

# Start: a creative approach to mental health care

Start Manchester is an arts-based, face-to-face mental health service within the emergent field of arts in mental health. This article describes its work and demonstrates how it uses art in a health-focused way. While the article refers to some of the literature that explores how and why the experience of art can be beneficial to mental health, it is explicitly written from a practitioner perspective. As such, it foregrounds the thoughts/feelings of the service users (referred to throughout as students) about their engagement with the project, in order to refine our understandings of the links between creative practices and mental health.

**S**tart Manchester ([www.startmc.org.uk](http://www.startmc.org.uk)) is part of Manchester Mental Health and Social Care Trust. It enables people with severe and enduring mental health needs to use creative engagement to build well-being, recovery and self-management. Activities include arts and horticulture training. Start encourages personal development through the experience of learning to be a maker and designer – skills and knowledge of techniques are acquired, but also problem-solving skills, the ability to articulate ideas, improved social confidence, and the sense of a valued social role. This latter is most obviously seen through the experience of contributing artwork and personal stories to Start's exhibitions. These exhibitions explore mental health themes, and aim to promote mental health awareness, tackle stigma and encourage social inclusion. In this way, Start aims to work at both an individual and a wider social level.

## Improving quality of life through art

In 2002, the editor of the British Medical Journal, Richard Smith, recommended diverting 0.5% of the healthcare budget to the arts in order to improve the health of the British people. 'We will all be sick, suffer loss, hurt and die,' said Smith. 'Health is not to do with avoiding these givens but with accepting them, even making sense of them. If health is about adaptation, understanding and acceptance then the arts may be more potent than anything medicine has to offer' (Smith, 2002).

A number of sources agree that good mental health is closely linked to the ability to survive change. For example, the Health Education

Authority (1997) defines mental health as 'the emotional and spiritual resilience which enables us to enjoy life and to survive pain, disappointment and sadness'. Smith's interest in resilience and adaptation therefore makes sense; what is perhaps more unusual is his – a medical doctor's – assertion that the arts could be key to developing these skills.

## The tools for change

White (2003), in his study of how art benefits mental health, 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'. Stuart, one of Start's students, explains his own experiences of this:

'In art, it is almost impossible to make mistakes. By changing my way of thinking, any [artwork] that came out... different to my original expectation was great; I just changed my expectation... I have been able to let my imagination run wild and this has allowed me to imagine life outside of my illness. From the place of imagination I am now slowly moving to [translate] the ideas... to practical ways of living... These new perceptions carry over into life outside Start and help me to manage my illness.'

Stuart eloquently illustrates the transformative power of art on his life, through its ability to influence his thinking, his outlook and his perceptions. In short, his art studies have led to choice and control within his life. Why and how does this happen?

## Keywords

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## PRACTICE

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### Thinking it through

The practice of art requires constant problem solving. Every artwork is a unique designing and making experience, demanding analysis, predictive thinking, judgment and frequent decision-making. These types of skills are what the educationalist Edward de Bono (1992) calls 'design thinking', by which he means the process of learning to think creatively, or laterally: 'It is with design thinking that we construct and create solutions... Design thinking allows us to put things together to achieve what we desire.' The connections between art and adaptive thinking patterns have been examined more closely by occupational therapist Jennifer Creek (2001). She reports on a project that demonstrates how increased exposure to arts tapped into the 'creative potential' of participants, stimulating more adaptive thinking patterns. These in turn benefited wider life skills, such as coping behaviours and problem solving. 'The capacity for thinking and acting creatively will influence the way in which problems are approached and enhance the ability to find solutions,' she writes. 'This flexibility, which is characteristic of creative thinking, enhances the individual's ability to cope adaptively with the inevitable stresses of life.'

### Finding and expressing a sense of self

The individuality of approach fostered by the practice of art is closely allied with its capacity for personal expression. 'Art can be a route to say what you want when words don't come easy,' says Joe, a Start student. Saying something about who you are and how you feel is of critical importance in developing a solid sense of self. This is particularly so for people experiencing mental ill health, as such an experience can take away a great deal more than an optimistic outlook. It can destroy all the points of reference that define our former selves, and erode our identity, leaving behind damaged self-esteem and perception, and an identity that may be hard to recognise (Pettie & Triolo, 1999).

Ailena, a Start student, illustrates this:

'After my first hospital admission I felt a total wreck... I was adrift... I lost friends... because of ignorance and fear, and I have distanced myself from people who know I have been ill and treat me differently.'

Healing this damage may be a slow and difficult process, but starting to explore identity and feelings can be regarded as a significant step forward. In the words of Karen, another Start student:

'Start filled a black hole by enabling me to be myself when I needed help to do that... You get to know all sorts about yourself through art... I could see that I was starting to express myself... art has helped me find myself again.'

These students' positive outcomes are indebted to what art has offered them in terms of self-exploration and expression. Even at the most basic level of designing and making an artwork, you must exert personal influence. You are the maker, and your own preferences and views mould the final product. This could be regarded as the beginning of rebuilding a sense of self. It is a challenging process, one which Start tutor Jill Cunningham calls 'learning to be fussy':

'When students come to Start, I have noticed how little some care about choices, and this is a product of damaged self-esteem and self-concept. If you don't recognise or value yourself, how can you exert personal choice over anything? Learning to be discerning about what you choose and make is very important, and I encourage students to develop these skills alongside initial techniques because they go hand-in-hand.'

### An inner space

As students' skills progress at Start, so they tend to become more absorbed in their work and their ideas. Artistic and self-expressive abilities develop together, and students are able to discover inner resources and a sense of fulfilment. Start student Damien explains:

'The artistic creativity encouraged at Start has been a major factor in my illness management – it's a dynamic form of self-development... The energy of illness [is] focused into a positive force that has been instrumental in opening my mind to other possibilities, other ways of perceiving the world.'

In her study on art and mental well-being, Hester Parr describes how participants in arts activities refer frequently to this energising and restorative aspect of art, terming it a 'therapeutic interiority... a psychological locatedness, enabling a temporarily all-consuming occupational space that distract[s] from negative and disruptive thoughts and emotions' (Parr, 2005). Becoming lost in the 'flow' is, of course, dependent on having the skills to meet the challenges faced in any activity

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Without skills, a student can experience limitation rather than relaxation and achievement. Start believes a good skills foundation sets the imagination free to express and explore, and technical and artistic skills are therefore carefully developed in the arts sessions.

### **A sense of achievement**

Arts activities, if well-run, provide numerous opportunities for achievement, and achievement, if inwardly acknowledged, can boost confidence, motivation, expectation and aspiration. Yet it can be hard for someone to feel ownership of their own success if they have low self-esteem – a frequent difficulty for those with mental ill health. Start helps its students to develop a sense of achievement by encouraging high standards of art, by regular and well-evidenced feedback, and by encouraging students to exhibit their work in professional galleries. Exhibitions bring external feedback and promote objective self-assessment, both of which can be beneficial. However, exhibiting is also a risky endeavour, because the public response cannot be predicted or controlled. This is a slice of ‘real life’, when Start provides much support, because of the risks attached. Most students, however, feel the gains far more than the losses. Says Start student Ellen:

‘From being stripped of self-confidence Start has allowed me to learn to take risks again... I have become more experimental in my artwork... and in my life.’

Positive risk-taking is part of participating in arts activities, as documented by Matarasso (1997), who writes of the arts ‘teaching us how to live with risk and to turn it to our advantage’.

### **Developing the inner artist**

Exhibitions are about the artists who make them, and Start’s exhibitions are no different. While the work stands alone aesthetically, our exhibitions also examine mental health themes, provide mental health information, and tackle stigma. *Crowning Glories* is a project that invited students to design and make an item of headwear inspired by cacti. The cactus stood as metaphor for the way that mental illness may be perceived: the seemingly intimidating exterior hiding the tender inside that we all share. This project was demanding for students: thinking within a conceptual framework, articulating complex ideas, daring to be experimental and expressive, and making to the highest of standards were all required.

The results were outstanding, showing a high degree of technical and design innovation, challenging the public’s concept of a hat as much as their assumptions about mental illness. Metal, glass, ceramic, wood and fibre were used to create the sumptuous collection, and the exhibition was a success at a number of levels. First, artistically, it was greeted with enthusiasm by the public and critics alike, including one who commented: ‘All the exhibition pieces are beautifully constructed and portray a great depth of talent, sensitivity and insight.’ For the Start students, this feedback enabled them to assess their work more objectively and positively, and thereby assisted in the enhancement of their self-esteem and confidence:

‘I’m really proud of my hat, it’s given me a strong sense of achievement to have work in this exhibition. When you see it in a special setting you see it differently... it looks like more of a masterpiece instead of just something you made – unless you’ve experienced this thrill, you can’t really know.’ (Jess, Start student)

The exhibition also included mental health information in the form of personal stories about mental distress and recovered well-being. For many students, sharing this information was the greatest risk of all, because of fear of stigma. The public response was, however, encouraging. Galleries showing the exhibition reported their visitors to be interested, moved, admiring and inspired, as attested by the comments books. For students, having a voice to combat misinformation was empowering:

‘I liked the idea of the metaphor. I thought to myself – yes, we can say something to the public and help them to understand better. I’m glad to be contributing to changing the way the public think about mental illness.’ (Graham, Start student)

The exhibition has now toured for six years and has been seen by an estimated 200,000 people. In 2004, it won the International University College London Arts and Health Award, much to the delight of all involved.

### **A journey of exploration**

Following the success of *Crowning Glories*, the Start team wanted to try a more complex project that would help students to develop coping skills, emotional literacy and stress resilience. Now, *Voyager* was designed and delivered with

Manchester University's Whitworth Art Gallery. Students were invited to study one painting in depth for seven weeks in a short and intensive course that took place at the gallery. During the course, students explored and discussed their feelings about the painting, noting how, with each new piece of knowledge gained, their emotional responses changed and perceptions developed.

In exploring emotional literacy, we were seeking to restore important life skills to students that would, broadly, help with anxiety and stress management. The ability to understand and accept both our own and others' feelings, and to exert choice and control over emotional responses, are significant coping skills, but they are also skills that are often damaged by illness. Using the study of art to enhance such skills makes good sense because art, especially art involving design and critical thinking, uses both sides of the brain. The rational left hemisphere and the emotional right hemisphere work together to produce a joined-up thinking state. Research from Carter and Frith (1998) tells us this enables us to control emotions more effectively. If joined-up thinking is practised, the same research indicates that we are more likely to be able to control emotional and negative responses, even when under stress.

What happened in practice? To find out, the Start team gathered feedback via questionnaires. Questions encouraged reflection on the learning experiences during the course, the 'eureka' moments, how participants' opinions about art may have changed during the course, and comments on the experience of studying in a gallery rather than at the Start studios. Three different questionnaires were used: one that was administered at the beginning and end of the course to reflect changing opinions about art, one the participants filled in weekly to reflect learning achieved, and one completed a year or more afterwards that asked for feedback about the course and experiences during it from a longer time perspective. These informal methods are similar to those used in action research projects in educational settings, where teachers investigate more effective learning and teaching styles.

Students' responses suggest many benefits. Most reported enhanced confidence, and many noted improved anxiety management as well. Talking in a group was easier for some, while all reported improvement in recognising and expressing feelings and ideas. In several cases, people described a new openness:

'I've become more reflective, more questioning over others' work. 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.'

Others found their new perceptions had spread further than the course and represented more profound life skill changes:

'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.'

'Critical thinking is a life skill appropriate to many situations...'

Thus students indicated that, in acquiring the skills to manage the challenges of the course, they had improved their general life skills too.

Following the course, the Whitworth Art Gallery worked with Start to put on an exhibition telling the story of the project, in which we once again included mental health information. For the first time, Start students agreed to talk in person about their health experiences. They helped to run workshops and tours, and to make a film about mental health. A total of 42,000 visitors saw the six-month exhibition, and comments were positive, especially about the open and constructive ways in which the show explored mental health issues. The students expressed delight at the reaction, and pride in seeing their work on show:

'A dream come true... It has given me pride, confidence and bags of inspiration for the future.'

'I have much bigger hopes and dreams now I have taken part in this project.'

### Making a positive contribution

The success of Now, Voyager allowed us to see just how powerful art can be as an ambassador for inclusion and awareness. This is something others have commented on, too – for example, Dunn (1999), in the Mind enquiry into social exclusion and mental health problems, argues that: ‘The arts can play a catalytic role in promoting social inclusion, both by virtue of the participatory processes involved and the products created... [the] artistic product can help audiences to grasp truths...’ We also noted how empowering it is for people using mental health services to have a voice and represent their views and experiences to the public. This led us to develop our latest exhibition work, Inner Word, which went on show at the RHS flower show at Tatton Park in Cheshire, in the summer of 2006. Inspired by a Zen garden of contemplation, this artwork presents experiences of mental distress and recovered well-being. One hundred hand-made pebbles, each embossed with a word, nestle in a scree and gravel bed, interspersed with plants and natural stones. A path takes visitors through the garden and allows them to touch the pebbles and read the words. Disconnected... Despair... Transformation... Hope... Aspiration... Choice... Love life... Superb... the words and the artwork evoked strong responses from the RHS visitors, 18,000 of whom visited the display in just five days.

Our display team – made up of staff and students – used the opportunity to talk about mental well-being, to give out information leaflets and self-help literature, and to listen to the hundreds of stories that visitors wanted to tell us. So strong was the response to the display that the RHS awarded Start a Certificate of Commendation. The students were elated by the response to their artwork, and by the chance both to endorse the use of art as a mental health intervention and to promote better mental health awareness. The opportunity to use their skills and expertise strategically was a significant confidence-booster:

‘I was so proud to be able to help other people and tell them how art has helped me find myself again.’

### Concluding thoughts

We sometimes write about art as a tool for building better health, but I suggest that art is far more than

this. It is a complex, infinitely varied and responsive medium that develops personal skills, helps us to find meaning in the world and, in turn, interprets the world back to us. It is this capacity for art to embody meaning and value that makes it so powerful in rebuilding lives. ‘Art as activity, process and object is central to how people experience, understand and then shape the world,’ says Matarasso (1997), and Start’s students would agree:

‘Through art... I began to find a different purpose in life... My illness began to dominate my life less, I began to have another life again as a person.’

‘There was a time when I was ashamed of having a mental illness, but I don’t feel like that anymore, because it’s become an opportunity rather than something to hide. If I hadn’t fallen ill, I wouldn’t have had these opportunities. I would never have found art... so, I wouldn’t be me.’ 🌱

*All names of Start students are pseudonyms. All quotations are reproduced from interviews with Start students and by their kind permission.*

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