, alongside researcher interpretation. The
selection of data was agreed amongst the participants and research team to ensure it was representative, whilst illustrative of personal experience.

**Findings**

Participants’ experiences of engaging with drama are presented in four themed areas:

- Beginnings
- The influence of others
- Shifting perspectives
- Performing

**Beginnings**

This theme represents participants’ and stakeholders’ response towards a new opportunity. It describes the sense of disruption and challenge experienced as a result of being involved in the project. The collation of the participants’ responses are illustrated in the arts-based installation (Figure 1) and explained further by textual data:

![Figure 1 Arts-based representation of findings: Beginnings](Image)

*Figure 1 Arts-based representation of findings: Beginnings
Source: Savin-Baden et al 2013.*

The beginning phase marked a period of intrigue and interest around the project. Individual choice making around levels of engagement with the workshop material was evident. People were not likely to respond to the environment, content and materials in consistent ways, but with different expectations, hopes, and ideas. For some an uncertainty was revealed, for others intrigue, enjoyment, for others a bewildering beginning:
I was told about this by an acquaintance who persuaded me to come along, I couldn’t quite work out what she was talking about really, so I was intrigued to find out about exactly what it was. The first meeting with the professional artist we were doing little mimes, the kind we used to do at school at the end of the day, and I was thinking what have I come to?, but I have come, so I’ll give it a go . . . and it gradually evolved.

Considering participants’ initial experiences, it was interesting to examine what influenced people to come back for more, the following theme moves on to expand upon this further.

The Influence of Others

This theme illustrates how ‘a person is a person because of other people’ (isiXhosa proverb; Watson & Fourie 2004:20). The theme both represents and acknowledges the interrelatedness of human existence and relates to Shutte’s (1993) perspective that people depend on one another for the exercise and development of their capacity for self-realisation. Figure 2 represents participants’ responses which are explained further below:

Figure 2 Arts-based representation of findings: The influence of others


It was evident that a commitment and reliance on one another developed which lead to opportunities for individuals to extend their influence whilst strengthening their abilities. The participants became a group through doing things together, as the following quotation illustrates:

Meeting other people kept me coming back, I liked the company. I live alone, so it was nice to have something different to do. I saw it as pushing me, challenging me to a
certain extent - not stressful though - not like that. I had the element of choice, and I got to enjoy it with other people. It’s the interaction between people I enjoyed, we’re all in it together, and of course some people are more outgoing and show leadership in the group and that always happens, someone emerges as a leader where there’s a group of people.

The relationships amongst group members, supporting participation, should not be underestimated. Many people spoke of the importance of ‘the group’. The fun, the friendship, the shared experience, the stimulation of seeing ‘change’ in one another certainly appeared to help shape group confidence and a willingness to do more.

The influence of the facilitator is also reflected here, including her style and approach, and commitment to a belief in human potential and the vision of how the arts could support people to be enriched and empowered.

The facilitators were good, they really were. They did guide us along the way and I should say we wouldn’t have managed without them. It was our material but they had to hone it down so it could be used on a stage, so they helped with the quality, the delivery, we had no experience of that, not being in theatre work.

The theatre practitioner guided the group using her expertise in interactive and participatory performance encounters, whilst working with the participants’ ideas and contributions. It was evident that managing the challenge and pace of sessions, within an environment of trust and respect was key, and this approach affected participants’ decisions to keep coming back. In addition the facilitator’s enthusiasm, creativity and warmth was viewed as inspiring and energising. The role of the Age UK project worker also requires mention here, as she supported individuals across the groups through her generous, considerate, encouraging and perceptive manner. Her role could be viewed as one of a ‘translator’; working with the content and subtleties of interaction between the facilitator and group members. In summary, it was evident that human interaction and pursuit served to support people’s needs and wants and had the potential to be transformative. As Townsend noted:

Empowerment is enabled when people demonstrate mutual respect, promote positive interdependence, share risk and responsibility, encourage hope and build trust in themselves and others. (Townsend 1996:182)

The following theme moves on to consider the resulting shifts which occurred through such actions and interactions.

**Shifting Perspectives**

This theme represents and explores how engagement in arts-based activities nourished and supported transition of participants’ sense of being. It reflects the quality of the personal and social dimensions of the arts-related activities in which the participants were engaged, as well as the diversity, strength and potential for development that each person offered and gained from workshop sessions, as illustrated in Figure 3. What was evident across these data was not only different forms and levels of engagement, but also the ways in which shifts had occurred in perspectives about engagement, through the process of working and learning with and through others. Greaves & Farbus (2006) also acknowledge the importance of the group process to support elders’ confidence development and self-efficacy.
Participants became empowered during the creative process through development of the content using their stories, their ideas, their suggestions for improvement and their risk taking. In the following example, one participant shared a particularly significant experience:

I think when we started to do a little bit of writing that was a turning point for me because I like writing, I used to like writing. It’s given my writing a new lease of life, I used to write doggerel but now I think I’m verging on writing poetry - without that hopefully not sounding too big headed.. There’s been quite a few bits of applause and well you know you play to the gallery don’t you. I think the group have enjoyed the few bits I’ve read out that I’ve written. I’ve never had a very high opinion of myself, a bit of a jack of all trades, not really very good at any one thing, so the response I’ve had to the poetry has been quite gratifying and I’ve been feeling quite big headed about it. I’m enjoying it!

This theme recognizes how mutual support and validation enabled shifts in participants’ self-perception and sense of presence, reflected by a growing commitment to the group and the project. Indeed, the unity and group dynamic supported transition from workshop participant to performer. Such transitions also influenced other aspects of participants’ everyday life, as reflected in this individual’s data:

I think I’ve got a bit more ‘get up and go’ since I’ve started doing things here in coming to these workshops - I may not be fast, but I am going (laughs). I have been doing a
little more gardening – ladylike gardening – and what else? I’ve been to the theatre a couple of times by myself. Of course another influence is my sister who is a companion as well, and who has been housebound for the past few weeks so I’ve been doing things for her too, but it all adds up to the fact that I’ve got a bit more purpose in life. All through the last year I sat and watched day time telly, so compared to that its improving.

Such personal reflections and revised perspectives about oneself provide some measure of evidence of the transitional experience encountered by participants. This occurred through the sense of unity, group dynamic and freedom of the participants to express, explore, create, dare, and to try things out, as illustrated by another participant below:

I think the difference is with this is we haven’t had a script, we had to do our own script and I think that’s been the interesting part of it, that we’ve had to put in our own ideas. Some have been absolutely fantastic and hilarious at times, there’s been a lot of humour!

The final theme moves on to present the impact of the project more widely and the dynamic and expressive responses experienced in being involved.

**Performing**

This theme captures participants’ diverse, yet often overlapping conception of the notion of performance. It also illustrates expression of individuality in that that there were a number of typologies reflected in being involved as reflected in Figure 4. Participants’ gains in terms of being-well included:

- A sense of pride and pleasure in undertaking something many had never thought possible
- Increased sense of ‘doing’ noted in peoples’ lives more generally
- Taking part in activities that had personal meaning and significance
- The quality of the performance, with the support and kudos of the Theatre

The sense of presence, and voice and the ways in which this challenged perceptions of the skills, abilities and valued contribution of older adults, realized through expressions of self, agility, bravery, sharing of emotion and humour.
Individuals placed value on being provided with the space and opportunity to be someone else, to try things out, to express themselves and to communicate this with others. In one example a participant explained:

Sometimes you know I feel I can be more like how I want to be when I’m here, you know, without holding back.

For others it was evident that performing required new skills and was experienced as more of a challenge:

We’ve had to push ourselves that bit more to think about performing on the stage, to think about that and be able to participate like that you know, but thankfully we were encouraged by the facilitators and one another.

Shifts in people’s health and wellbeing occurred by engaging in significant, meaningful occupation, through making informed choices and having control, and feeling increased self-confidence, creativity, ‘get up and go,’ and shifts in wider routines. It was also evident that this impact affected wider networks of meaning, including relationships with family members:
I speak with my son on the phone and he wants to know how I’m getting on and they think it’s great I’m doing this. And I know that he worries about me - but since I’ve been doing this he’s pleased and of course my granddaughter, she’s 15, she enjoys drama and she does it at school – so her and I we talk about this on the phone, we share what we’re doing, and everything’s ‘cool’ you know, and when I told her I was actually going to be performing at the Belgrade - because they’ve been here when I’ve brought them to see pantomimes and that - well she was so impressed!

In addition, this theme relates to a momentum created amongst participants for future action. As Inglis (1997) notes, future choice in action and self-reliance centre on creating self-confidence, self-expression and an interest in learning, which this project has been the catalyst for:

... when this came along it felt like a wonderful opportunity for me because I did used to do amateur dramatics a long time ago and really enjoyed it but back then.. I thought well I’ll give it a try, and I’ve really, really, enjoyed it and I’m dreading it finishing because I’m wondering - when I have caught up with myself around the house - I’m just worried I’m going to be back to where I started. I want something to help occupy my mind that isn’t just connected with the house or my garden.

**Findings of the WEMWBS Data**

The WEMWBS data provides complementary, confirmatory evidence about the positive shifts experienced by participants. This can be seen in Tables 3, 4 and 5 in relation to initial and follow-up scores. What is evident is that except for one participant who had no shift in scores (female vii Table 5) all individuals scores increased at follow-up and shifts were seen to occur across all items. Of note were shifts linked to the following items: ‘Feeling optimistic about the future’, ‘feeling close to other people,’ ‘feeling interested in other people,’ ‘having energy to spare’, ‘thinking clearly’, ‘being interested in new things’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Initial score</th>
<th>Follow up score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male a</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male b</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female a</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female b</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female c</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female d</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Mean initial score: 49
Mean follow-up score: 53.166
Mean group score : 51.08

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Initial score</th>
<th>Follow up score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female i</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female ii</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female iii</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female iv</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female v</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mean initial score: 52
Mean follow-up score: 57.4
Mean group score: 54.7

Table 4 Asian women’s group data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Initial score</th>
<th>Follow up score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female A</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female B</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female C</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female D</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female E</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female F</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female G</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female H</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Mean initial score: 51.75
Mean follow-up score: 56.5
Mean group score: 54.125
Overall mean score (both male and female scores) $51.08 + 54.7 + 54.125 / 3 = 53.30$
Sample size calculation – total participants 24 (21 females and 3 males)

A Wilcoxon Signed Ranks tests was carried out on the WEMWBS scores (see Table 6) and suggested that individuals scored significantly higher after the intervention (Mdn = 56.5) than before the intervention (Mdn = 51.5), $Z = 4.22, p < 0.01, r = 0.86$. Changes between pre and post intervention scores on the WEMWBS scores were examined using a Kruscal-Wallis test and suggested that the effect of the intervention was similar across Residential Housing, City Centre and Asian Women’s groups, $H(2) = 0.39, p = 0.82$.

Table 6 Pre and Post intervention score on the WEMWBS scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Pre Median, (Range)</th>
<th>Post Median, (Range)</th>
<th>Change Median, (Range)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Residential Housing</td>
<td>47.5 (22)</td>
<td>51 (20)</td>
<td>4 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Centre</td>
<td>53 (22)</td>
<td>57 (12)</td>
<td>4 (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Women</td>
<td>52 (17)</td>
<td>57 (22)</td>
<td>4.5 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All groups</td>
<td>51.5 (23)</td>
<td>56.5 (25)</td>
<td>4 (15)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: data adapted from: Savin-Baden et al., 2013.

In summary, the findings from both these calculations suggest that the increase in scores for participants in the respective groups was attributable to the intervention itself, rather than any
other external factors. As such the WEMWBS data usefully supports and corroborates the overall study findings.

**Discussion**

Marginalised and occupationally deprived people are often viewed as being at a disadvantage when their knowledge and skills are challenged by the realities of their daily life. Social deprivation is a particular health risk relative to wider society (Benetar 2002; Duncan 2004). In examining human experience and wellbeing, it is important to consider what supports people to experience satisfaction in their daily life. Being isolated, or marginalised raises issue of vulnerability and individual’s capacity to respond to life challenges. This project sought to examine how arts interventions including theatre and performance, could influence participants lives, and facilitate a process that might enable people to achieve beyond what they previously considered possible.

McNaughton et al (2005) present the arts/health diamond which categorises arts and health projects along two dimensions, in Figure 1 below.

![Figure 5 The Arts and Health Diamond](image)

**Key dimensions of arts/health**

**Unity is health** — projects that start from the point of using creativity to enhance social relationships. These reflect a growing school of thought that good relationships are a major determinant on health.

**Creativity and well being** — projects that emphasise creativity as a route to well being. These aim to work with individuals to better understand their health, using creative approaches as a means to expression. Art is seen as a potential therapy.

**Social**

**Engaging groups** — projects that engage groups to bring communities and health promotion closer together. They use creative methods to explore, disseminate, and communicate messages about health.

**Supporting care** — projects that support the process of care by working on the softer aspects of ill-health that health services, under the strain of heavy demand, cannot reach. Projects in the third group share some common ground, but aim to communicate with communities as a whole.

**Individual**

**Health Services**

The first dimension examines whether the focus is primarily on engagement with the arts (with an assumption that such activity carries benefits for wellbeing) or more specifically on health improvement (with the supposition that the arts can help to achieve health outcomes); and the second explores whether the focus is on individuals and their wellbeing, or on working with groups and communities. We suggest the model can be applied in relation to the findings of the Creative Gymnasium project in that engagement with the arts has been rewarding across both dimensions; targeting wellbeing through the creative process and offering health improvement at the personal, group and community level. However, measuring effectiveness is still an underdeveloped field of research activity and it is evident that the relationship between the arts, health and wellbeing remains diverse and includes a wide range of practices, communities and contexts.

The findings from our study revealed that participants engaged at a primary level of reflection, an inquiring phase in which the workshop content and environment (physical and
social) was evaluated. Individuals made judgments about their choices around engagement in relation to an initial assessment of the self. For many the initial experience was one of ‘bewilderment’ and uncertainty, with initial workshops experienced as infantile, although for others a more immediate connection and sense of enjoyment was evident. What appeared important in relation to participants ongoing commitment in the early stages was a general level of intrigue, a commitment to one another, and in particular the role of the facilitator, and the significant role she held in managing the challenge and pace of sessions for individuals, nurturing engagement, building trust, being inspiring and energising.

The programme functioned at the level of the group, and through the sharing event and performances, in the wider community, yet interestingly, despite this, participants recognised an opportunity to be oneself. Participants spoke of feeling able to do things alone whilst feeling part of a group – this individual opportunity to demonstrate capacity was valued; participants spoke of being an individual, alongside others, with sense of their own space. This (transitional) process prompted movement from a previously held belief to another, and aspects of personal change ensued and are evident within the data, for example, participants spoke of seeing other productions at the theatre, taking up previous and new hobbies. Such shifts, whilst viewed as positive, can be troubling whilst affirming, as inhabiting such a changed perspective can be disquieting for some. For example, the changed perspective offered individuals potential to take or make other choices; they prompted a desire to sustain or move forwards and engage further, which was not always possible due to funding and the project lifetime.

The use of drama to enhance personal health and wellbeing suggests the arts may be transformational in shifting behaviour in terms of patterns of doing, thinking and feeling. Transformation resulted from perhaps a personal epiphany, a change not only of how one views oneself, but also changes in perspectives about the political, economic and social ways in which life is lived. These shifts result in major change in ideas of one’s potential and identity – an ‘interactional moment’ (Denzin 1989:70). Yet despite such moments of heightened significance questions remain regarding whether longevity, or the quality of the experience, or what other factors are distinguishable which can support transformation. We suggest reflection, accessed via our data collection methods, proved useful when exploring with participants the shifts experienced in relation to personal identity, participant engagement, agency and presence. Sharing reflections with one another supported the shaping of alternate views of the self, and with that more accurate interpretation of the self.

Key Findings

The findings to date from across the study appear to indicate 6 important features:

1. Engaging in drama and arts activities provided forms of creative encounters and processes that were valued by participants. Examples include the development of a new and broad set of relationships which encompassed peer to peer, individual and facilitator, individual and family as well as between audience and the wider community. Such interactions amongst participants extended beyond the creative process and influenced the roles, relationships and routines of participants’ everyday lives.

2. Participants’ skills and confidence were influenced in a positive way by taking risks, for example in sharing personal material, public speaking, and generally doing things that previously individuals did not think they could do, or had opportunity to do. Such risk taking was experienced as fulfilling and rewarding.

3. Participants believed they gained a greater sense of agency, voice and presence in their community. This occurred through the creative process and products developed, such as digital stories, educational materials and public performances.
4. The skill set of the workshop facilitators was a core contributor to effective participant engagement, for example, a facilitator who was generous, considerate, encouraging, with expertise in interactive and participatory performance encounters, and who demonstrated the ability to encourage and value participants’ ideas and contributions.

5. The connection with the respected theatre company added both kudos and value to the drama and arts activities.

6. Participant gains were evident from both an immediate and medium term perspective; however, due to the short timeframe of the project it was not possible to give indications of any longer term benefits, as these have not been demonstrated to date.

Conclusion

The findings indicated that participants’ engagement in an artistic occupation was self-validating. Further, theatre and performance provided opportunities for diverse marginalised members of a community to connect and participate in a shared activity and transform their views of themselves and others. What is of note is the importance of space and place within this project, that is, the participants found a place to express themselves, to be themselves, to find out things about themselves and to feel respected members of their community. Moreover, the opportunity to produce credible public performance was also emphasised, and have support to do this from a professional artist. The evidence and recommendations from the project, in combination with new partnerships established, has contributed to the Theatre’s decision to make an ongoing commitment to the delivery of arts activity to the 50+ population; this group being a key part of the delivery infrastructure of the city.

Reflection on the Arts-based Evaluation

For many researchers in this area of inquiry, artful works and texts are expected to stand alone and be open to many and diverse interpretations. Yet for us this perspective seemed to stand against many of the arguments that have been fostered in qualitative inquiry, whereby researchers should not leave the text to speak for itself, since it is mediated by time and context. Therefore, the role of the researcher is to interpret the text and explain it for those reading it. What became critical for us to acknowledge as researchers in using arts-informed evaluation was it was likely to introduce more questions than answers, both for the researchers, the participants and the stakeholders. What was at the heart of this kind of project and evaluation was the desire to make (radical) statements about arts, justice, equity and health.

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REFERENCES


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The International Journal of Social, Political, and Community Agendas in the Arts is one of four thematically focused journals in the collection of journals that support the Arts and Society knowledge community—its journals, book series, conference and online community.

The journal explores the various points of interface of arts practices and communities, including the arts expressions of community and group identities, arts policies, art and government, art as activism, museums and galleries as institutions, arts in advertising, and public arts.

As well as papers of a traditional scholarly type, this journal invites presentations of practice—including experimental forms of documentation and exegeses that can with equal validity be interrogated through a process of academic peer review. This, for instance, might take the form of a series of images representing artistic practice, together with explanatory notes that articulate this practice with other, significantly similar or different and explicitly referenced practices.

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