



# Helium

## Puppet Portal Project

Examining Puppetry and Technology  
Located Across Four Hospital Environments  
within the Arts and Health Context

*Independent Evaluation (Summary)*  
By SpiralOrchard

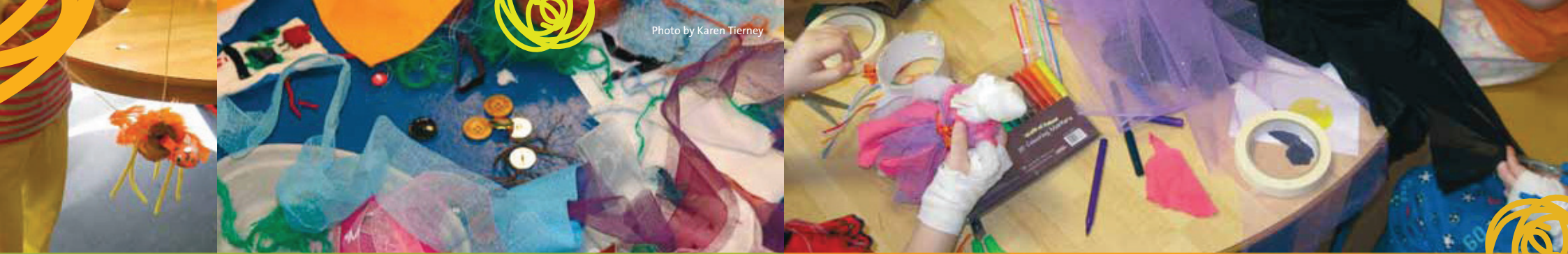


Photo by Karen Tierney

## What is Helium?

Helium is an innovative arts and health company that seeks to transform children's healthcare experiences by engaging them in stimulating and enjoyable arts activity within a variety of healthcare settings.

Helium works to nurture the child's creative sense as part of his or her overall well-being. It views the healthcare environment as a valid artistic space within which children may be enabled to express themselves as creative beings.

## What does Helium do?

Helium provides a range of arts projects across children's health services, including artists in residence and community health projects. In this work, it draws family, friends, healthcare staff and hospital-based teachers and hospital play specialists into the children's creative activity.

It has recently piloted the Puppet Portal Project across four hospital environments, which has been evaluated by SpiralOrchard, the evaluation specialists in arts and health.

## Stakeholders

The Arts Council and the HSE funded the pilot phase of the Puppet Portal Project. Helium is also supported by Social Entrepreneurs Ireland.

The stakeholders in the project comprised the children; parents; artists; teachers and hospital play specialists; hospital staff; hospitals; funders; Helium; the Centre for Health Informatics TCD, and Kids' Own Publishing Partnership, which co-managed the project with Helium.



## The Puppet Portal Project

The Puppet Portal project sought to innovatively merge art, health and technology to facilitate children in hospital in creating interactive puppetry performances. For this project Helium engaged four artists in four hospitals.

These were:

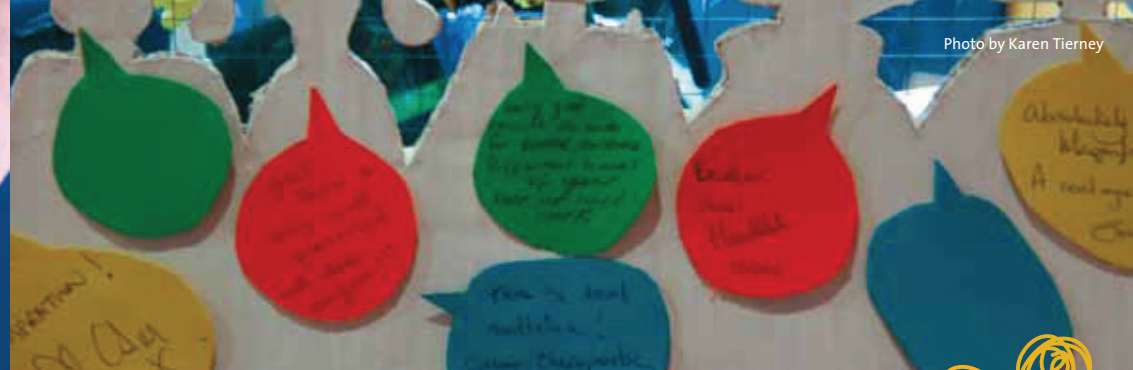
- Children's University Hospital, Temple St., Dublin,
- Beaumont Hospital, Dublin,
- The Children's Ark Unit, Mid-Western Regional Hospital, Limerick,
- Sligo General Hospital.

The artists used Áit Eile ([www.aiteile.ie](http://www.aiteile.ie)), an on-line community for children in hospital developed by researchers at the Centre for Health Informatics in Trinity College, Dublin, to help the children in the four locations to share their puppetry, and to engage socially with each other. This use of puppetry and multimedia technology aimed to reduce the child's sense of isolation while developing and nurturing their imagination and creativity.

Helium collaborated with the Centre for Health Informatics in extending Áit Eile as a tool for working creatively with children in hospitals, and for creating virtual communities of artists, children and staff in different healthcare settings. Throughout the project, the TCD centre, which has played a key role in developing web-based environments for children in hospital, facilitated the use of this technology by the artists and children.

The project supported reflection and dialogue among artists, health professionals, hospital teachers and play specialists about best practice in creative engagement with young patients. It encouraged also the transfer of the creative skills and understanding of the creative process to hospital staff and to parents.

Kids' Own Publishing Partnership co-managed the project and provided a structure for communication and creative exchange among the artists focused on achieving best practice in every aspect of the project.



## What did the Puppet Portal Project do?

Four artists worked with approximately 450 children across four hospitals in providing puppetry sessions and related activity for young patients on one day a week for 20 weeks. The number of participants varied, depending on medical issues, but an average of five children attended each session.

The children made and used the puppets, created their stories and performed the resulting shows through a live video link. They also made videos and documented their work through on-line multimedia journals.

Children reported their 'favourite activity' was 'making puppets'. Many liked 'learning new things' and 'doing the puppets how you like', activities that gave them freedom of choice and expression in what is otherwise a controlled medical environment.

The creative activity allowed the children to express themselves through the puppetry and the shared activity with other children. It gave them a sense of control over their restricted environment, and left them feeling happier and less stressed. It relieved their boredom and distracted them from their illness.

Parents, hospital school teachers, hospital play specialists and healthcare staff also developed their creative skills and awareness of children's creativity.

For the artists, the project provided five professional development days and four further days for artistic and evaluation briefings and for training in web and video technology. Kids' Own Publishing Partnership provided peer mentoring for the artists. The website [www.practice.ie](http://www.practice.ie), which is an on-line platform managed by Kids' Own Publishing Partnership, acted as a forum where the artists could reflect, with their peers, on their work and professional practice. Through their blogs on [www.practice.ie](http://www.practice.ie), the artists shared their insights, experiences and challenges.

Áit Eile ([www.aiteile.ie](http://www.aiteile.ie)), the online community for children in hospital, facilitated collaboration among artists and children across all hospitals. It was used as a repository for weekly journal entries comprising photos, videos and other innovations developed by artists in the different hospitals. It worked as a communication tool that enabled children in hospital interact with family, friends and the outside world.

Through this activity and reflection, a model for creative activity with children in hospital has been developed on which future projects could be based.

## What impact did the project have?

The project was evaluated based on 292 completed questionnaires, on-site observations and other creative ways of gathering data devised by the artists to facilitate the children.

The evaluation showed:

- 🕒 Children were happier and less bored as a result of taking part in the puppetry project. The activity distracted them from their illness.  
The project allowed the children to express themselves through the puppets and their stories. Often they expressed their anxiety at their healthcare situation in this way, which reduced their stress and gave them a sense of greater control over their environment. Being able to communicate with children in other hospitals helped reduce feelings of isolation.
- The project introduced children to the use of multimedia technology. It encouraged creativity, social contact, physical movement, self-expression, and confidence.
- 🕒 Parents, guardians and staff felt the puppetry had improved the children's mood and reduced their sense of alienation in hospital. Parents were delighted to see their children enjoying themselves; many took part in the activity with their children, and learned creative skills they intended to use at home.
- 🕒 The project brought creativity and humour to the hospital environment. New creative and technical skills were acquired by health staff, teachers, and hospital play specialists through the puppetry sessions
- 🕒 Hospital teachers found the puppetry activity covered many aspects of the school curriculum, which further developed the model for working within hospitals.
- 🕒 The project allowed artists and health professionals to jointly discuss best practice for working with children. Communication between artists and hospital staff facilitated the sharing of skills and insights into children's creativity, which informed other aspects of the hospital environment.





## In the future...

In its next phase, the Puppet Portal Project will continue to explore the use of storytelling and technology to facilitate social engagement and creative expression for children in hospital. It will support the creation of artwork and creative activity across hospitals to which the many stakeholders - children, parents, staff and artists - can contribute and jointly own.

It will incorporate another on-line community, [www.solas.ie](http://www.solas.ie), developed by the TCD Centre for Health Informatics, as a further resource in developing a children's community in hospital. It will engage with clinical and care staff in developing the role of the artist in the hospital and further develop best practice for creative activity with young patients. Kids' Own Publishing Partnership will support the development of the project and its practitioners.

Specific objectives include finding ways of using art and technology in the hospital ward to reach children who otherwise might not be able to participate.

As a first step, the Puppet Portal Project will engage five artists to develop puppet making and collaborative performance using innovative technology with young patients. It will explore ways of collaborating with artists and musicians based outside the hospital, using technology for on-line collaboration. Harnessing the benefits of on-line interactive technology in this way will be an important underlying goal of the next phase.

In working towards these ends, the project will draw on the experience gained through the first phase and identified in its evaluation.

Brian was around nine when he arrived at hospital with serious injuries that caused cognitive and physical difficulties. During his time in hospital he took part in a series of Puppet Portal workshops.

## Case Study - Brian's Story

### Session One

This is Brian's first Puppet Portal workshop. He finds it hard to speak and so it's difficult to express his feelings verbally. His use and understanding of language is impaired. His short-term memory is poor. Because his mobility is temporarily impaired he uses a wheelchair or relies on assistance to get around. Today, he holds a simple rod puppet with a costume of colours that he can chose by pointing his finger. His puppet does not have to speak; instead it talks by nodding and waving. Brian is intrigued to see other children with other puppets on the web. He realizes that they, in turn, can see what his puppet is doing. By the end of the story, his puppet is singing softly.

### Session Two

Brian's voice is returning. He is starting to whisper sentences and a new puppet talks a little. The artist shows Brian and the other participants how to use a storyboard, breaking down a story into separate scenes, as part of preparing their video-link puppet show. Brian realizes now that their show will have an audience. Better make it a good story. When he forgets the thread of the story, the storyboard reminds him. Though his voice is weak, a clip-on microphone carries the sound to the audience. He is delighted when he hears himself at a louder volume. The reaction of the other children on the video screen to his puppet's story pleases him. They seem to like it.

### Session Three

Brian is feeling chirpy today. His puppet lives Under the Sea but learns that there are other lands on the earth around and in the sky above. Brian enjoys making up the puppet's story and creating a fantasy world for it. His newest puppet can do a lot more with its

body. There is a puppet performance as usual. He enjoys watching the other children's shows and hearing their voices, and he can't wait to see their reaction to his puppet and its journey Under the Sea.

### Session Four

Brian's speech is much better. He is used now to the idea that there are other children who are in other hospitals. The world seems a bigger place with interesting possibilities. Brian decides that today his puppet will have superhuman powers and will be able to fly.

### Session Five

Brian is recovering very well. His puppet feels mischievous and merry today. He looks forward to the Wednesday sessions. They animate the routine of his hospital day. Soon he will leave and go for further rehabilitation. He waves at the other children on the web screen as his puppet prepares to move on to another land.

### Later...

Brian has gone for rehabilitation but he has happy memories of his time in hospital. When he left, the artist gave him a video of all his puppet shows to bring home with him. His Nana was delighted to see all he had done. There is a surprise for him today. His old friends in hospital have linked up with him on the web to show him their puppet show. He looks back at the hospital he has left, and waves to everyone.

*Brian's involvement in Puppet Portal did not cause his recovery but it contributed to a holistic process that gave him a positive experience of hospital and enhanced the process of recovery. The puppets he made are a lasting reminder of how far he has come and how much more he has to enjoy in his future.*



## Learn more about Helium

For more information on Helium arts and health company, go to **[www.helium.ie](http://www.helium.ie)**

You can follow Helium through its pages on:

**Twitter:** [www.twitter.com/HeliumArts](https://twitter.com/HeliumArts)

**Facebook:** [www.facebook.com/HeliumArts](https://www.facebook.com/HeliumArts)

The artists' blogs can be accessed on **[www.practice.ie](http://www.practice.ie)**

The evaluation report of the **Puppet Portal Project** carried out by SpiralOrchard, *A Pilot Puppetry Project: Examining puppetry and technology located across four hospital environments within the arts and health contexts*, will be available on **[www.helium.ie](http://www.helium.ie)**



Helium was shortlisted for an **Innovation Award** by the **Neurological Alliance of Ireland**, which honours initiatives that improve the quality of life of people with neurological conditions, for the Puppet Portal Project's work in Beaumont Hospital, the National Referral Centre for Paediatric Neurosurgery.

Helium, the HSE and the Centre for Health Informatics, TCD, were highly commended in the **Allianz Business to Arts Awards** in 2010 in the category of **Best Use of Creativity** for the Puppet Portal Project.

# Helium

Transforming child health,  
through exceptional arts experiences

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**[www.helium.ie](http://www.helium.ie)**