

Being Creative

A research project that explores the impact of arts-based peer-led support groups.

Research Team: Tom Cook, Lynda Tweedie, Oliver Jones, Philippa Forsey,
Justin Rogers, Megan Robb and Stefanie Gustafsson
and the people from Creative Perspectives and Writing Space



Introduction

This project is part of the Community Matters initiative funded by the South West Foundation. It is a community-based participatory research project and a collaboration between Creativity Works and researchers at the University of Bath. Creativity Works is a socially engaged arts organisation who believe that creativity inspires and empowers people to explore, develop and grow. The organisation, through a commission from Bath and North East Somerset Council, offer a person-centred progression model from initial arts workshops and projects to ongoing peer led groups. This study examined the impact of the peer led group.

Methodology:

From the start, the research was approached as a co-produced project involving staff, volunteers and participants from Creativity Works, as well as academics from the University of Bath. The group worked with the ethos that each team member had life and/or work experience, which resulted in skills that could benefit the research project. At each step of the process the group met to reflect on any action related to the project, including the formulation of the aims; the development of the methodology and the analysis and dissemination of the research findings.

The project aimed to examine the question: What is the impact of arts-based peer led groups on the participants? To explore this question, twelve participants were identified from within two existing peer-led groups supported by Creativity Works. The first group was a creative writing project, Writing Space, whilst the second was an art group, Creative Perspectives. The project gained ethical approval from the University of Bath and informed consent was sought from each participant before data collection.

The participants were asked to produce a piece of creative work that reflected how they felt about the peer support group. This was followed by a semi-structured interview to explore the participants' experience of peer support in greater detail. The interviewers were members of the research team who were already volunteers within the peer support groups. Their status as insider researchers was beneficial in building rapport and trust with participants, and gathered the richest possible data for the project.

Once all data had been gathered and transcribed, the research team adopted a group analysis approach. Each piece of creative work and each interview transcript were coded by two members of the research group. Themes were identified and the meaning of each theme was agreed through group discussion.

Findings



The process of analysis resulted in the identification of four key themes; 1) The importance of creativity; 2) Developing social connections; 3) Creating a valued space and place; 4) Promoting self-empowerment. In this section of the report each of these themes will be discussed. Quotations from the interview transcripts, as well as participants' creative pieces, are used to give voice to the participants and to highlight how important these themes are from their perspectives and their lived experiences.

The Importance of Creativity

Creativity emerged as the one theme that both connects and reinforces the others. It proved to be the driving force in establishing the other themes. Every participant mentioned that creativity was, in his or her own way, the prism and conduit through which the social and wellbeing outcomes they encountered evolved and presented themselves. Each individual's creativity is unique; however, the context that the participants were practicing in was influenced by internal and external factors.

The following quotations from the participants show that internal influences comprised of their innate creative talents, their emotional wellbeing and their life experiences:

"We've all got different influences...because it's as much about life experience as it is about nature and nurture, and how you feel at that time."

"People trying to turn feelings into words and succeeding is inspiring."

"I've got an ability, I've got my own style of writing and I can express myself...the creative process expands my creative flair and brings out my passion for something in life."

The predominant external factor that influences participants' creativity is their peers. This is evident across this range of comments:

"I actually find it easier to be motivated in a group...we bounce ideas off different people all the time"

"A writing family, always there for each other"

"I like to hear people's ideas."

"I get inspiration from the other people."

"People trying to turn feelings into words, and succeeding is inspiring."

Other key themes influencing creativity were nature and environment. Modern culture and community were also influential in the creative process:

"An absolute love of nature...Nature, Outdoors, a walk in the countryside."

"I might read something, or I might see something on TV, or some strange event occurs and I think, it would be quite good to write about that"

"People generally, really; I'm aware of watching people more. I'm more aware of everything, and suddenly I can start to make sense of it with words."

These two areas of influence in relation to creative flow have a bearing on the evident personal outcomes experienced. The most powerful of these outcomes occurring across the sample, was the ability to express oneself, and find a voice. The wide range of quotations below demonstrate how key this was to the participants:

"It makes me think about other things, which is good because it takes me out of my head"

"...more courage, to speak up for myself through poetry"

"Takes your mind off other stuff that's troubling you"; "It brings out the best in me"

"Then I discovered art, which was a way to express my inner emotions and things that were going on"

"This group involvement has given me the most confidence to write what and how I see and feel"

"The finding of a new me"

"It's made like a second coming again, another life"

"Art has given me a pathway out of the life I had before...it gives you an identity"

"It just makes me express myself in a different way to what I would normally do."

Another important finding was how the group nurtured a sense of peace, mindfulness and wellbeing and how creativity was at the centre of this:

"It just helps your mood and your wellbeing when you do a lot of art and be creative"

"I'm at peace when I'm creating"

"Being creative makes me feel happier."

Image 1: *Painting my inner garden*



Developing social connections

Developing social connections has been an essential element of the peer groups. Conducting this research has provided insight into how important making friends is and how it improves an individual's mental health and well-being. Findings show that becoming a member of a peer-led group can be a great way of branching out socially, particularly for individuals who feel isolated and cut off from their communities.

Peer-led groups are non-hierarchical, so every member has an equal standing and a say in how the group is run. One of the members of our 'Writing Space' group said that it had given him *'the platform from which to try other experiences and socialise more'*. This seems to be a common theme for many of the group members who say they have gained a lot of friends and are generally more confident and outgoing since being involved with Creative Perspectives and Writing Space.

"I've gained a lot of confidence, I've gained a lot of friends, I've kind of got a new outlook on life and I've got hope, like for the future now"

"The group has also given me another outlet at this point in my life, so I don't become too isolated and have another hobby to occupy me and I've got more outgoing"

The creative activity and interactions between group members provides inspiration:

"I find I get inspiration from the other people, nice being in a friendly, safe, environment, people that are like-minded but also it's nice to watch other people doing their work, and gain confidence in your work"

"I just love it because you are meeting other people who have created stuff as well, so it's a good social thing, and inspires you, and has just inspired me to go from strength to strength"

Importantly groups also provide encouragement and are a supportive environment with no judgements:

"The people in the group are very supportive and encouraging"

"It's really nice being with other artists and I think that helps, inspires me, and helps me grow in kind of confidence in a new field for me, art"

"It's when I'm in an environment with other people who are inspiring, then that kind of inspires me to just focus, and do a very enjoyable activity"

"I actually find it easier to be motivated writing in a group"

Group members expressed that having no hierarchy where all their voices are heard, which helps them to have a stake in the group:

"There's an allowance here of lots of different types of writing"

"This group was very welcoming, and there haven't been any questions about me which have felt intrusive"

"The group experience together and what we are able to give each other, I really enjoy the feedback. I find that a great help"

The relationships formed and the sense of shared identity helped people feel supported and for some this was so strong they equated it to being part of a family:

"I definitely think being in a group, can support each other when you are doing the art, you are not just solo, you've got a group you are with which is really nice' and 'meeting the same people, keeping up with how they are getting on, keeps me a bit more grounded with reality"

"We are able to work together as a group, which has, over the months become a writing family, always there for each other"

Creating a valued space and place

Space

Data showed that the groups provided a valued space that serves as a sanctuary with a creative atmosphere. A key aspect of this is how the groups provided structure and a consistent space for people that became a vital part of their weekly routine:

“Regularity and a regular space to meet is very important”

“I am so grateful to be able to come to Writing Space on a Tuesday afternoon. It really adds a bit of structure to my week and provides some escapism”

“I also really value having the kind of protected time when I actually just do art, painting, or catching up and chatting. So, it’s a pleasant kind of little space I can give to myself in the week”

“I find it’s a sanctuary, you know, to leave one’s problems behind and it’s nice to focus on positive things”

“Well it makes the weekend go with a zing, because a weekend is a down time for me, particularly Saturday and Sunday, then all my socialising comes to a stop, so it’s a safety valve, you know, to lead you on to Saturday and to Sunday. Where would I be without it? Completely lost”

Alongside the structure that groups provided in peoples’ routines, the groups also provided space for them to develop their creative expression and interests:

“Always a friendly, safe, relaxed environment, which allows, and encourages creative expression”

“I love coming and doing art and sharing artistic skills with other artists, meeting people with similar interests, and sharing ideas and learning skills from them, I enjoy it, something to really occupy the time”

Place

The importance of place also emerged as a theme from the data, in this context place was understood as the physical place where the group meet. This was particularly important in the art group as their current meeting place allowed them on a very practical level to pursue their creative interests:

“We’ve got loads of room in the place so you can put your stuff out so you can do large projects or small projects, where it would be impossible to do in my small bedsit flat, you know, use of the tables and all the easels are very useful. I haven’t got the room, whereas this art studio has got room to move, and that’s important. Not only can you move around the place but also you don’t have to watch about making a mess on the carpet, and other things like this, you are not knocking into things”

“Just doing things like setting up the room when you arrive, and putting the things out, I enjoy doing that. Helps make you feel that it’s your art group”

The participants also drew inspiration from the environment, by being around other artists at the studio:

“You see other people creating artwork and you get inspiration from that, and you can compare ideas, and if you are in the middle of a painting and you are not quite sure what to do you can ask somebody else, and it’s a really nice group, and the fact it’s peer led as well makes you feel you are really part of it. It’s nice being in the Artist Studios as well because it’s a proper artists’ studio. You are not just painting in a little community centre somewhere, you are actually in an artists’ studio”

“I have reconnected with art and been introduced to artists at the studios”

Image 2: Untitled



Promoting self-empowerment

Promoting self-empowerment was another key theme that was evident across the data. The group members identified how the groups made them feel empowered:

“It’s all about empowerment, being part of a peer led group makes you feel empowered, and hope and empowerment I think are two of the most important things in recovery from any mental health condition. Hope and empowerment, and this group gives me both”

Group members also expressed how their participation led to a sense of achievement through the creativity, where they could develop new skills, which led to greater confidence:

"It makes me feel better about myself because I feel that I've got more to me, and you can be creative in lots of different ways"

"It's like I feel like I've been released from the cage because I've got a way to express myself...it's really helped with my writing. My writing has improved"

"I've been involved in decisions, like when we did the exhibition, it's given me a lot of confidence because we make decisions as a group. I would never have thought I was capable of doing a lot of the things I did during the exhibition, it's really built my confidence up... it's made me feel empowered"

The engagement in creativity also promoted coping skills and built resilience by providing a sense of calmness and a space for mindfulness:

"I think it's contributed a great deal to my mental wellbeing. Groups like this are vital for mental wellbeing"

"This group has helped my feelings of anxiety and depression a lot. It has given me the platform from which to try other experiences and socialise more"

"When you are actually doing art it brings some stillness and brings you very much into the moment. And I think that re-centres me"

"I've kind of got a new outlook on life and I've got hope, like for the future now. I haven't self-harmed since I started doing art.... That kind of goes out into everyday life as well because you feel a bit better about everyday life as well ...now I've got a bit more confidence in the outside world too, and that's what creating things I think has done...it's like I'm an artist and that's an identity"

"I go home and I feel calm for the rest of the evening, and during the week I can reflect back on it and it still helps me to stay calm if I think about that space"

Personal empowerment has been a key finding and participants also spoke of how they rediscovered a purpose and identified opportunities for their personal progression:

"It just inspired me to go from strength to strength"

"I've gained respect, and that's lovely, for somebody to respect your work"

"Good, like a productive person who isn't just useless, I've got an ability, I've got my own style of writing and I can express myself... It brings out the best in me"

The peer-led approach to the groups is also important to the participants as it has promoted choice and has enabled them to take control and set their own goals. The approach also enables everyone to have their voice heard and believe in themselves:

"It's good because it gives you that bit of responsibility for your own group, you feel it's your group, rather than someone else's group that you just come along to... it gives me the confidence to say things, I think if someone was in charge I possibly wouldn't have the confidence to say my ideas, but because we are all equal it's like I feel like I can"

"Less shy... Reading in public as well"

"I actually find it easier to get things out when I know that there's a group of us sat around a table and all doing the same thing, as opposed to when I'm on my own I struggle with where to begin and to keep on going"

Image 3: 'Pain in yellow'



In addition, participants also talked about how Creativity Works enabled new possibilities for them to connect with their communities and develop their creative interests. This included trying out things they had not done before, widening their experiential repertoire. There was a sense that the groups had provided a platform to do “more” in the various areas of one’s life and create space for self-improvement by, for example, changing established ways of thinking. This allowed them to connect with communities outside of the group and develop their personal skills, as this participant reports:

"As I said it's opened up my life, I see things now in a different way, I'm able to think things through, I'm able to make decisions better. The words mean much more to me, and being able to put them in the context of a story, or to explain something now"

that I couldn't do before, I literally couldn't, I had trouble writing a letter, you know, and now because I belong to a church committee I have reports to write, and it's helped enormously, couldn't do without it. It really has been a massive life opener, it really has. We do a lot in the community, which I enjoy. We put on lots of sales and we do teas and things for the older people, and up at the farm as well, that's another, you know, I've joined things that have been fantastic... It's opened a load of doors, it has, yeah"

Others shared how being a part of Creativity Works inspired them to think of attending another community group:

"I'm thinking of doing a similar writing group that's run by the Library, which happens twice a month"

One important feature given the arts-based focus of Creativity Works was the development of participants' cultural interests. Some had only limited engagement with art prior to the group and had not been aware of their artistic interest. For example, one participant talked about how being a member of Creative Perspectives allowed them to develop their artistic skill taking it *"from strength to strength"*, suggesting that they *"had no idea I could paint before."* For others, it provided an opportunity to re-engage with an already existing interest, which had been there in the past:

"I've always been a keen reader but it's really got me into poetry, which I had forgotten how much I enjoyed when I was at school... I'm reading and listening to a lot more music, I love listening to music. So, I think it's had a direct bearing on making that possible"

Conclusion: Lessons learned and suggestions for further research

The findings of this project show the positive impact that these arts-based peer led groups have on the participants. The quotations from the interviews are powerful and demonstrate just how vitally important the groups are for the people who attend them. Data shows how the groups provide an important space for people to be creative, which affects their wellbeing across their everyday lives. For example, the data shows how important the groups were in providing a regular space and place for people to come together with others with shared interests. The groups provide inspiration and encouragement, not only to develop people's creative interests but also to build their friendships, social networks and community engagement. The findings presented above also demonstrate how the groups are key in building on people's confidence and their skills, which enables them to try new things. For many of the participants they act as a springboard to embrace new opportunities and to connect with their community.

The data also showed how sustainable these two groups were, they had been running for many months. Thus, the participants often form close friendships. Change is an inevitable part of any ongoing group and that means at times whilst people join, others leave and some participants spoke of missing those that had left. The research provided a space for

participants to reflect on the impact of group changes and this is a potential lesson that future groups would benefit from allowing space for participants to reflect on group changes.

It is also important to acknowledge a limitation of the study, which is that it only included active participants in the groups. Future research would be beneficial that attempts to follow up with people who no longer attend the groups as this might offer insights into the limitations of peer led groups. However, despite this limitation the data gathered in this study provides rich detailed accounts that show how vital creative peer-led arts groups can be. This is illustrated when a member of the art group was asked about how they felt about attending the group and being creative and they replied...

“Alive and not just existing!”

All written materials and conference presentations produced as a part of this project are the result of a group co-production. Each member of the research group has contributed throughout the process. Any further publication of materials will adopt a similar approach of co-production.

**Research Team: Tom Cook, Lynda Tweedie, Philippa Forsey, Oliver Jones,
Justin Rogers, Megan Robb and Stefanie Gustafsson**

