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A Community Arts programme for Older People: An Evaluation

Abstract

Purpose

This paper presents an evaluation of a community based arts programme for older people in Nottinghamshire.

Design

The evaluation was conducted using a combination of pre and post-initiative quantitative questionnaires and qualitative focus group interviews. This article focuses upon the findings from the focus groups.

Findings

Participants reported feeling more positively about ageing and being more motivated to pursue new opportunities at the end of the programme. Five themes emerged from the focus group interviews, namely i) age and ageing, ii) the finished product, iii) new opportunities, iv) aspirations and the future and v) personal benefits. These related to increased confidence, having greater creative expression, meaningful occupation and opportunities for socialisation.

Social Implications

The programme was found to be successful in helping individuals feel more positive about their age, to feel more confident and motivated, to engage with others through mutual creativity, as well as to challenge negative social stereotypes of older people.

Originality/Value

The paper will be of relevance and value to those working with older people and those with an interest in the arts. This evaluation demonstrates the diversity of the older population with older citizen's voices being at the heart of the programme.

Keywords

Arts, community arts, older people, age, ageing, evaluation

Article Classification

Case Study

A Community Arts for Older People: An Evaluation

Background

It has become widely accepted that the health and wellbeing of older people is a main priority for British society, especially with an increasing population of the over 50's (Age UK, 2011; Department of Health, 2001; Oliver, Foot and Humphries, 2014). Health and wellbeing is much more than simply attending to physical illness with treatment. It has become widely recognised that social factors have a significant impact on health and a sense of wellbeing (Cooper et al., 2008; Langeland, and Wahl, 2009; World Health Organisation, 2002). Loneliness and low self-esteem as a result of isolation is a common problem amongst the older population (Cattan et al., 2005; Findlay, 2003). A review of the literature concludes that physical and social activities are consistently associated with a positive effect on mood and increased self-worth (Biddle, Fox and Boucher, 2000; Cooper et al., 2008; Langeland, and Wahl, 2009). The health benefits are primarily psychosocial; making new friends, maintaining social networks and the stimulus of interacting with people from a variety of backgrounds is inevitably good for older people.

The World Health Organization recommends improved access to "non-medical sources of support through social prescribing/community referral" and includes engagements with arts activities in these recommendations (Friedli, 2009:41). Similarly, the Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCP) recommend "participation in arts, and developing creativity" in their "Case for action" for public mental health (2010, p.28). Furthermore "community arts" (RCP, 2010, p.30) are identified as promoting social cohesion. The British Medical Association (BMA) (2011) and the New Economics Foundation (2008) also recognise the social value of engagement with the arts.

Recent evidence suggests that social approaches to the organisation and delivery of public health may have considerable potential for health improvement, particularly for those that are considered most disadvantaged in society. In particular, the evidence suggests that participation in art activities has the potential to make a major contribution to health, wellbeing and life skills (Royal Society of Public Health, 2013; the Chief Cultural and Leisure Officer's Association report, 2014).). The participatory nature of the arts can develop trust, openness, honesty, cooperativeness, tolerance, and respect, which in turn helps to build and nurture social capital within communities (Putnam and Feldstein 2000). This paper presents an evaluation of a community arts

programme for people over the age of fifty, demonstrating the positive outcomes that this type of initiative can have for older people.

A Community Arts Programme

This community arts programme was developed specifically for people over the age of fifty. Unlike many older people's projects, the programme sought to engage a broad range of older people including those who are newly retired, individuals who have lost partners due to bereavement, people living in rural locations, those recovering from health problems including mental health issues, as well as more vulnerable and 'elderly' individuals. This programme aimed to promote a positive view of ageing, to support independence and wellbeing and to challenge negative social perceptions of older people. Central to this programme were the recognitions of diversity within this age group and therefore opportunities to capture individual experiences and provide a voice for older people.

The programme was divided into eleven themes, each run as a series of ten workshops attended by 119 participants (females = 76, males = 43). The workshops included art forms in: broadcasting and social media, comedy, drama, environmental art, music composition, photography, poetry, radio script writing, singing, visual arts and writing for theatre. Each of the workshops were led by trained artists and supported by mentors and facilitators.

Methods

The evaluation aimed to explore participants' experiences of engaging with the arts programme through a series of focus group interviews. Focus groups attempt to understand the meaning participants ascribe to actions or beliefs (Bryman 2001). In this study, nineteen participants agreed to take part in the focus groups conducted by the researchers. Questions focused upon i) participants' experiences of engaging with the programme, ii) reasons for attending the programme, iii) any noticeable changes since attending, iv) participants views of age and ageing and v) feelings and plans towards the future. Discussion amongst participants was encouraged to allow various avenues for discussion that the question alone may not have elicited. Focus groups can encourage participation from people who may be reluctant to be interviewed on their own or feel they have little to offer on the discussion topic (Kitzinger 1995).

Each focus group was digitally recorded with participants' consent, transcribed and analysed thematically. The transcripts were read and re-read and notes were made throughout the reading on general concepts contained within them. The themes were validated within the research team.

Findings

Five interrelated themes emerged from the focus group interviews. These included i) age and ageing, ii) the finished product, iii) new opportunities, iv) aspirations and the future and v) personal benefits (table 1).

Table 1:

Theme	Sub themes
1. Age and ageing	Public attitudes, participants' beliefs
2. The finished product	Exhibition, performance, the written word, having created something new
3. New opportunities	Learning new skills, doing something new
4. Aspirations and the future	Potential for further creative pursuits, career advancement
5. Personal benefits	Enjoyment, quality of artists, learning and skills, confidence, having something meaningful to do, social aspects

Age and ageing

The entire programme was developed for people over the age of fifty and participants were aware of this and they gave frank opinions about their own sense of ageing; people recognised elements in loss of ability. There were also a number of comments regarding public attitudes to older people::

Well, I, I just think it's an opportunity to do different things and it's good that at last they've realised that when people get older, which we all do... We've got plenty of life in us still, you know... why should people think, "Oh, they're older, they can't do everything..."

FG1

People recognise the effects of ageing but simultaneously do not feel as old as they are:

I don't feel my own age, I mean, I look it some days, but I mean, inside, you don't, do you?

FG1

There is a shared recognition of negative public attitudes to older people:

the older that I get, the more I realise what an ageist society we live in and how you become so invisible, and, overlooked and patronised and viewed in a lot of aspects, as though, you know, you're not capable or, it's not possible for you...

FG3

One aspect of the programme that was not specifically asked about was an issue of rights to access the arts. Some participants insisted that older people have a right to access the arts as well as every aspect of society:

and you know, for goodness' sake, why, [laughs] why can't we have access to the arts and the, you know, creative arts and stuff, why can't we have that access?

FG3

The finished product

For each of the art forms, a finished product was attached the end of the programme of workshops. These included a finished poem or script, an arts exhibition or performance to showcase participants' work. Participants spoke of these with laughter, satisfaction, a sense of achievement and pride within the focus groups. Some participants were genuinely amazed at the quality of the finished product:

I think the really, really nice thing is the exhibition of it at the end. That is really, really important. Because people think, "Gosh, we did this", and, you know, the pride in what you've done...

FG2

I must admit when I went on the course, I couldn't, I didn't ever imagine that we were going to produce two films out of that. ... It was unbelievable!

FG3

I feel much more comfortable about getting up on stage and, you know, performing, and it's given me more confidence ... to actually believe I can do this, and I enjoyed doing it, you know.

FG4

...(...) you feel proud of what you've done and what you've learned... and what you've performed.

FG4

Opportunity

It is evident from the findings that the programme provided opportunities to participants that would not have ordinarily existed. This programme of work was time-limited and funded from the public purse; as such, opportunities for older people to engage with arts activities are not always very accessible, especially for people in small towns or rural areas. Participants therefore valued the opportunities that were made available to them:

Without the people, I'd have never had the opportunity to make the film and that was great. But it was the other things that came along with it, you know, the writing and the acting.

FG1

...as you get older, you do things because you really, really want to do them, and the opportunities aren't always there for you.

FG3

And it gives us the opportunity. As I say, I would really, really hope that other people would get the opportunity too because I'm sure it can help them, and, you know, improve their lives and their futures

FG4

Aspirations and the future

Participants felt inspired by engaging with the programme. The courses stimulated people to think about the future and what they might be able to achieve. Obviously, only longitudinal research would be able to establish the long-term effects of engagement in the programme, nevertheless, participants were clearly stimulated, inspired and aspirational for the future:

I'd like to do more drama actually now that I've got a taste for it. FG1,
432

...yeah, get out and do it, everybody's got a dream of some sort, you know, singing, dancing, whatever, even though we're not great, nice to have a go, do something, you know.

FG1

Yeah, I think it's very, it makes me want to go out and do something else now. It's given me that sort of push to go out and...

FG1

*Yeah, I was inspired to carry on making films. I've yet to do that but...
[laughs]*

FG3

I think once you've been on one, you want to go on more. That's the thing.

FG3

The possibilities are limitless... [laughter]

FG3

Personal benefits

The personal benefits have been multi-factorial to participants. There is an overwhelming sense that people thoroughly enjoyed their experiences of the courses provided. The artists have inspired them and given confidence to maintain their creative expression and to pursue the arts in some form or another. People have learned new skills, gained confidence, felt pride in their work, have found something meaningful to do with their time and enjoyed the social aspects of the workshops.

I mean, I'd love to do more; we've had a taster of it now. It was great. I can honestly say,... everybody enjoyed it because they were all so happy...

FG1

...and it was an absolutely super experience

FG2

...it was for string instruments which none of us knew about apart from one person and I mean, it was just amazing. What I would have liked would have been for it to have gone on for two or three years

FG2

I thought this is absolutely amazing and when you actually go through the course and, as you've said, the quality of the tutelage, if that's the right word, it's absolutely top-notch so you wouldn't expect that to be free.

FG2

I wanted to learn to sing properly but I didn't feel that I was good enough, and the course gave me confidence and I thoroughly enjoyed it and I think, perhaps, I am good enough now.

FG3,

It was the highlight of my week

FG3,

Learning & skills

For many older people, the opportunity to learn new knowledge and skills is not an option. The programme provided new opportunities that would not otherwise have been available to them. Skills could be both artistic but also social:

...two things, there is learning something new and meeting different people.

FG1

... and everybody wanted to learn. That was, that, and you sort of, you know, pushed each other along.

FG1

I don't think anybody had ever had anything published, I certainly haven't, so we were all dabblers, but we all learned something from it, definitely. And I thoroughly enjoyed it.

FG2

...most of us had no prior experience, but the very first day, we'd been shown how to put all the camera equipment together, set up the sound and do all the roles on a film crew and then, we went out and about, and each of us had to direct a small piece which, and we all, we were all acting as well, so, we cycled round all the different roles on a camera crew.

FG2

I found the course really rewarding and I learned an awful lot from it. And I continue to learn...

FG2

Confidence

The concept of confidence was significant in the findings of this evaluation. Whilst some participants gained confidence in learning new skills, others gained confidence taking part in activities they had not taken part in for a long time:

I wanted to learn to sing properly but I didn't feel that I was good enough, and the course gave me confidence and I thoroughly enjoyed it and I think, perhaps, I, I am good enough now,

FG3

And they give you confidence which is what I think, especially in our age group, if you're trying something new, you need to be given the confidence and the encouragement to do something you've never done.

FG4

...that then gave me the confidence to say, "Well, actually, I, I am a poet, I can write poetry".

FG4

...and it's given (...) more confidence, as you say, personally, but, also, to, to actually believe I can do this, and I enjoyed doing it,

FG4

...that certainly has led me to realise, to value what I can write, realise, yes, I can write.

FG4

Social benefits

Participants identified many social benefits of engaging with the programme. For some, the opportunity to get out of the house and have something meaningful to do was appreciated:

...to get out of the house

FG1

And it's getting people out of the house and meeting different people, isn't it?

FG1

We had a film night, film evening with a nice meal, very, very pleasant evening, so, really successful group, I thought.

FG1

...going out the house and meeting people

FG1

Really, I enjoyed the group of people that I was with. After a few weeks, you sort of get to know them and, at first it, I must admit, it was probably a little bit daunting... I don't know if you all felt like that. But after a few weeks, it was great, we seemed to fit together as a team... ...and, probably the great thing about it was, everybody was interested in what they were doing and everybody wanted to learn. That was, that, and you sort of, you know, pushed each other along. So it was great really

FG1

Well, I think it's being part of a group and meeting people...

FG1

Discussion

Social isolation has been recognised as being a major issue, particularly for older people. Evidence suggests that social isolation has adverse effects upon health and wellbeing, although less evidence is available as to how this can be

overcome (Findlay, 2003). This evaluation provides evidence of how arts interventions might provide positive outcomes in reducing social isolation, building confidence and motivation and providing new opportunities for otherwise isolated older individuals.

The programme of work evaluated positively by participants. This evaluation provides insights into how people engaging with the programme perceive old age, as well as evidence of the effectiveness of the arts as a creative social medium. Some of these insights challenge stereotypical views of both how society sees older people and assumptions that are often made about how we think society sees older people.

Participants have greatly appreciated the professionalism of the artists and this has been reflected in the quality of the workshops that have been provided. There is an overall sense of enjoyment. People have enjoyed taking part, being challenged and working towards a finished product, such as a performance or an exhibition. The workshops have provided new opportunities for people and they have learned new skills. For some, new opportunities have opened up for the future. People have felt inspired and wish to pursue their creative abilities.

Participants have greatly valued the programme, but also realise that funding for such work is time-restricted. There is a strong feeling that the programme has had a powerful effect on people's lives and they wish to see a more sustained programme of work in the future. It is important to note however that the success of the project was largely due to the temporary funding for the work. For long-term health and social benefits, such programmes of work need to be commissioned into health and social care provision or at least supported within communities. This could be facilitated through social prescribing, personal budgets and direct payments. It is possible that similar activities may already exist amongst groups such as University of the Third Age, Women's Institute, arts courses running at local colleges and in local libraries and halls, Parish groups and so on.

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