

Art of Living Creatively

Apex Arts in Collaboration with Plymouth Mind

Newsletter 1 Summer 2016



Apex Arts working in collaboration with Plymouth & District Mind are now a quarter of the way through delivering a two-year singing/song-writing, creative arts and performance project in Plymouth entitled The Art of Living Creatively (ALC). Funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation's Explore and Test grant the bi-weekly project is aimed at people who experience anxiety and social isolation which may inhibit them from leading a creative and fulfilling life. The grant is looking to see whether participation in and ease of access to the arts makes a difference to their lives. The project is being evaluated by Operation Emotion.

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Background

In April 2015 Eddie and Kyle, two young creative men on the Autism Spectrum living in Cornwall, were independently asked by Terry Stanton of Volunteer Cornwall to be Local Celebrities for A Positive Journey, a Grundtvig Partnership Project, funded by the EU and coordinated by Plymouth Mind. They were accompanied on their Positive Journey trip to Rimini by their mothers, Jacqui and Caroline, both of whom run creative companies working with people who may be socially excluded and experience anxiety due to being on the Autism Spectrum or diagnosed with a Learning Disability – Jacqui runs Apex Arts and Caroline, Connections Through Music. Kyle, already a singing and

recording artist and Eddie, an artist and musician, originally met in 2012 and immediately struck up a unique and amazing friendship reinforced by being participants of Apex Arts, Cornwall. This connection eventually led to the Art of Living Creatively collaboration with Plymouth Mind.



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First steps

First steps are an exciting time but the unknown can cause anxiety and so it was agreed that the project would be run from the Mind Parkside Community Building, a space already familiar to potential participants and next to a possible first performance opportunity at Freedom Fields Festival. As Apex are based in Cornwall, connections were made and fliers sent out via the Plymouth Autism/ Learning Disability networks and also promoted at Plymouth Mind itself. The Art of Living Creatively title was initially used as the title of the flier and misunderstood as solely a visual art project and so these were re-worked with the more direct title questioning – Do you like to Sing?

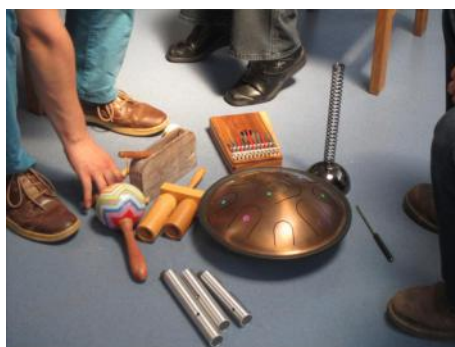
Recruitment was targeted at people who had a real desire to sing and write songs (whether experienced or not), who wanted to be part of a creative community and would be willing to make a commitment. Generally there was a lot of support and enthusiasm for the project, however, as Apex are unknown outside of Cornwall there was, understandably, initially some resistance and caution with regard to a new creative



group starting and this had to be taken into account with regard to recruitment timing.

As Apex works responsively it was agreed that the whole team of Apex

artist/musicians (4 in total including Jacqui and Caroline) would be available at each workshop. This would also enable participants to have a band experience from the start of the project and encourage potential musicians to join the group. It was also agreed that each session would start with carefully planned ice-breaker/anti-stress activities, geared to music, to relax the group and provide continuity with the rest of the afternoon. Eddie and Kyle were also enrolled as Apex Ambassadors to provide inspiration and a vital link between participants and leaders.



Attendee profile

The formation of a new group is an embryonic process and so the first few sessions were treated as introductions with no specific output timeframe or expectations. This allowed time for the group to grow, settle and start to form its own dynamic. The group meets on Tuesday afternoons and this time was not suitable for some potential participants and some had difficulty committing to a bi-weekly session. ALC currently has seven core participants with a new member, who is also a percussionist, starting in September. There are a few additional spaces available and we are confident that these will be filled within the next six months as our Plymouth presence becomes more established. Participants' ages range from mid-twenties to sixties with a ratio of 3:4 female to male. No current participants

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are diagnosed with Learning Disabilities but all experience social isolation and anxiety due to either having mental health issues or being on the Autism Spectrum.

Feedback from attendees

Feedback is a regular feature at ALC sessions where all reflections are welcomed, listened to and acted upon. Through feedback the group has understood that everyone's opinion is worthy of respect and this has helped with a sense of community cohesion and overcome feelings of shyness: "The group is getting stronger as we all get to know each other". We've learnt that participants enjoy and benefit from the toning and anti-stress activities and that singing together enhances feelings of wellbeing. We have learnt about participant's choices of music, what obstacles people would like to overcome and what they would like to get out of the project with regard to song-writing and creativity and this has helped focus the sessions.



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Anecdotal progress from attendees

This first quarter has seen amazing progress from participants both creatively and in building the group's identity where a genuine interest in each other's welfare and commitment to the group has been shown. One participant came personally all the way to the session to explain why she couldn't attend and explanations for non-attendance are always given well in advance to be relayed to the group at the start of the session. One support worker reported a participant being 'a different person outside of the group', much quieter and less communicative than they are within the sessions. Some attendees have been spreading the word



about the group and this has helped with reaching people who will particularly benefit from the project. Participants

have also been sharing information about local writing groups. All participants report feelings of wellbeing from singing and being creative together. One participant particularly resonated with the mbira (thumb piano), found it very relaxing to play and was interested in buying one for personal use. With regard to music-making all group members have now sung some lead vocals into a microphone. One participant whose fear was of performing in front of people has regularly performed in a small group to others. Someone who was shy but wanted to sing, has sung lead on a song. A



participant was inspired to write a whole set of new lyrics after a session and has continued to engage between sessions with the music. A project theme, developed by a member during a song-writing exercise, has started to be explored.

Skills learned

After a few sessions it became clear that the project had a group of attendees who were all confident at writing (whether stories, poems or ideas these were easily translatable to lyric writing) and who were very willing to share creative ideas with each other. However, questions were raised with regard to understanding the musical form, basic music theory, and chord and harmony structures. It was therefore decided by Apex that we would provide a musical vocabulary for the

group learnt through the art of song-writing itself. Through individual and group work participants have experienced writing lyrics inspired by music and then creating an appropriate melody. They have written lyrics to the basic musical song forms of verse, bridge and chorus and then understood song structure. Participants have also used drawing to understand a common emotional language, put vocal sounds to these emotional drawings and written lyrics ready to be made into a song. During warm-up and anti-stress sessions members have also learnt and practised basic harmony and part singing. They have worked on rhythm and creating relaxing music using percussive and specially tuned instruments. Participants have also been encouraged to come up with ideas with regard to an emerging performance theme. Finally, having a group of trainers who are all musicians has meant that the participants have had the unique experience of learning to sing with a band. This not only provides support but adds professionalism and gives a sense of importance to the songs.

Next steps

Participants at ALC are approximately half-way through writing six original songs to perform Spring/ Summer of next year and Apex anticipate that the remaining songs will be written by the end of the year. There is also interest from the group in making videos of the



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songs, using green screen, and incorporating drawings and other ideas around the performance theme. This will start to be developed in the next few months and will provide the IT component, which could potentially lead to the songs being recorded and the whole project being presented as an e-book next year as a record of the project and for later dissemination. Ideas will also be gathered for performance props, t-shirts and banner.

Lessons learned by trainers

Approaching the project with an open mind but with the experience of

working with groups in Cornwall meant that Apex were prepared for most eventualities. Their working model - built on the slower processing speeds of many they had worked with previously - was useful in some areas but adjustments had to be made to accommodate the greater confidence, efficiency and speed that the ALC group worked at when writing and sharing ideas.

The trainers learnt that the anti-stress games introduced at the start of all sessions were great ice-breakers and enabled the group to feel relaxed and supported for the rest of the session.

During this first period Apex have also realised that for some attendees two years may be a long time to commit to a project whilst for others it may become a part of their lives and so it was decided to be aware of, and work towards, individual targets for participants and also to allow time for follow-up next year to help maintain the social and creative connections made throughout the project.

Contacts

The Art of Living Creatively can be contacted by email: info@apexarts.org.uk or by calling Jacqui on 07789 020948.

