

How can arts activities contribute to people's journeys of recovery from mental ill health?

Arts and opportunity

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Start in Manchester, part of Manchester Mental Health and Social Care Trust, is a mental health service that uses arts and horticulture to help people with serious and long-term mental health challenges to recover health and rebuild their lives. Our work is based on the growing evidence base that visual art has a key role in the mental health recovery process – in rebuilding skills, adjusting perceptions and recreating identity.

When we fall ill with a mental health difficulty, we can literally lose ourselves in the process. Life disintegrates; the person we once were is perceived to be gone forever. We may wonder: 'Who am I? What happened? Where is the me I thought I would be?'¹ Part of the recovery journey must be spent rebuilding an identity that puts aspirations and reality back together; that digests the new life experience of illness, and uses it to create a new self.

This article will make the case for a strong connection between arts activities and recovery of mental health: that, because arts activities have the capacity to transform, art can help us to redefine both ourselves and our place in the world. How does this happen?

Developing thinking skills

Let's start with thinking. Arts activities affect thinking because participation in them demands a creative approach to viewing problems and designing solutions. There are few standard solutions to challenges that arise in personal arts projects, because each project is unique and demands the application of unique thinking, decision-making and application of judgement.

De Bono² sees this type of personal creative thinking as a dynamic but neglected skill that encourages people to 'design think' flexibly and distinctively, for themselves. 'It is with design [thinking] that we construct and create solutions... Design thinking allows us to put things

together to achieve what we desire.' So creative or design thinking, which I am suggesting can be stimulated by creative activities, can lead to feelings of empowerment.

Is there any research that shows design thinking, stemming from creative activity, working in this way? Occupational therapist Jennifer Creek explored this idea in her study³ of creative activity groups for women from deprived neighbourhoods. She demonstrated that creative activity can tap into 'the creative potential' and stimulate flexible thinking. This thinking has, in turn, a direct benefit for life skills, such as problem solving and coping with challenges: 'The capacity for thinking and acting creatively will influence the way in which problems are approached and enhance the ability to find solutions... This flexibility, which is characteristic of creative thinking, enhances the individual's ability to cope adaptively with the inevitable stresses of life.'³

Similarly, White⁴ describes art as providing 'a medium for participants to explore and understand feelings and develop alternative coping strategies'. Art, he writes, 'is a tool for change'. The capacity for adaptation, he suggests, is closely linked to maintenance of good health. He quotes Illich, for example: 'Health designates a process of adaptation. It designates the ability to adapt to changing environments, to growing up and ageing, to healing when damaged... health embraces the future as well and therefore includes anguish and the inner resources to deal with it.'

He also cites Smith's assertion in the *British Medical Journal*: 'More and more of life's... difficulties... are being medicalised. Medicine cannot solve these problems... If health is about adaptation, understanding and acceptance, then the arts may be more potent than anything else medicine has to offer.'

White goes on to link these quotes to a wide variety of arts services that work with people with mental health challenges, enhancing important life skills such as

emotional literacy, communication, health management skills and confidence, social connectedness and stress management.

So, participation in arts activities can lead to gains in adaptive coping strategies and life skills, because the activities themselves stimulate new ways of thinking, and therefore new ways of approaching life situations.

The importance of achievement

Creek's study³ also reported some improvements in participants' mood, motivation and self-esteem. Is this solely to do with more flexible thinking skills, or is there a process of redefinition of the self going on here?

Art workshops, if well run, provide many opportunities for achievement, and achievement is thought to be a strong factor in improved self-esteem and motivation, for some people. Moreover, researchers think there is a symbiotic relationship between self-esteem and achievement: raising self-esteem tends to make achievements more likely, partly because it raises self-expectation and so builds motivation.⁵⁻⁸ So a winning circle is set up, and the stage is set for changes to self-perception.

Start can offer numerous examples of this process in action. We produce, with our students (service users), a

This journey of self-discovery and growing insight is connected in the participant's mind quite clearly with her art experiences and the opportunity to develop self-expression. As she explores art, so she explores herself. With the growing ability to express herself, she comes to view herself differently, and has embraced her mental health experience as part of her new identity.

If we look again at research in this field, we find that this student's journey fits in well. Kerka⁹ gathered evidence to show that, because creative activities stimulate so much within us – the senses, the intuition, critical thinking and expressive self-development – they are uniquely well placed to help us interpret and reinterpret the world and adapt to its ever-changing circumstances by adjusting our perceptions.

This re-finding or redefining of the self marks the student journeys described above, and is also connected to what Parr¹⁰ calls art as 'relational social practice'. Participation in the arts, and making art, has a social dimension too. Parr notes that participants in arts projects may derive a sense of social locatedness from their achievements. By this, she means the regaining of a sense of one's abilities and place within the 'social mainstream', and the use of this experience as a 'stepping stone for reinsertion into wider social relationships and situations'.

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range of artwork for public exhibition in high profile gallery spaces. This is what one student said when an exhibition to which she contributed artwork won an international arts and health award:

'When I was first referred to Start, I thought: "Artwork? Me?" Now I can't believe the things I've achieved. Each time I make something I surprise myself... The sense of achievement I get from making things has begun to change the way I feel about myself... I have a sense that I am starting to make a new identity for myself, which involves valuing myself... for the first time in my life.'

Here is a change in self-perception or self-definition, based on achievement and re-evaluation of personal abilities, which the participant herself attributes directly to arts activities and the opportunities they offer.

Reflective skills

To recognise a change in one's identity, and consolidate it, it is vital to develop reflective and analytical skills.

Here is another quote from a Start student:

'When I became ill, and joined Start, I studied art properly for the first time... I found that I was feeling more positive about myself [through the art]... you can learn all sorts about yourself with art... you can express yourself... There was a time when I was ashamed about having a mental illness, but I don't feel like that anymore. It's become an opportunity for me rather than something to hide.'

Theory into practice

At Start we devised a project that aimed to help students develop reflective thinking skills, achieve changes to perception, and improve their coping strategies. We hoped that positive changes would continue beyond the end of the project, and perhaps contribute to lasting changes in their perceptions of personal identity, so expediting the recovery process.

The project we devised was called Getting to Know Alfred Wallis,¹¹ and was run in conjunction with the Whitworth Art Gallery. It combined art appreciation with practical art, and aimed to reach all those targets mentioned by Kerka: the senses, the intuition, critical thinking and expressive self-development. Added to this, participants would gain skills, knowledge and confidence, and a sense of achievement through an exhibition of their work at the end of the project.

The project participants were asked to study one of the gallery's paintings in detail for seven weeks. The chosen painting was the naïve-style work *The Island*, by Alfred Wallis. We chose Wallis because much about his life and work is unorthodox, and therefore challenging to preconceptions and perceptions of art.

The course was constructed so that the information given became progressively more complex and demanding. Our aim was to produce a gradual adjustment in the students' perceptions and opinions. These changing views were carefully recorded on feedback forms by staff and students, and later helped us to evaluate the success of the course in stimulating self-development.

Many students noted that the project's art history component changed their perception of the artist, →

→ and they reflected on this in a wider way. Some, for instance, expressed a new openness to examining previous assumptions around art:

‘I’ve become more reflective, more questioning over others’ works. I was surprised at the number of insights gained and am... less dismissive over work I get an immediate dislike to.’

‘I was greatly surprised at the change in my perception of others’ work as well as my own.’

‘When I got to the end of the course, I found my feelings about the painting had completely changed... I realised that I had changed, not the painting.’

Towards the end of the course, students openly recognised a change in their analytical skills, and that they could use these to look at other parts of their lives:

‘... trying to understand how the picture was defined as art... led on to other questions, such as defining emotional experience and [its] origins... I have been able to gain an understanding of this.’

‘I have a clearer recognition of my own biases... When you relate to a work, it is as much about you as about the artwork.’

Students noted changes in their coping strategies. Working in a gallery, with new staff and a new group of participants, caused considerable apprehension, but students persisted:

‘Being with new people was anxiety-provoking but I found it so interesting, it made me stay. I’d get there early to make myself... more relaxed. Seeing the paintings beforehand enabled me to “psyche myself up” and focus.’

Some students said that leaving the mental health setting behind them for a period of time was beneficial, because it allowed them to reappraise themselves, to experiment with a new identity:

‘I liked working in a place where the general public were, rather than an NHS environment... Getting out of the mental health stigma [meant that] nobody was judging... [I felt] part of the mainstream.’

Students also commented on their greater confidence to express opinions, visit art galleries and similar cultural settings, and function in a group. Some students went on to acquire voluntary work placements, college places and paid work after the course.

So it would certainly seem that this course, which taught coping strategies through means of art workshops, was both effective and beneficial.

The project culminated in a large exhibition at the Whitworth Art Gallery that presented the learning journeys and self-development experiences of the Start students while on the Wallis course. Titled *Now, Voyager*, the exhibition showed for six months and was viewed by 42,000 members of the public, of whom 4500

were children. Being able to reach this huge and wide-ranging audience was another benefit of working in partnership with a mainstream art gallery.

Public feedback about the exhibition testified to its power to alter opinions and reduce stigma. This aspect of the project was very important to the Start students, who discovered that they had a voice in the public arena that was valued and heard.

This model has a number of benefits over and above more conventional therapeutic interventions:

- we worked in a mainstream setting – a gallery. This was inclusive for the students, taking them out of the discrete and hidden settings in which most mental health interventions are delivered. In this way, the intervention de-clinicalised treatment
- the model emphasised learning about art, rather than learning about coping strategies, and this was normalising for the students
- the model provided new roles for Start students as mainstream gallery visitors/gallery course participants, and this emphasised wellness rather than illness.

Summing up

This article began with the loss of identity that mental illness can bring. It closes with another quote from a Start student about their personal journey through illness, through which a positive life role evolved:

‘When I became seriously unwell, I lost not only my sanity but also my identity. Through my art, [I have] vastly improved not just the quality of my life, but also restored my long-lost confidence and self-esteem. What’s more, it’s given me a positive identity. I am no longer merely “the unemployed schizophrenic”, as I have often regarded myself: I am an Artist whose work is admired and respected by many.’ ■

For more information about Start and its work, visit www.startmc.org.uk

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