

**Why art? Exploring the Contribution to Mental Wellbeing of the Creative Aspects and Processes of Visual Art-Making in an Arts and Mental Health Course**

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## **Abstract**

### ***Background***

Evaluations of participatory arts and mental health projects have consistently found improvements in mental wellbeing but the part played by the creative aspects, as distinct from the benefits of social interaction, remains unclear.

### ***Methods***

This study explored the specific part played by the creative aspects of introductory arts courses that aim to improve mental wellbeing. Nine course participants consented to recording of accreditation assessment meetings held with them towards the end of their course.

### ***Results***

Thematic analysis identified themes relating to two categories: creative processes and the learning that ensued. The creative processes were playful experimentation and inspiration. Learning processes revolved around learning to learn and artistic development.

### ***Conclusions***

Previous studies have found play, inspiration and learning to be associated with wellbeing. It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that the creative aspects of the courses did play an important part in improving participants' wellbeing.

Keywords: Visual arts, Mental health, Interviewing, Thematic analysis

## **Introduction**

Open Arts is a participatory arts and mental health project hosted within the charitable funds of an English National Health Service (NHS) mental health provider trust. The core activity of the project is the provision of introductory art courses that aim to promote mental wellbeing and social inclusion by providing relaxing, welcoming art groups. Courses run over 12 weeks with two-hour sessions each week in a variety of media.

Participants can be referred by a mental health worker or they can self-refer, as the courses are advertised publicly as well as through mental health services. The project therefore works with people at risk of mental ill health and isolation as well as those experiencing mental health problems. Since 2010 participants can opt to have their work assessed for accreditation by Gateway Qualifications (formerly known as National Open College Network) and an Open Arts studio, opened in 2013, provides placements for those wishing to continue their work more independently.

Evaluation was built into the project from the start and is carried out by a group of current and former mental health service users, with academic support from a local university. Results have consistently demonstrated improvements on measures of mental wellbeing and social inclusion (Secker, Loughran, Heydinrych and Kent, 2011; Wilson, Secker, Kent & Keay, in press), including in comparison with people on the waiting list for a course (Margrove, SE-SURG, Heydinrych and Secker, 2013).

The art sessions provided by Open Arts are described below in order to contextualise the study.

### **The arts sessions**

During the formative stages of evaluation the approach taken was found to be key for participants and the outcomes achieved (Secker et al., 2011). In response to these early findings sessions now combine taught techniques, tools and activities with time and space for individual studio practice.

Setting the scene for the sessions by creating a 'pop up' art studio in a community venue is the first step. Tables are set out allowing for a group feeling but also enough space for each individual (usually in a horse shoe layout or group of tables put together), with a large table to the side of the room on which a range of materials are laid out. Soft music is played in the background and a sample of art-related books is laid out on the tables for participants to look through to help settle them in and for them to use as inspiration. Equipment such as drawing pencils is dotted across the tables in case participants feel inhibited from getting up and helping themselves in the first instance. Volunteer arts assistants also support participants and bring them a selection of materials if they do not feel able to do this themselves at first.

The first session starts with 'ice breakers' which aim to enable participants to relax and feel less inhibited than they otherwise might. To begin with the lead artist provides a range of objects and each participant chooses an object on which they then

focus for brief timed periods: first drawing their chosen object using their non-dominant hand; then drawing the object without looking down at the paper; next holding the object but not looking at it and drawing through touch; and finally looking at the object and drawing it using a continuous line. This is followed by mark-making using a variety of charcoal, pencil and pastel. Initial sessions also include an introduction to the use of sketchbooks aimed at establishing the groundwork for an attitude of working as an artist and perceiving a visual world. Participants spend this period looking at examples of sketchbooks and discussing how a sketchbook can aid development of their own ideas.

These techniques typically occupy the first half of the session. After a refreshment break participants then spend the remainder of the session working at their own pace, playing with the techniques and working them into their drawings. Since a key aim is to help people feel comfortable and relaxed, the roles of the arts facilitator and volunteer include chatting with participants and being mindful of whether they seem settled and happy, or need any help.

As the course progresses, sessions each week cover a range of arts media and techniques. Each course varies a little depending on the specialism of the artist leading the course, which is beneficial to the project as a whole as the arts facilitators, volunteers and participants share skills and try out each others' ideas. Each session ends with a brief summary of what has been covered, participants have the opportunity to show their work to the group, a feedback sheet is passed round the room for participants to write on if they wish to and a reminder is given of what is planned for the following week.

Half way through the course the groups have a gallery visit to London, usually to Tate Modern, where they have a practical workshop as an introduction to the gallery. These visits always prove popular and represent a major achievement for those for whom it is a significant milestone simply to leave their house each day, let alone travel up to London on a train. As well as enabling the group to bond through spending a full day together, the visit aims to broaden perceptions of what a gallery can offer and what participants themselves can achieve through exploring exhibits and discussion of individual art practice.

The sessions towards the end of the course include less taught input, with more time given to participants developing their individual style and working in more depth on techniques of their choice. In addition, time is available for participants undertaking accreditation to tighten up their folios of work and ensure that all learning outcomes have been covered. For all participants, preparing for their next steps is also important at this stage. Many choose to take up a place at the Open Arts Studio where they are able to progress on to independent arts development for up to six months. Others who are not able to attend the studio are supported to engage with adult education, voluntary work or other arts or community initiatives of interest to them.

## **Method**

Qualitative results from both an England-wide study (Secker, Hacking, Spandler, Kent and Shenton, 2007) and the more recent evaluations of Open Arts (Margrove et al.,

2013; Secker et al., 2011; Wilson et al., in press) have revealed a number of ways in which art-making in groups may work to improve wellbeing. These include social interaction with like-minded peers, relaxation and time out from worries and problems, increased motivation, and a concomitant broadening of horizons. However, the part played by the creative activity itself as opposed to a more general enjoyable stimulus inherent in the social aspects of a group activity remains unclear (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016). This study therefore aimed to explore the specific contribution of creative activity by focusing more directly than in the previous studies on the creative processes in which participants engage during the Open Arts courses.

In thinking through how the study aims could be achieved it seemed reasonable to suggest that making the creative activity central to the study, rather than asking more abstract questions about it as in the previous evaluation studies, might shed new light. In turn, since the assessment meetings held with course participants opting for accreditation of their work already explored the creative processes involved in some depth, it was decided to use a sample of those meetings as a means of generating data for this study.

All nine participants in three courses run during 2014 who had opted for accreditation were therefore invited to take part in the study by their arts facilitator one week prior to their assessment meeting. All nine agreed and signed a consent form indicating their assent for recording and for photographs of their work to be used to illustrate the study findings. The nine participants were all women in their middle years from White British backgrounds. They had a wide range of levels of previous art experience, from those who had done no creative activity since their schooldays to

some who had more experience but had not maintained their art-making in recent years. The accreditation unit for which they were being assessed was a Materials Exploration unit focusing on the use and understanding of different techniques and media.

The audio-recordings were professionally transcribed for thematic analysis, which followed the procedure described by Braun and Clarke (2006). As a starting point, all members of the study team read through the transcripts, making notes on initial thoughts about potential themes. These were then discussed at a meeting convened for that purpose. In qualitative research such meetings are generally used to achieve consensus where initial views differ (Hill, Thompson and Nutt Williams, 1997). In this case, though, it became clear that two potential overarching frameworks were emerging and that these reflected the particular interpretative frameworks brought to the task by team members from their different professional backgrounds. While one framework revolved around learning processes, the other centred on participants' personal growth and development. Since both frameworks appeared to offer useful insights, rather than trying to reach a consensus as to which to pursue, or attempting to combine them, it was agreed that for the next stage of the analysis two members of the team would take a lead, one focusing on each framework from their particular interpretative stance. This involved working through the transcripts to develop initial codes and then organising the codes into categories within themes capturing their meaning within the relevant overarching framework.

## **Results**



As the process unfolded it became clear that a focus on personal development was less useful in making sense of the data than a focus on learning. At the same time, the creative processes associated with participants' learning began to emerge more clearly and from that point the analysis therefore focused on those two intersecting themes. Accordingly, the results are presented in two main sections, the first focusing on the creative processes identified and the second on the learning that ensued. Where extracts from the data are presented to illustrate the results pseudonyms are used to identify the speakers in order to preserve anonymity.

## **Creative processes**

The creative processes identified as central to participants' experience of the Open Arts courses clustered around two main themes: playful experimentation and inspiration.

### ***Playful experimentation***

Since the accreditation unit for which participants were being assessed was a Materials Exploration unit, it is probably unsurprising that experimentation with the effects that could be achieved with different materials was a key focus of the assessment meetings. However, it was apparent from the enthusiasm with which participants described their experimentation that they were not simply addressing the accreditation criteria. Rather, they had clearly experienced immense pleasure from what several explicitly spoke of as 'playing', and playfulness therefore emerged as a

key aspect of the experimentation they described.

The sheer range of materials participants described experimenting with was also striking. They included not only the art materials provided during sessions, but also everyday materials sourced at home and used in combination with more conventional materials:

I'm experimenting with different mediums and things at the moment... And I was also thinking maybe food colour and oil, you know like cooking oil? Mixing them up and then seeing... I might experiment with that... I've got loads of ideas and now I've got time to play with it, I quite like playing with things  
(Rose)

In addition to their experimentation with art and other materials, participants described experimenting with the effects that could be achieved using different tools and techniques, some again relatively conventional but others less so:

Yeah, a coffee, well, a stirring stick! *[laughs]* Yeah, and then I just went like that. I can't remember what I did first. I know I scored into it to make different patterns and then I put the glitter on. (Abby)

Several participants went on to describe how their experimentation with materials and techniques had enabled them to create textured effects, which for some gave tactile as well as visual pleasure:

Right, what it is, what we did, we did acrylics, and basically you put it on there and then you put PVA glue on it and water, and then you just move it about like that... You can feel the PVA glue as well through it, but you can't see it... But yeah, I like this one, and I don't mind that all the water splashed here because I was flicking water at it as well with the brush. But I like the texture, I like feeling that one. (Iris)

The effect that could be achieved with colour was a further key theme:

I hadn't realised 'til I used acrylics, because this was the first time, just how bright the colours are, and I think that I just wanted to work with those, with the brightness of colours and really... I realised that, you know, to do something other than I had in my mind, with the vibrancy of the colours, because they're quite... they pick up the light so well, so yeah, I enjoyed that. (Ella)

A final theme to emerge from participants' accounts of experimentation concerned the enthrallment they experienced as a result of the way in which an artwork could evolve, almost taking on a life of its own, as the effects achieved with different materials, techniques and colours became apparent:

I wetted the paper and then I just sort of splodged the red paint and it kind of sort of spread out, and then I put some green splodges and I had a straw and I kind of blew the paint a little bit sort of, so that it started to kind of go out in lines rather than be sort of blocks like the red was... The straw, I loved that, playing with that and then I thought, oh, it looks a bit sort of like blossom... I

was quite pleased with it really, because it just started off as an experiment, you know. (Josephine)

### *Inspiration*

The previous section has highlighted the ways in which the results of experimentation could enthral participants as their artwork took shape. In turn the results obtained through experimentation could prove a rich source of inspiration for further work:

But then all the techniques that we've learnt on the course, you know, each one I've thought, ooh, you know, I've got really excited about it and wanted, you know, where before I've kind of finished one thing because the next week we're learning something else, and my mind's sort of gone to the next thing and it's, well I think it's just sort of learning all these new, it's just sort of opened my mind to so many possibilities you know. (Josephine)

In addition, participants described a strikingly wide range of other sources of inspiration. In some cases the process involved appeared relatively direct, most notably when inspiration was derived from other works of art. These could be discovered through personal research, through the gallery visits arranged by Open Arts, or, as in one case, from a TV programme:

And this one, well I'd seen this pot on the Antiques Roadshow, Clarice Cliff, and I liked the way she does the sort of two colours in the trees and that. And then there was another pot which looks like an old Chinese pot and it had like a

pine tree on it, so I was trying to sort of do the pine tree pot but in the Clarice Cliff sort of style. (Abby)

Family members or memories could be another relatively direct source of inspiration, either in and of themselves, or through related personal motifs and symbols:

It don't look much, I know. But my mum died 2½ years ago and she sent me a card and it had all this on, and to a special daughter and everything, and I just tried to recreate it a little bit... It don't look much but it's very personal to me because my mum didn't send many with daughter on. (Kate)

I always have to have my token three little stars, they're for my children. Or I've got like three buttons, there's always something of three. (Iris)

However, participants also described some less direct inspirational processes, in particular where the original source for an idea had stimulated their imagination and enthralled them in fantasy. Linked to the themes already documented, for example, Daisy explained how other works of art had not simply been a source of inspiration in themselves but had sparked a process of fantasy and enchantment:

I just made her [my daughter] a book tree, so every time we read at night and there's a character she likes, I put it on her book tree, so there's my little girl there I've drawn and that's her with her book open, and then it came from – do you know the old Ladybird books? I've got a love of old books and old illustrations and it reminded me of the Ladybird tree at the beginning of all the

old books, so I kind of got that idea from there, and then just all the characters, so Red Riding Hood, the Little Mermaid, as we read them we just add them on.  
(Daisy)

Alongside the inspiration derived from other works of art, found materials could also be a rich source of inspiration. To some extent the Open Arts course deliberately engineered this by making available not just more traditional art materials but also a range of household and other materials. Participants explained how finding such materials in the art room had the intended impact, through evoking memories of other art works, chiming with personal motifs and, again, stimulating fantasy:

This is just a paper plate under there, because I knew as soon as I saw that, what I could turn it into. And, as I say, as I love nature and fantasy, fairies, I thought, it's got to be a mushroom, you know, it's just got to be a mushroom! And that is something I'll take home and use, you know? (Janet)

Equally, however, participants described how materials found in the home or elsewhere could set in chain similar processes to those stimulated in the art room:

Oh, how did that start, I'm trying to think. My daughter loves Frozen of course and I'd broken something and there was a lovely big slab of glass and I thought ooh, it would be really nice if I did a picture in glass paint and she could have it in her window and it looked really lovely, and then I decided to do the whole of our front door... And then from there I thought ooh, I'll do a glass for her, so I made just like a champagne glass and made it into the evil queen on this side,

and then on the other side was her when she's turning into the horrible witch.

(Daisy)

## **Learning**

The central learning processes identified in the course of the analysis revolved around learning to learn and an ensuing artistic development.

### *Learning to learn*

Participants described learning to learn in three ways. The most common was trial and error, which was closely linked to the creative process of experimentation and fostered a capacity for reflection and self-critique. Participants also described using their sketchbook as a learning tool to chart and reflect on progress, and four went on to describe a higher level of learning involving a growing understanding of the mental processes underpinning their learning.

The part played by experimentation in enabling participants to learn through trial and error is apparent from these accounts:

Yeah. This again is one of my favourites but I wish I hadn't have gone a bit over the top with the metallic though, I think I like sparkling glitter and I get a bit carried away and go over the top a bit, I wish I'd kept the leaf maybe just a green. But again, we just... (Daisy)

Yeah, this, I mean all this... me trying to get the hang of painting, because I've never been very good at painting, so I've sort of gone, which I think is better, from using sort of very dark, perhaps too much water colour, to something like this where you've got it not watered down, so that's the better effect, I think, than something like this. (Poppy)

In turn an ability to reflect on and critique the results obtained through trial and error was central to participants' learning:

Mm, then I realised, having not done a collage before that if I'd somehow built these up first, because really the sea just... I'd wanted these to come forward in the foreground, so if I was doing something like this again I would approach it completely differently. I would be able to think of those things, understanding what I've learnt from this. Yeah, that's it. (Ella)

For several participants the sketchbook created at the outset of their course proved to be a valuable tool in developing the capacity to reflect on the results obtained through trial and error:

That and the collage, this one, was definitely my two favourites without a doubt... And I've wrote there that I should have used more water and a bit less glue, so... because obviously it's not all good, you've got to write what you, you know, not mistakes that you've made because there's no mistakes, but you know where you went a bit wrong. (Iris)



The growing understanding of their own mental processes described by four participants naturally differed depending on the individual concerned. For one participant, understanding and accepting the way her mind worked was a significant step, while for others the significance lay in challenging and moving beyond the mental processes identified:

My mind seems to try to think quite orderly, so I find it quite difficult not to be orderly... Like some people can randomly put on and it looks great, my mind won't let me do that ... And it's something I've never realised before. I thought, yeah, it's quite right, and I think about other things I've done and it's true, everything has got to be just so. (Poppy)

That was my worst piece, that's the first day I started and had to do something, and I was trying to be very accurate and correct because I'm not used to just sort of doing, I like things to be very organised. I was trying to do it really and it was annoying me that the paint didn't form neatly. And then when I went home I thought, yeah, we'll just chill out and have fun, and we did that. And the difference is amazing! (Daisy)

Ella went on to describe how her greater understanding was enabling her not only to move beyond mental processes she found limiting, but also to take greater control of them:

Just making those marks and lines taught me a lot about how our brain works, because I realised that sometimes we'll see an image and our brain immediately

must take its own picture, so then when you come to draw it, it's racing ahead and not following your eye. So that was a good experience of how to control my brain and keep it in time with my hand to draw the lines. (Ella)

### *Artistic development*

Participants' artistic development was closely intertwined with the learning they described and revolved around three main themes: perception, skills and understandings of art.

Where perception was concerned, it was clear from participants' accounts that the 'ice breaker' exercises at the first session of their course freed them not only from any inhibitions about art-making, but also to begin to draw on senses other than the visual, particularly touch:

That was the first week and yeah, it was good, but it was a bit, I don't know, it was a bit strange for me, because I'd never done it like that before, and to think of it like that, like touch and everything, but as soon as I was doing it, you were actually touching the things and seeing how they feel and everything. (Kate)

As Poppy indicated, the development in their perception carried over into future sessions, enhancing their enjoyment of the different techniques with which they experimented:

I found modroc [plaster bandage used for modelling] really relaxing because

you're concentrating on getting the shape and also of course you're using your hand to get the feel of it, and you shut everything else off, you're just sort of concentrating on that, it's very relaxing. So yeah, I really enjoyed doing that.

(Poppy)

Having laid the foundations for learning in the first session, skills development was a core aim of the sessions that followed and participants were encouraged to continue learning between sessions. For participants with little prior experience of art developing their skills in this way was a rewarding new experience:

Oh yeah, my horse! Yeah, when I first started I didn't know what to draw, and they had a book of horses... I've still got a lot to go, but I think I'm getting there with like looking at it more, and it seems to come out a bit more now, so... I tried it on my own and it was rubbish. But when I was doing, like looking at the book and giving you each piece what you can do, it comes out a lot better, it comes out like you want it to come out, well it comes out like a horse [*laughter*].

(Kate)

Equally, for participants with more prior experience developing new skills was important and for one participant whose artistic development had been curtailed by a disability this was particularly significant:

I'm absolutely thrilled that I did the course... it's been a shock at how much skill you can lose, but it's also taught me not to try to go back... And yes, it's starting at the beginning for me, with all of these materials, but also now I can

see that with the disability there are other materials I can use. It won't be the kind of stuff that I've done in the past but that's OK because now I know that there are materials that I can use and still work with them, and hopefully just keep practising and getting better. (Ella)

Participants also explained how their understanding of art had developed through their course. As Daisy explained, this could entail moving beyond prior assumptions about what constitutes art to a wider understanding of what art might encompass:

It's helped me realise that I'm quite artistic really. I thought art was literally a beautiful painting that's in galleries. And it's the little things that you might do that you don't realise... I think probably mine is not so good with the drawing and the painting, it's more the making things, getting my hands dirty. And this is just a silly thing at home that I did, that I didn't realise was art until I came here. (Daisy)

Similarly, assumptions about what might make a suitable subject for art could be overturned and participants found themselves looking at the world and at art itself with new eyes, or as Josephine put it, as an artist:

It's been fantastic, it's just opened my mind to so many different things that I kind of look around me now and all the time I'm thinking, ooh, I want to paint that, ooh, I want to do that, ooh, I could do that in whatever and it's just inspired me so much and just kind of looking as an artist. (Josephine)

For one participant who acknowledged that her understanding of art had been limited, learning more about what might inspire and shape an artwork had been a powerful awakening:

And then the student who was here, she said, do you know that person had chronic illness, and that what he saw was just the red. And then I thought to myself, you can't go with what you're seeing, there's always something in why they're doing that sort of thing, because your first reaction is like anybody, oh, that's rubbish, I can do better than that, and then when she told me I thought, well yeah, you can think differently now, I can think differently. When I see a piece I won't judge it on what it looks like, if I know what the artist has been through then I'll judge it on that... The pieces are good to look at and things like that, but I go in deeper. (Kate)

## **Discussion**

Mental wellbeing is a term that has come into use as an alternative to the term positive mental health (Tennant et al., 2007). Whichever term is used, the concept is viewed as comprising both affect (e.g. happiness, life satisfaction, positive outlook) and psychological functioning (e.g. playing a useful part in things, making decisions) (Ryan and Deci, 2001). Mental wellbeing has been identified as important for health outcomes (Huppert and Whittington, 2004) and interventions focusing on positive mental health promotion have become increasingly widespread.

The concept of mental wellbeing is arguably particularly apposite in relation to participatory arts interventions since arts project participants commonly report the benefits they experience in terms of both affective gains, such as increased confidence and feeling more positive, and improvements in functioning, such as increased social contact, improved relationships and greater motivation (Spandler H. Secker J., Kent L., Hacking S & Shenton J. 2007; Secker et al., 2011). In a context in which recovery from mental ill health is now understood as gaining or regaining a fulfilling life of ones choice regardless of the presence or absence of symptoms (Turner-Crowson and Wallcraft, 2002), the concept is also particularly relevant for people experiencing or at risk of mental health problems because it does not assume the absence of illness (World Health Organisation, 2007). Rather, as Secker (1998) has proposed, people who need to use mental health services can nevertheless aspire to mental wellbeing, in the same way that someone with a physical disability or long-term condition can nevertheless aspire to physical wellbeing.

Whereas previous evaluations of Open Arts have focused on mental wellbeing as an outcome achieved for participants, the aim of this study was to explore the specific contribution of creative processes to the positive impact on mental wellbeing documented in the previous studies (Margrove et al., 2013; Secker et al., 2011; Wilson et al., in press). The creative processes identified revolved around playful experimentation and inspiration, and there is supporting evidence in the wider literature that both have a part to play in the promotion of wellbeing.

As will be clear from their accounts, a striking aspect of participants' experiences of experimentation with art materials and techniques was its playful nature. While some

participants explicitly described what they were doing as play, the unstructured informality evident in other accounts was equally redolent of the self-directed activity, guided by imagination and focused more on process than results, that defines play according to Gray (2008). In particular, a focus on process rather than results was a clear theme in participants' accounts of experimentation. As Gray suggests, shifting the focus from results to process helped eliminate the fear of failure for participants, allowing for the imaginative testing of new ideas.

The wellbeing benefits associated with play include relief from stress, increased creativity and improved relationships (Apter and Kerr, 1991; Brown, 2009; Fontana, 1991). These benefits are amongst the significant outcomes identified in the previous evaluations of Open Arts, and this study illuminates the contribution of the creative process of playful experimentation to their achievement. In addition, enjoyment has consistently been reported by all participants to date in evaluations of Open Arts and this study indicates that the opportunity provided by the introductory courses to learn through playful experimentation without fear of failure also plays an important part in that outcome.

A final aspect of the playful experimentation participants described was their evident pleasure in exploring the use of colour. These accounts chime with the results of research indicating an association between increased awareness of colour and wellbeing (Parkes and Volpe, 2013). The authors describe a pilot study in which people experiencing mild to moderate mental health problems took part in a nine week programme aimed at developing their colour awareness. On the basis of a follow-up evaluation 12 months later, Parkes and Volpe conclude that increased

colour awareness had a positive impact of on participants' mood and physical and mental wellbeing.

Turning to the second creative process identified, inspiration, the wider literature suggests that this process too is linked with wellbeing. Thrash, Elliot, Maruskin and Cassidy (2010) conceptualise inspiration as illumination and insight (transcendence), as evoked by something beyond oneself, and as compelling the pursuit of a new idea or vision, a conceptualisation that meshes well with participants' accounts of the process. The authors go on to report a series of four studies with undergraduate psychology students in the course of which they found significant associations between levels of inspiration and aspects of wellbeing including positive affect, life satisfaction, vitality and self-actualisation (the achievement of one's full potential). In a qualitative study carried out by Buheji, Saif and Jahrami (2014) via interviews with senior business managers, inspiration was also found to be associated with wellbeing, in terms of psychological health, happiness, confidence and optimism.

Although these studies were concerned with inspiration in contexts other than creative activity, in a further contribution to the literature Thrash, Moldovan, et al. (2014) see no reason to suppose that the results of their studies would not apply to creative activity. Their supposition is supported by research carried out by Thomson and Chatterjee (2014) aimed at developing a wellbeing measure specifically for use by museums in which inspiration emerged as one of six key concepts associated with wellbeing.



The learning ensuing from the creative processes participants described was a second main strand of their accounts, and learning has in itself been demonstrated to be associated with wellbeing. An analysis of longitudinal data from the British Household Panel Survey of over 10,000 adults carried out for the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE, 2009) found that people who had undertaken part time education, whether leading to a qualification or not, reported significantly higher levels of wellbeing than those who had not. Lifelong learning is also recommended by the UK National Health Service (NHS, 2015) as a means of boosting self-confidence, building a sense of purpose and optimism and strengthening relationships with others, thus promoting mental wellbeing.

Finally, the growing understanding of the mental processes underpinning their learning described by four participants, termed metacognition in the adult education literature, has been found to play a determining role in both self-actualisation and wellbeing (Kiaei and Reio, 2014), thus further supporting the significance of learning in the wellbeing outcomes previously reported in evaluations of Open Arts.

### ***Implications for research and practice***

Although small in scale this study contributes to understanding of the ways in which participation in the creative processes of art-making benefits participants' mental wellbeing. Further research with more diverse groups of participants than were included in this study, particularly men and participants from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, may well reveal other ways in which creative activity is of benefit. In the meantime, the study is of value to Open Arts Essex in reinforcing the

importance of the practice methodology that underpins the introductory courses. The study may also be useful to other arts projects and practitioners aiming to promote mental wellbeing for people experiencing or at risk of mental health problems.

### **Conclusion: so why art?**

Previous studies in other fields have found play, inspiration and learning to be associated with wellbeing. Based on an analysis of data from accreditation assessment meetings held with nine Open Arts participants, this study indicates that playful experimentation and inspiration, together with the learning that ensued, were central to participants' experience of their introductory visual arts course. It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that the creative aspects of art courses did play an important part in improving participants' mental wellbeing, in addition to any benefits derived from the social interaction involved in such courses. Our study therefore highlights the importance of providing opportunities to experience the benefits of creative activity through courses such as those run by Open Arts. Research with more diverse populations may contribute further to understanding of the impact on mental wellbeing of engaging in creative processes.

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There are no declarations of interest to disclose.

6767 words



## Author biographies

Kirsten Heydynrich was awarded a Postgraduate Diploma in Art Therapy at Queen Margaret College, Edinburgh. Alongside voluntary work with Studio Upstairs in London she offered freelance art therapy services until her appointment as Open Arts' first project manager in 2008. Following the birth of her third daughter in 2013 she returned to freelance work but continues to support Open Arts as a member of the project steering group.

Jo Keay has a Diploma in Foundation Art and an Advanced National Vocational Qualification in Art and Design. She has worked in community mental health since 2003. She was a founding member of the South Essex Service User Research Group (SE-SURG) and from 2005 to 2008 worked on the national study commissioned by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and Department for Health to develop the evidence base for participatory arts and mental health. She has been one of the lead artists facilitating Open Arts courses since the project's inception and took up post as Open Arts Manager in 2014, combining these roles with practising as a community artist.

Lyn Kent joined Anglia Ruskin University in 2004 as Researcher/Administrator for SE-SURG after a career in teaching. She led and/or contributed to over 20 studies for SE-SURG, focusing most recently on evaluations of Open Arts. Alongside that role she also worked on the national study commissioned by the Department for Culture,

Media and Sport and Department for Health to develop the evidence base for participatory arts and mental health. Since retiring in 2015 she has continued to support Open Arts through research and as a member of the steering group.

Jenny Secker qualified in Edinburgh first as a mental health nurse (1979) and later as a social worker (1984). After a career in mental health practice and research she was appointed Professor of Mental Health at Anglia Ruskin University and the South Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust in 2002 where her research interests centred on well being and social inclusion. She retired from her post in 2014 and was subsequently awarded the position of Emeritus Professor. She continues to support Open Arts through research and as a member of the steering group.