

Community arts exhibitions, as a form of group knowledge production

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Abstract: *This piece discusses how a community arts exhibition produced by a group of mental health service users can be a form of knowledge production. With the potential benefits of reduced stigma and emancipation for those involved, whether exhibiting or interacting with the exhibits. I would like to encourage service users and clinicians to jointly explore how “beyond text” media, including art, can be co- produced together as part of group work to inform and supplement more traditional forms of knowledge and research.*

Keywords: *community arts; beyond text; co production*

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Introduction

This article discusses how a community arts exhibition, produced by a group of mental health service users, can be a form of knowledge production. The potential benefits for those involved, it can be argued, are a sense of reduced stigma and a sense of being free. These occur for the service user, whether exhibiting or interacting with the exhibits. I would like to encourage service users and clinicians to jointly explore how 'beyond text' media, including art, can be co-produced, using groupwork to inform and supplement more traditional forms of knowledge.

Outline of the community arts exhibition

The Creative Arts Steering Team (CAST) facilitates a Trust wide art exhibition with a different theme each year. CAST is a group of mental health service users, staff and governors who are interested in promoting the use of Arts throughout the Sheffield Health and Social Care NHS Trust (SHSC). CAST has an organising committee which meets monthly to plan and organise one off and ongoing events. The chair of it is a past employee of the Trust who now volunteers.

The process of creating and viewing the exhibition involves working in multiple groups of varying sizes. For instance: there is the large CAST group of all its members; the smaller subgroup of the people organising the event; the separate groups that produce the exhibits; and the group of people who view and interact with the exhibitions.

The theme of this year's exhibition was strength and softness. The theme was decided by a collaborative group exercise, where each member of CAST at the planning meeting wrote down ideas that they wanted to explore for the exhibition. After a discussion a theme was then agreed jointly. The group decision making was facilitated by one of the CAST volunteers rather than the chair, having the effect of encouraging shared decision making. Previous themes have included hope as well as light and dark.

Submissions were invited throughout Sheffield Health and Social Care NHS Trust, from individuals and groups. Members of the CAST committee used contacts that they had throughout the Trust to promote



In this exhibit people took a photograph of themselves and wrote what they see as their strengths and softness, making a group creation.

the exhibition. These contacts of the group members are a key to the success of the exhibition.

The exhibition is a forum for creating knowledge and understanding about how people experience and perceive strength and softness. The exhibition also contains interactive elements, eliciting the views of those who view the exhibition and its theme. Furthermore the exhibition helps exhibit and promote local artistic talent.

Unfortunately the previous exhibitions were dismantled by the organising group without collating, recording or sharing the unique knowledge gained during exhibition. This year however, the contributions from the interactive exhibits were collated and thematically analysed by a sub group of CAST who were interested in not losing the messages and meanings that people wanted to portray through the art. This provided an opportunity to analyse the wider meaning of the words strength and softness to those who participated in the exhibition.

As someone who works with groups, understanding the range and breadth of people's perception of the words strength and softness is valuable to our ongoing work with groups of service users. We work with people at times when they may need strength and softness in their lives. By developing a more in depth understanding of these concepts, this may help facilitate our work with individuals and groups, including

developing individual and group strategies to promote these concepts in peoples' lives.

I have come to view the yearly art exhibition as a form of group knowledge production. The knowledge is produced, shared and captured by numerous groups of varying sizes and compositions. The exhibition can help generate knowledge that can be used alongside other knowledge produced from more traditional forms of research.

Beebejaun et al (2013) write about 'beyond text' forms of knowledge and helped me to reflect on and consider the concept of what constitutes knowledge. In everyday life as people, we utilise all our senses to interpret what we are experiencing and it follows we should employ research methodologies that draw upon all of our senses. Some art exhibits utilise many of the senses at once, with tactile, visual and auditory components.

Seeley (2011) is an advocate for a stronger relationship between the arts and action research. Seeley (2011) suggests that the arts can be used to contribute to the many ways of knowing beyond the intellectual and that they should not just be seen as an add-on to traditional ways of developing knowledge, but more a fundamental way of experiential and presentational knowing. This helps us both focus and expand our own and others' consciousness. Using the arts Seeley (2011) suggests will lead to better quality, deeper, more satisfying and influential research.

Moxley et al (2012) write about the importance of the arts in social work education. They comment on how community arts exhibitions are a means of capturing diverse information about social issues affecting our local communities. Moxley et al (2012) suggest the power of the arts, is in their capacity to foster human expression, document human experience, and legitimise the perspectives of those who are otherwise marginalised. Community arts exhibitions can serve as a medium for transmitting knowledge about serious social conditions, affecting both groups and individuals..

These ideas demonstrate that the arts can be a powerful tool in the pursuit of knowledge and this is something I am interested in exploring further.

Art exhibits and producing art, is often not done in isolation but rather in groups. In this section I explore how the art exhibition adopts the core principles of co production. Co production is a research methodology where the researched and researcher work together in



partnership throughout the research process (Horne and Shirley, 2009). An art exhibition has elements of co production for both the participants who submit work and those who take part in the interactive displays, as both are working together to produce something that others will interact with. In this instance co production happens in the context of a group, as the individuals and people who are interacting with the displays can be thought of as a group.

Currently I would suggest most community art exhibitions are participatory in design, with people submitting work on a theme, or in response to a stimulus, who are often working in small groups to produce the art. Some art exhibits have interactive elements, asking those who view the work to contribute to it, or provide a response, thereby adding their unique perspective by creating a group piece of art.

An example of co production for this exhibit is the hopes and fears chest below. This piece was produced by a group of people in conjunction with a CAST member. The CAST committee members had the role of advising on individual pieces, and negotiating where the exhibits went. During the exhibition spectators were asked to write on post it notes what their hopes, fears, delights, longings, and insights were and place it in the appropriate labelled drawer. The exhibit itself involved many people's ideas, and group conversations before the final idea was created.

Co production involves participants being fully involved throughout the group research process. Over time, the CAST exhibition is moving towards this idea of group co production. Initially the exhibition was managed and run by a staff member as the CAST group was not fully

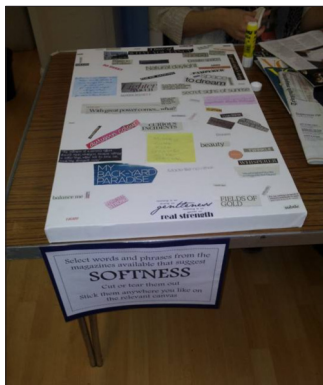
formed as a group. CAST has since developed a core organising group, who choose the theme and organise the exhibition, with members being encouraged to take on tasks according to their experience, connections and ability. This group is integral in deciding the theme and how to explore it through art. CAST also discusses how the outcomes of the exhibition will be collated and interpreted. As the CAST group gain more experience and confidence, it is envisaged that the employed staff who input and give direction to the group will slowly diminish. For the elements of co production to increase, CAST would need to see the exhibition as a means of creating knowledge that should be recorded and shared.

One of the aims of co production is to help to contribute to positive social change (Beebejaun et al, 2013). Lamb (2009) has a passion and a vision for using the arts as a way to foster social integration and challenge stigma. Art exhibitions provide a forum for the general public to become more familiar with mental health service users. In turn, this helps reduce the general public's fear and misconceptions about mental illness and in so doing aspects concerning the stigma of mental illness can be addressed.

Grushka (2005) states that artists are the inventors, creators and maintainers of culture in any society. Grushka (2005) argues that an art exhibition, reveals for the observer, glimpses and insights into the artist's world, informing his/her own understandings of self and society. Therefore, an art exhibition can help tackle stigma, whilst helping to create a 'cultural identity'. It can be seen in the CAST exhibition how members of the public can intermingle with service users, often realising that they share similar experiences of strength and softness. This helps to challenge the perceived 'other', and 'different than me' notions that can be held by society.

Those who came to the exhibit were invited to cut out phrases from magazines and stick them on the board.

Through interacting with the exhibits, people are employing critical reflection to validate and enlarge self knowledge (Grushka 2005). In this exhibition people were potentially able to reflect on how they see themselves as strong or soft and gain self awareness around this, facilitated by creating group pieces of art. They can also see themselves in a role where their art is good enough to be viewed, and thus their



status elevated (Moxley et al, 2012). This can potentially lead to emancipatory opportunities (Grushka, 2005).

Hacking et al (2008) report on a systematic outcome study of the impact of participatory arts project for people with mental health needs, across twenty two project sites in the UK. Their study concludes that participatory arts positively benefit people with mental health difficulties. Art participation increased levels of empowerment and had the potential to impact on mental health and social inclusion. It follows from this that coming together in groups to create and also to view art work would have a positive benefit to the individuals' mental health.

This project has helped me to rethink what constitutes knowledge whilst working with groups.

In the past the exhibits from the art exhibition were dismantled. This was a missed opportunity to capture, record and share the unique knowledge that was produced through it. The challenge is to develop a culture where we start to record and share this information in a meaningful way.

I have written this paper as an introduction to community art exhibitions produced by mental health service users and their potential for further research. These group projects generate a wealth of information that can influence change within the communities themselves. I would encourage you to reflect on what happens to any art work that is produced as part of a community group as a way to facilitate further learning for all those involved with the group.

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