Summary of interviews

Between December 2017 and February 2018, Voluntary Arts conducted a series of interviews with individuals engaged in co-creative activities in different ways. These interviews sought to focus on the interviewees' experiences and observations of how relationships can be formed, trust can be established and social divides can be bridged through these activities.

Interviewees:

Interviewees were offered the option of taking part anonymously and most said that this would be preferable, so names and job details have been removed.

Learning Providers

P1 = EW, craft group leader, Northern Ireland
P2 = LS, community arts organiser, Wales
P3 = FD, photography course tutor, England

Stakeholders

S1 = MS, local cultural trust, Scotland
S2 = KW, local government, England
S3 = RL, local government, Northern Ireland

Learners

L1 = SA, choir participant, England
L2 = KP, community arts participant, England
L3 = JN, drama group participant, Scotland

Learning Providers

A (Introduction):

P1 has been running and facilitating a voluntary craft group that meets regularly in a local art gallery for several years. The group is open to all and began with a very low skill level. The meetings are free to attend with an optional small donation to cover tea/coffee. Meetings take place twice a month from 16:00 – 19:00 and attendance is very flexible. Participants come when they wish and often stay later.

P2 began a community drawing project that has invited the whole local community to participate in a project focused on the landscape of the area. The project ran over a long period of time in different locations and involved a large number of participants. The finished collection of works was

then exhibited in several locations over two weeks. Participation was free, simple and as brief as the participant wanted it to be.

P3 runs a regular photography group based in a city centre but taking place in different locations. The group is quite regular and most participants have been active for a number of years. The structure is not intended to be a class or a course, but a mutual sharing of skills and ideas. The organiser keeps things moving and contacts members but does not solely direct the activities.

All of the interviewees indicated that the main motivation for them and their participants was the simple joy of creativity. There were many other secondary factors but the most significant was always the opportunity to be creative. The social aspects of the groups were important to the organisers in a way that was not unlike the view of participants. The organisers find the activities hugely rewarding on a personal level as well as making a positive difference in their community. The organisers did not feel their activities were targeted at any particular demographic but found that there are some common traits among participants which they thought were related to the particular art form.

For example, P1 said that the group has always been entirely female because textile-based craft was still seen by many as being feminine. The group was diverse in other ways and brought together women of different generations (from young mothers to retired women) and socio-economic backgrounds as well as crossing the significant religious divides in the community. P2 actively sought out a wide range of participants within a geographic area so crossed many different demographics including age, gender, income and culture/ethnicity. P3 has found the medium of photography attracts a mix of individuals who meet and engage with each other through their shared love of photography. The group involves people of a wide range of (adult) ages and also different ethnicities. The organiser's perception was of a group that cross socio-economic brackets but also acknowledged the cost of equipment as being a potential barrier for those who are genuinely struggling financially.

B (Social Relevance):

P1 described the atmosphere as "very open and accommodating" but also noted that there were physical accessibility issues as the venue is up a set of stairs. The atmosphere is informal and relaxed and there is no pressure on participants to attend every session or keep up to a deadline. Some participants do not attend for an extended period due to other issues but are always welcomed back to the group once they can return. This casual 'drop-in' approach has made it easy for new members to join over the course of the last few years. Asked about whether strong social links were established through the group, P1 responded "Definitely, yes, there couldn't not be.", indicating that it was a natural tendency within these groups. The group's private Facebook group has helped to maintain and establish links and build friendships within and outside of the group's meetings.

The group enjoy seeking out other collaborative projects and links with other groups and organisations. This keeps everyone excited, motivated and interested and helps to make connections to new people. This has led to individuals joining new groups in the area and others joining this group. There have definitely been some strong and lasting friendships established through the group and, in one particular case, an older participant has also joined up with a different group of much younger, politically motivated textile artists. She would never have previously thought of

approaching or working with these artists before they collaborated on a project. These partnerships are important for building links, though they tend to happen organically once different groups are introduced to each other.

The social relevance of the group was seen as slightly harder to define but also wide-reaching. The visibility of the group (taking place in the middle of an art gallery during opening hours) means that they are encountered by a large number of individuals and engage in many conversations with passers-by. The all-female group do tend to discuss particular issues relating to women's lives in the area and the various issues faced by women in terms of social conservatism and mental health.

P2 described the atmosphere as one of "quiet contemplation". The activity itself was often slightly solitary, with participants focused on drawing their piece – but the project structure meant that this drew them into a discussion with the organiser, connected them to other participants visually and then encouraged them to meet and engage with others as part of the showcase. Group workshops would start noisily and with great excitement before descending into "a busy silence" as participants concentrated on their work.

The project helped participants to feel closer to their community. The organiser reports that the mass participation of the project made the links between individuals across the area much more visible and put a focus on their shared point of view. Participants gained improved confidence from the activity and one in particular went on to enrol in a further course and then on to an art degree.

The process of contributing to the project involved a sort of 'code of conduct' that meant that all participants needed to respect the contribution of others. "Participants were involved in a shared endeavour, and therefore knew that their work would be accepted and respected, which made people appreciative of each other." Because the project involved members of so many different community groups, it helped to build social cohesion as each group saw that they could work together and contribute to a common purpose.

P3 reports that activities take place in a sort of "studious" atmosphere. The participants are very focused on their work and the precision necessary to get the shot they want. There is a distinct difference between the time when the participants are dedicated to their creative activity and the social time when the group discuss and share their work. This is normally a very lively, friendly atmosphere while also being respectful and considerate. The group has been together for some time now and is now 'settled'. While they are open to new members and there has been some change over recent times, there is a feeling that there is a sort of 'core' group that know each other quite well. It may not be that easy for new members to join and feel immediately comfortable in this sort of situation.

Despite this potential barrier to new members, the organiser did think that the links that have been established through the group and the lasting impact were significant. The core group involves individuals from very different backgrounds and there were definitely instances of people who otherwise would not have crossed paths becoming good friends and building a mutual respect for each other's creative work and differing points of view. The bonds formed are often through the discussion of photography, equipment and composition but this has clearly extended to discussing the participants' life experience, background and emotions. There is a strong level of trust

established through the group's activities and this becomes evident in how they collaborate, assist each other and share equipment.

C (Co-creative activites):

P1 thought that the group did not usually target any specific groups. The group was established as an opportunity for people to get involved in craft so many who joined initially were not already very skilled or experienced in the field. The lack of male participants is recognised as an obvious issue but is not intentional. Some particular projects have focused on certain areas such as LGBT and women's rights but the contributions to the project have been open to all.

The organiser feels that there is a "richer dynamic" within mixed groups and that the participants are "stretched socially as well as in terms of skills". These positives far outweigh the negatives, which they identified as being mostly about "time commitment". But it was noted that the time commitment was not noticeably more significant due to a group being 'diverse' in the usual sense. If a project targets particular demographics, there are additional considerations – often relating to timing and transport/cost. Sometimes it has been necessary to arrange lift-shares to help participants attend.

The use of the Facebook group helps to establish and maintain links within the group and offers are route into the group for newcomers that might be less intimidating than visiting the drop-in sessions. Sometimes the opportunity to participate in a certain project or the potential to progress into other creative areas is a strong motivation for participants to join, or remain part of, the group.

"Time commitment!" is the main reason why such activities are successful. This is not just meant in terms of the preparation and organisation of regular activities, but the need to allow these activities and the personal relationships within the group to develop over a longer period of time. There is often a short-term, project-based approach (sometimes funding-related) that means these activities stop before meaningful relationships can be formed. The other key consideration is to allow easy routes in – and out! – of the activity. "The door needs to be always open, both literally and figuratively". A non-judgemental, supportive attitude is important for organisers too.

This group does not normally worry about planned outcomes as they are very much self-directed and not reporting to anyone externally. The unplanned outcomes are very broad. The friendships and bonds have been unexpectedly strong. The progression of some of the participants in their craft has been stronger than expected with several moving towards exhibiting professionally and selling their work independently. The success of the group is evident in how it has built its profile organically and has strong grassroots support within the community. This has also helped to create a more friendly and open atmosphere in the gallery building and boost its reputation locally.

P2 has also sought to engage as wide an audience as possible, so did not target specific groups (apart from the geographic area within which the project took place). "The intention was that the whole community could participate and celebrate together." The main negative issue was attempting to facilitate such a wide variety of individuals. There was great difficulty in finding a time and place that suited everyone for group sessions. Even by hosting sessions in different places, at different times, inevitably some mobility and accessibility issues arose for certain individuals.

The particular method used to engage such a wide audience in this big project was that the entry level was low-skilled and that each participant was doing *exactly* the same thing, using the same limited tools and resources. "It was deliberately designed as an accessible, levelling method for everyone, not different for different people. And the reason for participating was the same for everyone: the reason was because you are here."

The project is seen as successful precisely because it treated everyone in exactly the same way and made everyone equally important. There was no hierarchy to contributions. It was very helpful that the organiser was already known and trusted by many of the participants from previous work, so this made it easier to engage with such a diverse audience.

The method was planned to produce specific outcomes, but the means of engaging such a wide audience was largely unplanned. The project built somewhat organically through local contacts with schools recommending groups to participate and businesses spreading the word. The excitement of a project seeking to reach everyone helped to generate the goodwill of the local community and build enthusiasm through word of mouth.

P3 again reported that the activities have never really targeted specific groups or demographics overtly, but, especially in the earlier days of recruiting members, there was an effort to promote the opportunity in diverse areas and communities. This involved a lot of online promotion through different forums and social networks to try to reach different people. The organiser also made sure to advertise in a range of physical locations including educational locations, shops, community and cultural centres.

The positives are clear and the group very much enjoy the fact that they have different perspectives and different approaches to their work. This means that discussion is always lively and interesting. The negatives, or the challenges, are reaching those without the resources to take part in photography. It is still something of an expensive hobby and the group don't provide equipment. "There is obviously such a huge interest in photography these days thanks to smart phones but to really delve into the medium requires a certain amount of equipment which can be a barrier".

The only specific method suggested was that the group maintains a strong social aspect to its meetings. There is time dedicated to the creative activity and then there is always a social time after this which allows participants to share ideas, build relationships and bond in an informal atmosphere. This time is seen as important by the organiser in allowing the participants to develop their thinking and also build friendship and understanding.

The reasons for this to be successful are "probably based a lot on personalities". The suggestion is that the format is useful but will not be successful without willing and accommodating personalities. It requires a certain level of management and moderation on the part of the organiser, but this can also stifle the group's natural behaviour if it is "too heavy-handed". The organiser needs the skills to manage social situations carefully to allow everyone to feel welcome and participate equally as this is not an easy task.

The unplanned outcomes are largely in reference to the relationships that have been built as a result of taking part in the group. There are "many deep bonds" as a result of the group's activities. It is hard to say if this is more evident than in a group that is less diverse as these would still result in

strong friendships, however, the organiser feels "it is clear that there is a unique ability for creative groups to build friendships that would have been difficult to begin or sustain in other circumstances".

D (Needs / Future):

P1 described this as "my quandary at the moment", indicating that there is a difficult decision to make on how (or if) to progress the group's activities. A more formalised structure or a change in governance could be beneficial in some ways but could also spoil the delicate balance of the group. The organiser does appreciate some "arm's length" support through promotion and platforms to showcase activities as a means of developing their work without compromising their independence. A link with a local 'community hub' allowed the group to receive some formal support as the hub handled the bank account and administration, leaving the craft group to focus on its activity. Good partners who understand the group are important to any of these collaborations.

Currently there isn't an obvious training need, as the organiser feels suitably skilled to continue at this level. However, if they were to leave, then there would be some significant gaps in skills. If the group were to become formalised, then some training in proper governance would be needed. The organiser's experience of linking with umbrella bodies has significantly helped the group to build relationships and explore new opportunities. The link to Voluntary Arts Ireland and other bodies is probably good enough that it would be sustained even if the organiser left.

P2 felt it was "incredibly important" that workshop leaders and organisers are fairly remunerated, even if projects are largely run voluntarily. "From some participants, there is an unfair expectation of professionality while also expecting flexibility and everything for free." If community-based activities are to be sustained and opportunities provided for people to participate on an ongoing basis, then this will require resources and fair pay when required.

P3 recognised the difficulties in operating a voluntary-run group that would like to involve more diverse participants. The issue of costs of equipment was reiterated. Perhaps some sort of funding towards equipment and materials for community groups would be helpful – or even a move towards shared community resources available for anyone to use. More time would also be beneficial but again the nature of the group – run by volunteers in their spare time – means that reaching out to new groups of people is not easy.

Stakeholders

A (Introduction):

S1 is Director of Creative Development & Delivery at a local cultural trust in Scotland. Recently they have sought to establish a culture of 'play and creativity' both inside the organisation and in the work they deliver. There is an effort to open up opportunities for people to get involved through the use of games and "informal, relaxed conversational spaces". There is an understanding that "creativity gives people pemission to have different ideas."

S2 works in the culture department of a local authority in England. The organisation oversees a range of creative activities across the local area. Some are led by professional organisations but "embed social practice". But alongside this, there are a huge range of voluntary arts groups that vary in scale and target groups. The local authority's role can be "as facilitator, support, host, co-ordinator, funder or deliverer". The voluntary led activities can sometimes target young people, older people or certain community groups. The results, or what is gained, can be dependent on the type of activity, the depth and length of engagement. Benefits can include confidence, connectivity, positivity, wellbeing, friendship, improved health.

S3 manages a local government arts venue and arts service in Northern Ireland. They deliver community arts programmes and partnership working with other sectors for arts delivery. Its focus is on delivering an annual programme of festivals, events, theatre programmes, education programmes, community arts programmes, public art commissions, artist-in-residence programmes and special events. A major part of their work is "developing the sector and capacity building for an existing arts community". Some projects collaborate with health, community, education and inter-ethnic organisations to reach a broader audience across its area.

A big shift in policy, or approach, in 2015 saw the local authority put out a call to local people to share their creativity rather than a "top-down" approach to programming. This initiative has really challenged the team's assumptions and beliefs about cultural participation and infrastructure. This has in turn changed the staff's approach to dealing with citizens as actively creative individuals rather than simply as consumers.

B (Social Relevance of Creative Activities)

S1 reported seeing "clearly different" relationships forming in a creative environment. People can "self-identify" that the type, and quality, of ideas they generate are different. They felt that trust was vital – both as an outcome of these activities and (to some extent) as a necessary precursor to full involvement. Being creative is thought to expose participants' vulnerabilities, and therefore generates a feeling of trust between participants. "It helps to break down hierarchies, and so leads to more interesting collaboration and interactions between people from different areas."

S2 felt the social aspect of creative activities is a key part of people coming together through arts. For older people, it can help to combat loneliness and social isolation. For younger people it can support the development of key life skills. "Creating these new social networks can change people's lives." They observed that different creative activities support the development of trust and collaboration. For example, "if you are singing or acting together you must support one another and you are all part of something bigger".

S3's new programme of grassroots arts delivery has meant that a growing collective of individuals and groups are working together, actively engaged in decision making. Each year, new partners join in and this is allowing groups and individuals to meet and collaborate for the first time. One particular project in 2016 involved 10 local churches working together, interacting with each other's communities. The 4,000 participants in this project may never have interacted in such a way if it had not been for the arts intervention.

C (Co-creative activities):

S1 believes creative activities are particularly effective in breaking down barriers and hierarchies among groups. People can come together to consider a whole range of topics and have a feeling of "everyone is part of it". One of the challenges they identified is dealing with people who can be very "stuck in their ways" and less open to new ideas and different perspectives. These individuals can sometimes feel "exposed" in new situations. It is important to remember many of these processes are "long journeys, there are no shortcuts".

S2 gave examples of different creative activities that targeted specific groups, including dance workshops for older people with dementia, intergenerational performances and drama workshops in economically deprived areas. From experience, it is seen as important that creative work is embedded and that it has a legacy. Positive aspects are identified as the learning gained from each other and celebrating differences and similarities. Challenges are in ensuring the work is authentic and meaningful for participants. Outputs include work that is "inspiring, surprising and celebratory" which can exist across art forms and excite participants. The outcomes are really dependent on the process involved in devising the creative activities.

S3 identified a number of partnership projects involving other organisations including a local "inter-ethnic forum", an older age partnership, a health and social care trust and a project connecting young musicians with local cafés. These activities have successfully targeted specific groups and engaged them in activities within their own communities and in collaboration with others. The experience of these projects has always been positive. These events and projects, or creative processes, give people an effective way to express their issues and differences.

The positive aspects are that everyone involved can really benefit: participants, artists, learners, communities. "People feel like they have accomplished something, sometimes healing happens, connections are made." Though arts should be a great equaliser when communicating with different groups, it is noted that arts can be viewed in isolation and perceived as elite or removed from a certain part of society. "People need to be reassured that it's OK to have art in their lives and it's OK to be creative." Outputs and outcomes are shared between the participants, organisers and the wider community – these include "building trust, mutual understanding, better understanding of issues, the change in confidence of people involved from beginning to end of a project, learning to do things differently".

D (Needs / Future):

S1 hoped for a future with spaces that allowed people to be creative in the way that suits them, whether that is "playful and loud or quiet and comfortable". The importance of facilitating different kinds of people and ensuring that they feel welcome is evident in the visible impact when this is done well – in terms of relationships, methods of working together and the quality of the outputs.

S2 wants the recognition and support for creative activities to continue to grow. The best reasons to support more of such activities are recognising "the social, economic and health & wellbeing benefits, that being creative is part of being human". They felt that participating in creative activities can be a catalyst for small and major changes in people's lives and this can have a profound effect on communities more widely.

S3 wished for participants to spread the word of the arts and encourage more participation, more support from local and national government and for increased collaboration across sectors.

Learners

A (Introduction):

L1 is a member of a community choir formed in the north of England as part of a wider project but is now sustained by the enthusiasm of its members and the support of a local venue. The interviewee is born and raised in the area and comes from an ethnic minority family. They explained that the choir is very diverse and came together mostly through promotion on local radio. They felt it was something new and worth trying and was a chance to meet people from different places and backgrounds. They currently meet twice a month but sometimes more often when there is a big performance coming up. Their expectations when they joined were low – mostly just something different to do and a chance to try singing for a few evenings. 'Objectives' did not really cross their mind, other than enjoying singing, but once they were involved, the many benefits and new relationships became clear and really important in terms of keeping them engaged with the choir.

L2 takes part in a community arts group with a focus on bringing together people with different life experiences to create together. There is often an inter-social element to their work. The interviewee focused on a particular recent project involving able-bodied and disabled adults collaborating on a theatre piece. The group's membership seems to be quite fluid and there is flexibility about when participants are involved – both in terms of each session and longer projects. This was highlighted as a reason for lasting engagement rather than individuals dropping out altogether due to an occasional inability to attend a session.

L3 has been involved in a community drama group in rural Scotland for several years. Their work is recognised as being inter-generational, inter-cultural and inter-social within their geographic area. There has been a concerted effort each year to involve as many people as possible across this sparsely populated area in the annual theatre production. Expectations originally were simply to have fun and put on a small production involving a few interested friends, but this grew once the participants thought about involving their neighbours as participants rather than audience. "The starting point for the productions now is to find a role for everyone, a place for everyone, and build from there – rather than limit the options." In recent years the project has involved participants from across the local area, ranging in age "from 3 months old to 90 years old – and even some animals!". People in the area look forward to the projects now and it brings everyone together with a simple, common purpose.

B (Social Relevance of Co-creative Activities):

L1 described the atmosphere at the choir as "the most warm and welcoming" they had experienced. It is a lively environment where people "feel comfortable trying things out without being judged". Although people were a bit apprehensive in the early days, the group have grown very close and people are very keen to get to know each other. They indicated that people are generally open to connecting with people from different backgrounds at the choir in a way that isn't obviously

happening in other circumstances. They felt this group was an important route for them to meet a whole new circle of people that they wouldn't have met otherwise. There are several other participants that they have become friends with over this time and they have connected socially and professionally as a result of this.

L2 finds the atmosphere at their group to be very focused. There is real intent to make work and create something of value. "Everyone is eager to produce something to be proud of." The individuals do mix and talk but the group is not seen as a purely social event (or at least it is not overtly viewed as such by the participant). The impact and relevance of the group is also evidenced in the work produced. They feel that producing work and having this viewed as important and "worthwhile" by others helps to validate the contributions of all the members, regardless of their experience and their background. The confidence level of participants grows through a project and the "rewarding feeling of having produced something together" is recognised as the lasting personal impact.

L3 sees the community cohesion as one of the major factors in why the group pursue a new production each year and devote time and share resources in order to realise their vision. They described the "determination" of the group to "do something different and make the community stand out, be acknowledged for having done something – pretty much out of nothing". There is real joy among the participants "because they are driving the activity themselves and see each stage as something they can be involved in at a decision-making level". This has meant that there is a noticeable ambition among the local community all year round and they feel they can work together to achieve other goals thanks to the confidence and camaraderie built through their drama productions.

C (Co-creative activities):

L1 thinks that the choir group may have been particularly aimed at bringing together people from different backgrounds but that wasn't obvious at the beginning and certainly wasn't the motivation for many of the participants. The choir has members of many ages, races, religions and are from a variety of locations in the area. They recognised this as being a "really nice" part of the project, especially for people from ethnic minorities or older people who may have felt lonely. It has opened a door for many of the participants "to feel comfortable with people they may have misunderstood previously".

L2, looking at the recent project involving disabled people, thought that this was really rewarding. They felt it took a certain level of planning in advance to ensure it was suitable for everyone involved but that because this was done well, they all enjoyed themselves and were able to "get stuck in" to the project and feel like they were making progress all the time and the different levels of ability among the group were never a significant issue or barrier. They felt they gained more of an understanding of the lives of disabled people even though they "thought they knew a lot already". The focus on creative work meant that the disabled people felt empowered and "equal" to the others and that their experiences as disabled people were then a secondary issue, only discussed in passing and by choice, rather than necessity.

L3 feels that the project has targeted "everyone and anyone" within geographic reach. They have always had a very open approach and have sought to bring as many of the local residents as possible into the projects, regardless of their circumstances or background. It has been "a wonderful tool to

get people together and to get to know each other in an area where people are quite scattered and isolated". Having (almost) everyone contribute has meant that the productions have "a real authenticity to them". There have been challenges, including the lack of a real hierarchy, so the decision making process can be quite slow. The desire to include everyone can mean that things can move slowly or decisions can be difficult as too many people are involved. The nature of the local area (rural, with long, cold winters) can make communication difficult but this has improved over time and the use of different social media and WhatApp groups has meant that people feel more connected.

D (Needs / Future):

L1 hopes that the choir can continue going from strength to strength. They hope that they can gain more recognition so that others can understand the importance of singing and creativity. They would like more new people to join but at the same time, would prefer that the existing group continue rather than lose some members or become too big to manage. Opportunities for the choir to join in more community events and celebrations would be most welcome.

L2 hopes that the community arts group can work with many more collaborators from different backgrounds. They enjoy the "spark and energy" that comes from beginning a new project with a new group of people and feeling that "freshness" to keep the core group active and excited. They thought that some small funding would help them to showcase their work more frequently or more effectively and, in turn, raise the appreciation of the work they do.

L3 said that the projects had already far exceeded their expectations and hopes so they thought that being able to continue at this level was ambitious. They were interested in opportunities to showcase their work farther afield, but thought this was too difficult as it would "potentially involve a whole town-full of people upping sticks and heading somewhere to perform, which would be a bit mad!".

Summary

Across the series of interviews, it is fair to say there was a noticeable difference in approach from each of the three kinds of interviewees. The 'Learning Providers' interviews were generally more in-depth and they seemed to have the best grasp of the issues being discussed and had considered these topics more. The 'Stakeholders', while understanding of the issues, were less involved in the practicalities and interactions of co-creative activities, so often spoke in more removed, high-level overviews of the broad range of work they are involved in. The 'Learners' had a good understanding of their activities but had not necessarily considered the impact of these on the relationships between participants – or not to this depth anyway. They were more reluctant to explore the issues and occasionally did not seem to understand the line of questioning, which was difficult to get around at times. Consecutive questions tended to get repeated answers – which were often positive or affirmative, but not much more elaborate than what gone before.

Still, all interviewees observed a range of instances of creative activities acting as a means, or a platform, for building mutual trust and social bonding across various divides. The routes to this vary and are sometimes almost imperceptible to those involved. Common themes that emerged in include time being allowed for these relationships to develop and become more trusting and deeply connected, the need for an open and welcoming environment and, sometimes, a skilled or experienced organiser to ensure that these qualities are protected over the lifetime of a project or group.

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