Invest to Save:
Arts in Health Evaluation

From series: Pictures emphasizing stillness.
arthur+martha
Photography: Lois Blackburn

Exploring the impact of creativity, culture and the arts on health and well-being.
Introduction and Background

Over the last three years the alliance of Manchester Metropolitan University, Arts Council England, North West, and the Department of Health, Northwest Public Health Group has developed and evolved. Under the management of Arts for Health, the aim of this alliance has been to explore the role of creativity, culture and the arts in building capacity for health and well-being across the North West of England and to engage in collaborative approaches to tackling key issues. The arts and health field has grown in presence and activity, particularly over the last five years, as health policy throughout the world has embraced empowerment principles and partnership working, as well as shifting responsibility for healthy living towards the individual (DOH, 2004). In response, new and creative approaches to delivery have been called for, facilitated by investing creatively in the very people and places that seek to both support and live these changes (Contos, 2004). Arts and health initiatives are presented as a means of facilitating the change and transformation of individual and community health (ACE, 2004), and of empowering service users and staff towards greater health and well-being. The objective of the ‘Invest to Save: Arts in Health’ research project was to evaluate and encourage development of arts based practices in a range of different settings and to understand more fully these benefits. The team has also provided advocacy, networking and training opportunities around this agenda. This report summarises the key findings from the evaluation process at the heart of the work and highlights key elements of the learning gained from the evaluation and partnership processes, which underpin recommendations for future developments.

In September 2007 we published an interim report ‘Towards Transformation’ and held an event at the Lowry to begin both dissemination and consultation around our findings. This summary document takes into account feedback from this event and broader input and shares the key findings of our work. Full details of the research and process, activity and future developments can be found on our website.

Health and well being is about being strong in yourself, strong enough to challenge what is happening to you and what is happening around you.

[arts educator]
Findings

Successful Arts and Health Projects

Projects that have demonstrated how a culture of openness, mutual learning, creativity and organic growth, they are responsive, user-led, and able to plan long term. The arts and health practitioners working within these projects, work within a creative approach that is based on their values, experience and knowledge. Within this approach practitioners aspire to be well aware, open to feedback and responsive to developments from inside and outside their work. Where projects have not been successful, there have been weaker underpinning structures, such as an irregular funding, lack of critique, evaluation and reflective learning in practice. Equally there are inconsistent relationships within teams and with stakeholders, a limited awareness of health or education and a lack of clear aims and objectives in relation to the goals of the host area (i.e. health audiences).

Environment

Environmental concerns emerged as a key central theme of perceived values across stakeholder groups. The quality of the environment was of importance to all stakeholders, whether it was the physical environment or the culture of the people within it. Optimum environments were perceived as stimulating creative and supportive spaces which embed a creative culture, holding high expectations for health and well being in these environments and in general. Service users found themselves openly. Service users had poor experiences and expectations of learning and health environments.

Engagement

Those engaging with the research in projects were predominantly older white females, who were looking to improve their quality of life or alleviate lifestyle issues associated with good ageing, coping with depression, or associated changes in life. Initial barriers to engagement with arts projects were found to be around lack of awareness of the potential, appropriateness and relevance of the arts activities to an individuals health or lifestyle. Once engaged however, service users typically increasingly accessed a range of arts forms.

Personal Concern for Health and Well Being

A personal concern for health and well being is a desire to have fewer physical ailments, curing illnesses and improvement in quality of life, particularly feeling more engaged and involved in general. They felt greater personal control for health and well being, and felt more empowered to make changes in relation to health, as well as having greater capacity to cope with illness or disability. Older people valued having broader choices, a social outlet and appreciated the arts activities as a source of personal development. There was a common belief that arts engagement had opened up lives that had become narrowed due to isolation, demoralised social networks or ill health. These coping with depression experienced a significant reduction in symptoms of anxiety and depression with adjacent improvements in confidence, self-esteem and motivation towards healthy living and well being.

Personal Development

Engaging in culture, creativity and the arts significantly improves health and well being by engaging people in challenging activities and giving them the opportunity to be creative and experimental. In turn gives people the confidence and capacity to see and do things differently. This leads to raised aspirations, and a greater motivation to think positively and personal growth, which were felt to be central to promoting well being. It was acknowledged that well being is not always about feeling good and in fact many processes of change involved experiencing of great personal challenge and difficulty. It was found that capacity to rise to these challenges and learning and personal growth were more central and meaningful of their environments. People experienced a resilient Tasmanian form of well being (Stedman well being encompassing resilience and personal growth and personal engagement) and how an impact on both mental and physiological health (Rhdy et al 2004).

Understanding Transformation

This transformation change observed across the study came in varied current conditions, namely where the arts or art form connected through engagement with a service user/nursing artist. During this period of connection and activity there was a possibility of entry into a creative flow state where people typically experienced absorption; deep concentration in engagement in what they were doing. This is a time of open thought, tone and space which provides a means of ‘forgetting’ about pain, illness or concerns beyond distraction. This experience was seen to stimulate a pattern of strategies typically described and depicted as a process of transformational change towards well being as well as health, where the findings emphasise the importance of placing partnerships and alliances at the heart of encouraging new means of challenging health problems (Flett, 2006), and are therefore not just timely and relevant to help address current strategic objectives in both arts and health fields. Optimum environments we have learned are places in which these present research experiences learning, challenge, potential for experimentation, along with support and opportunities for development and change in behavior. This is achieved within a supportive environment culture, often in response to repeated cycles of activity where the person can ‘practice being well’.

Development and Sustainability

Engagement with the arts we have observed can trigger a transformative experience, whether the service user already one, or a series of events. It is observed that experiences into change however, there is a need for sustained engagement, support and development. This level of support requires a number of sustainable structures to be in place which can underpin practice and development. These take the form of • clear focused aims and objectives • strong and responsive partnerships • sustainable funding • a culture of reflection and learning • a criteria for quality

Overall, the findings from the evaluation have learned are places in which these present research experiences learning, challenge, potential for experimentation, along with support and opportunities for development and change in behavior. This is achieved within a supportive environment culture, often in response to repeated cycles of activity where the person can ‘practice being well’.
Findings

The arts transformed my life. It did, it transformed my life, but it didn’t come without a lot of hard work on my part as well.

[participant]
The evaluation had at its heart clear aims to utilize a participatory approach in collaborating with arts and health projects, and the design of the evaluation facilitated and encouraged a highly collaborative process. The aim of this was to:

- explore practice and learning, and thus to
- build capacity and a language for evaluation and evidence gathering that would
- enable meaningful and relevant measurement tools to be identified and lead towards
- more creative and generative data collection methods.

We utilised Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider, 2001) workshops at the outset of the project as a means of bringing the diverse stakeholders together to explore consensus around defining good practice and optimum perceived outcomes. This format facilitated a relationship building between collaborators, promoted involvement and engagement with the process, and stimulated mutual awareness of desired outcomes for the project. All seeks to discover people's specialists, their essential contributions and achievements, and it is based on principles of equality of voice. Within this approach, teams were able to explore their diverse views within a guided and positive framework to meet the overall objective of identifying perceived elements of value or impact in their practice. They were also able to collaborate with researchers through a mutual learning process, to identify the best means of understanding, capturing and measuring anticipated changes.

Within this strategy there was the additional opportunity for teams to come together at the outset of the process to explore their practice within rich narratives. Here they explored both individual elements of practice, and a more overarching idea of the unseen or higher aspirations of what each was trying to achieve. This served to unify stakeholders within common values and aspirations, and promoted mutual understanding and greater clarity around desired outcomes. The consultation process generated the following key areas for potential measurement, and these were used as a focus for recording pre, and post intervention changes.

These areas were as follows:

- Well being (Riff's Scale of Psychological well being)
- General Health (General Health Questionnaire)
- Depression (Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale)
- Job Satisfaction (Warr, Cook and Wall Work and Life Attitudes survey)

In addition the research team conducted semi-structured interviews with project participants, teams, artists and stakeholders.

These mixed methodological tools enabled broad data generation that included both measurement of change around the key identified areas, and exploration of the meaning inherent within those experiences from differing perspectives.

The findings from this process encompass both measurement of changes and perceptions of value and whilst they go some way towards demonstrating the benefits of arts engagement, they also highlight areas for further research and development.

We wanted to create a learning environment, a place where people have an equal say and contribute to how things work.

[nurse/arts and health project lead]
We recommend that there is support to the development of a range of arts and health projects that are responsive to mutual needs and reflect a more user-led approach. Specifically, to build on existing successes to make activities more relevant and accessible to older male, younger and harder to reach groups.

We recommend the utilisation and development of creative and participatory approaches to research and evaluation and to greater relationship building between practitioners working across stakeholder groups.

We recommend investment in initiatives to support and develop the evidence base for arts and health practitioners whose practice will increasingly be based on a combined dynamic blend of research evidence, practitioner knowledge and service user need and preferences.

We recommend in increased support and training for arts and health practitioners to enable them to set clear informed and relevant project aims in relation to health and other strategic objectives.

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The model of transformation has emerged from the data collection and observation of practice within projects, we recommend that there is further exploration of practical means of embedding knowledge of the transformative cycle into sustained indicator change in key priority areas e.g. • Risk development • Education and training • Exploring application to areas of practice

A key strength of this evaluation process has been the learning relationships and culture of participation between diverse partners. We recommend partnership working and particularly support the use and development of creative methodologies as a means of facilitating relationships, generating a language of communication and raising awareness of mutual needs and values.

We recommend support for developing encouraging and supporting a culture of critique, reflection and learning within the Arts and Health Community. Central to this is a recommendation for practitioners to address critical discourse, peer review and reflective learning as part of development.

The participatory process enabled a clearer picture of practitioner needs to be established. In response to findings in the area we call for the support and development of best practice guidelines and standards. Although this evaluation has demonstrated clear support within the field for the transformative effect of arts activities, equally it has revealed the need for a strong structural foundation to encourage it and sustainability. In response we call for investment in sustained funding beyond short programmes, within successful existing projects and support for developing project capacity for sustainability.

We recommend support for the commissioning of high quality arts and artists for maximum impact and recommend guidelines for quality are developed to encourage maintenance of standards.

References

3. Arts for Health at Manchester Metropolitan University

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Collaborating Projects

The Wear Purple project offers a range of arts activities to older people to promote positive ageing, health and prevent illness. It’s important for people as they get older to meet other people and have something different to talk about to prevent isolation.

Contact Simone Cobbold
01244 347831
www.wearpurple.co.uk

The Stockport Arts and Health project, Arthur and Martha is a project at the outset of the study that offered visual arts and creative writing activities to older people in rehabilitation care. The aim is to document peoples’ lives and engage them in activity that might lift their spirits.

Contact Phillip Davenport/Lois Blackburn
01663 744113
www.arthur-and-martha.co.uk

Start in Salford is a project which offers a range of arts activities to people suffering from mild to moderate depression. Inner cities create social isolation, this project uses the arts to support and develop people that get involved.

Contact Bernadette Conlon/June Wilcock 0161 3516000
www.startinsalford.co.uk

Pendle Leisure Trust offers referral options for health professionals in the form of three art forms to people suffering symptoms of depression as a result of personal, social or environmental issues. It provides a creative environment for people in rural isolation, to learn and socialise as a means of combating symptoms of depression.

Contact Russell Tennant
01282 661784

BlueSCI is a partnership project based on the collaboration between an artist and a health professional. Its’ aim is to develop a combined arts-health/cultural approach to promotion of health and well-being within an environment that is designed to stimulate learning and well being and addresses mental health issues.

Contact Alicia Clare/Stuart Webster
0161 9124828
www.bluesci.org.uk

The Royal Liverpool Children’s Hospital, Alder Hey is an arts initiative bringing together a range of high quality cultural champions to improve the environment and culture of health facilities and the health and wellbeing of staff and patients alike.

Contact Vicky Charnock
0151 2933530

—it’s an opportunity to see things in a different way, even if it’s just for half an hour of that intense time.

[visual artist]