

Experience 2022

An Introduction to Arts, Health and Older People

December 2022

A response by Helen Meany

Experience 2022 is a learning programme presented by three organisations in partnership: Age & Opportunity, Waterford Healing Arts Trust and the Arts For Health Partnership Programme of Uillinn West Cork Arts Centre. It is funded by the Arts Council and the HSE and was first delivered in December 2021.

The aim of the three-day workshop was to support artists to work with older people in health and community contexts and to introduce them to this area of practice through case studies and first-hand testimony. The workshop ran from 7th–9th of December 2022, held on Zoom. Fourteen artists participated, from all art forms and disciplines. I attended on the first two days; the third day offered the artists the opportunity to get to know each other.

The line-up of stimulating speakers over the two days included:

Susan Langford, MBE, specialist in creative intergenerational work

Dance artist, Ailish Claffey

Age & Opportunity's Engage Programme Training & Development Facilitator, Brian Dooney

Dementia Advisor, Arts For Health Partnership Programme West Cork, Sarah Cairns

Activity Co-ordinator at Waterford Residential Care Centre, Paula Flanagan

Artists Caroline Schofield, Jill Bouchier

Artists Marie Brett and John Conway who presented separately in break-out rooms

Arts programme participant, Roger Green

Founder of Music and Health Ireland, Grainne Hope

Music from composer Ian Wilson started each day's session.

Additional contributions from:

Tara Byrne (Age & Opportunity)

Claire Meaney and Maeve Butler (Waterford Healing Arts Trust)

Justine Foster (Uillinn West Cork Arts Centre).

Introductory Note

What follows is not a comprehensive account or analysis of the workshop, but more of a snapshot of what I learned from it and what themes still resonate a number of weeks later. Although working with arts and older people in health or community settings is not my area of specialism, I was listening and watching through the lens of someone who has had personal experience of being with a family member with mild symptoms of dementia, who lived in a care home for many years. And as a coach and

consultant working in the arts, I work with artists and arts professionals at all stages of their careers.

Them and Us

The workshop was carefully and very effectively structured to move from broad scene-setting to the specific and personal. In her introduction on the first day, Tara Byrne from the development agency Age & Opportunity set the context of Ireland's changing demographics and ageing population, with the proportion of people over 65 to rise to one in five in the next two decades. She spoke of the importance of ensuring access to the arts and creativity for older people and the new Arts and Creative Charter for Older People that is currently being piloted.

That term, 'older people', recurred throughout the two days and was examined closely by Brian Dooney in his cogent presentation on attitudes to ageing, and on combating ageism. Asking the question: 'do you consider yourself to be young or old?' led to a dead end, he pointed out, while using the terms 'older' or 'younger' instead allows for a spectrum of possibilities, and is fluid. 'Change your words, change your world.'

He also emphasised that older people are not the Other. By replacing the pronouns 'they' and 'them' with 'we' and 'us' we create a sense of solidarity, a reminder that we are older people together and that ageism affects *us*. Since ageing is a life-long process, ageing is another word for living, he said.

'The spirit has no age,' he concluded; 'our imagination has no age.' His presentation gave strong encouragement to the artists present to approach their work with older people with an open mind, rather than making assumptions.

This amplified Susan Langford's earlier presentation too, where she observed that everyone has a past, present and future, and an imagination. Drawing on her decades of experience of intergenerational arts practice in the UK with the Magic Me organisation, she said that rather than assuming that older people prefer to dwell in the past and to reminisce, it is important to realise that older people also look forward and dream, just as young people do.

This was a powerful counter to the familiar idea, one that many of us may have internalised, that a person is 'too old' to begin something new, creative or otherwise; that it is 'too late' for new projects, plans, experiences or adventures.

Confidence, trust and instinct

Roger Greene, a participant in one of Waterford Healing Arts Trust's arts projects, exemplified the importance of overcoming internal obstacles to beginning a new creative activity. Through an imaginative programme launched during the pandemic, Art at the Kitchen Table, Roger took up art-making, at first in his own home with the support of a visiting artist, then in a pilot art studio set up in the Waterford Healing Arts Trust headquarters. It was initiated as a means of helping to combat older people's isolation during the Covid-19 period.

Roger's presence and contributions during the workshop gave valuable first-hand testimony about the impact of this new creative project on his life, as he recalled how he had developed confidence to move from drawing into discovering colour and eventually colour printing.

This was 'opening a door that had been closed for many, many decades', he said, in a fascinating and inspiring conversation with Maeve Butler of Waterford Healing Arts Trust. Roger said it was important 'to start from where the person is. People had art beaten out of them. Start with the assumption that the person may be struggling with art and creativity.'

This key point echoed what dance artist Ailish Claffey said, speaking from her experience as a facilitator and as a dance artist in residence at Tallaght University Hospital. 'Meet each participant where they are,' she advised the group. And, if this involves working with someone who is confined to bed or is in a wheelchair, the artist needs to think about 'a new way of being in the space'. This could be by moving a chair, changing the light, using props, and making small movements and gestures in a gentle way, such as folding ribbons.

Ailish Claffey spoke about how, in this context, the teacher becomes the learner. 'There is freedom in that: we don't have to have all the answers.' She suggested thinking about 'what's the invitation?'

There is freedom too, in not being part of the hierarchy of an institution. One of Ailish's central points concerned working with integrity, finding collaborators in health care settings 'with whom your ethos aligns'; asking 'what are your values,' and listening to your own intuition. 'Always tell the truth,' she advised. 'Listen to your own artistic voice. Regard everything as a pilot project. Be brave.'

Establishing the Basics: 93 %|7 %

Ailish Claffey's presentation explored in some depth the process involved for the artist and her insights were thought-provoking, especially for artists who already had some experience of this work and of reflecting on it.

For those who had little or none, Sarah Cairns, a highly experienced dementia care worker at Bantry Hospital, gave a very practical and informative orientation session. She emphasised the importance of understanding that dementia entailed the loss of short-term memory, so it was crucial not to ask people questions that they can't answer, and which cause difficulty and fear.

Instead, it was important to tap into procedural memory, which is 'rich and vast', through music, muscle memory, rhythm and smell, and then to move into connecting with people's long-term memory.

Sarah asked the group to consider what makes us feel safe, what gives us a sense of belonging and trust, and what happens if we don't feel safe. These were valuable questions, which she connected to polyvagal theory in neuroscience; about how to engage the sympathetic nervous system. Her prompts to the group helped to generate

empathy and think about ways to help people with dementia to feel safe, such as making sure to give them the information they need, by weaving it into the conversation.

She emphasised the importance of non-verbal communication, which makes up 93% of all communication. She advised using all those non-verbal and inclusive modes, from facial expression to body language, tone of voice, lip-reading.

This presentation, drawing on Sarah's expertise, was motivating and encouraging. For those artists who wanted to take their first steps into working with people with dementia, further sessions with Sarah would be invaluable, especially if there was scope to explore practices in more detail: e.g. methods, props, techniques; how to engage with large groups.

Open Gallery: a case study

Many of Sarah Cairns' points were exemplified in the next day's presentations by artists Caroline Schofield and Jill Bouchier and by Paula Flanagan, Activities Co-ordinator at Waterford Residential Care Centre.

Visual Artists Caroline Schofield and Jill Bouchier worked together, with Waterford Healing Arts Trust, to develop an art project at Waterford Residential Care Centre, called Open Gallery, based on Meet Me At MOMA in New York. They spoke about how they set about developing trust, working with people with dementia. By asking the participants' opinion, asking open questions and involving everyone, they drew people in to looking at artworks from the Waterford University Hospital's collection, and then actually making art of their own, working with paints and paper.

Both staff and residents joined the group and everyone's creative work was discussed and displayed on the walls, so that they created a residents' art room. They spoke about the need to build relationships with staff at the Care Centre, since they are also on a creative journey.

'Art Helps Us To Breathe' – Annie Albers

One of these staff members is Paula Flanagan, who spoke with passion and conviction about her experience of Open Gallery, and how a structured session with Caroline and Jill gently built confidence. The Activity Team members were part of the group, which also included student nurses, with everyone starting at the same level. They also made a group excursion to a local beach and painted what they saw. 'We were a happy group of artists,' she said.

Echoing Sarah Cairns points about non-verbal channels of communication and activity that is not dependent on memory, Paula described how empowering the art making was for people 'who struggle to find words' but who 'can keep learning, nevertheless'. It becomes a form of interaction and inclusion that builds new relationships and reduces isolation. 'They now had a voice.' There is a sense of

achievement, she said, adding that making art not only has an effect on the mind but a physical effect too. It becomes ‘a means of recovery.’

While Paula said that ‘words cannot express how powerful and enabling it is’, in fact her words made the case very eloquently for the value of this work and its potential to effect profound change.

I hope that many more artists in Ireland will be encouraged to move into this field and make these discoveries for themselves. This enriching and inviting workshop is instrumental in this, and I hope will be repeated, replicated and further developed by the three partner organisations in the future.

Helen Meany

February 2023