

Choose Life Action Fund

&

Theatre NEMO

Report on initial pilot project

Introduction

In this report we aim to supply information gathered over the initial three months of our pilot program of providing creative arts activities to patients undergoing psychiatric treatment within Stobhill and Southern General Hospitals.

The vast majority of our evidence comes from the artists working on the sites and is based on individual experiences while interacting with participants, we feel this to be extremely important to the evaluation process as the interactions between people are the key to the success of our work.

Figures and feedback from professionals are being compiled by clinical staff and will form a great part of the conclusive report.

Methodology

Our approach to providing creative stimulus begins with creating a comfortable and relaxed environment; this allows people to interact socially in a way that may not always be possible in a ward setting. We introduce people firstly by involving

them in circus skills; this involves activities like juggling, Diablo, flower sticks and the all time favourite “the unicycle”

The participants will then gravitate towards activities they identify with or often go from one to the other, many people will prefer to observe others during the first few sessions they attend before engaging themselves and others may never actually try any activities but clearly enjoy the company and atmosphere (not to mention the tea and biscuits).

Findings so far:

Each workshop is a surprise waiting to happen, it is never certain who will drop by, the unique attributes they will possess, or the special potentials they will discover and release, will they be alone or with a friend, a relative, or will they be part of a definable group. Will they be outgoing, loud, bubbly, gung ho, eager to try their hand at something new, or will they be quiet, retiring, uncertain, unsure, or will they be a mixture of both; feeling different inside, to what they project to those around them.

From the outset it was clear that traditional methods of engagement would not be suitable for this particular project and would perhaps inhibit the experience of the individual whilst limiting the number and type of experiences and activities offered by the facilitator.

An informal, fluid, undefined, unstructured, approach has been adopted to create a relaxed ‘non-clinical’ social environment, with a harmonious ambience, that promotes confidence in those encountering it; it’s okay to be there for how ever long you wish i.e. for ten minutes, five seconds or the whole afternoon.

It’s okay to try your hand at something; keyboards, juggling, animation, song writing, noise making, uni-cycle, pottery, drawing, painting, video editing, digital music sampling

It’s ok to just sit alone, enjoying the social hubbub that surrounds you.

It’s okay to chat with new friends, old friends or yourself.

It’s okay to just be.

Encouragement is gentle and never intrusive, whilst there has been no attempt to create a structured group with common goals, individuals often share their experiences or newfound skills with others, at times building small teams and partnerships with both social and creative aims and outcomes.

This approach has allowed each person to self determine their own experience, to build partnerships and levels of artistic and social engagement at a speed and level which is comfortable for them and, just as importantly, which suits how they are feeling on any particular day with regard to their mental well being.

The Spaces We Use:

Each hospital has provided accommodation which when compared to each other is unique in size, layout, location (in relation to wards), ambience, and accessibility.

The workshops in Stobhill take place in what is called the Lifeskills unit, there are three identifiable areas which the project utilises each week; the art room, the day room and the garden area which opens out from the dayroom, these generally facilitate the following activities respectively; video and animation, music and sound making, and circus skills.

The location is ideal, the unit is at the centre of the wards engaged, participants do not have to negotiate long distances to and from activities, adverse weather conditions, locked doors, or other factors which may inhibit those who are feeling low, tired, or lacking in motivation due to medication or poor mental well being. The day room comfortably accommodates the musical activities, the garden, when weather permits, is ideal for circus activities, socialising, chatting and smoking, on many occasions a vibrant social gathering has developed around the activities on hand (plans are afoot for a spring bar bq!).

The art room is well equipped for the purposes of animation and video, the room is open, bright and promotes a positive experience for the individual, the room is also full of stimulating art work and materials which encourage the flow of ideas and the growth of new ones.

The Southern General workshops take place in the occupational unit, two large vibrant rooms equipped with a potter's wheel, kiln, and a wide range of arts and crafts material. The space is ideal for the activities on offer, easily accommodating circus skills, sound and music production, video and animation and visual arts activities. The bench just outside the entrance is ideal for getting some fresh air and chatting informally about artistic endeavours and life experiences and events.

The location presents a slight problem, participants do have to negotiate several doors with coded locks, staff however are very positive in their approach to helping individuals access the unit.

Positives that are negatives that are positives:

As described each centre of activity is unique when compared; Stobhill feels very much to be an extension of the ward environment, this may benefit those who feel unable, or 'not up to', stepping away from the comfort and security offered by this setting, for others though, who are perhaps seeking a break from ward surroundings, the location may be too similar in its look or feel to the ward. In contrast, The Occupational Unit at The Southern General is pretty much the opposite in its look, ambience, physicality and location and thus creates similar feelings and responses to participants with contrary emotional or mental health states from each hospital.

Consideration must also to be given to the concerns of participants who may wish to work and socialise in an environment were they feel free, for a short while, from clinical assessment and observation.

Overall the flexible approach adopted by all involved, with regards to the utilising of the spaces available for staging workshops, continues to prove successful in its approach. A positive approach and willingness to work around and in hand with the attributes of each space has resulted in similar outcomes in both units: workshops continue to succeed in giving us all opportunity to smile, laugh, relax, day dream and perhaps, if just for an instant in some or a day, a week or forever in others; the opportunity to feel good about being.

Developments

Soon after we started the project we identified a number of problems that people were encountering when interacting with the computer equipment, some people had no previous IT experience and some people had extreme difficulty with mouse control, due to the effects of medication. Those with little experience of computers and especially older generations were afraid to try it out in case they would break something and those experiencing difficulty with the mouse became frustrated. Over time we adapted the equipment to counteract these issues, firstly we added a midi keyboard, which looks like any other traditional keyboard, this makes the concept of computer music more believable it also greatly reduces the use of the mouse we also made use of mixing desks, microphones and guitars, all of which are familiar tools for making music, even if you've never done it yourself. All of these familiar objects made the music sessions far more accessible to every one.

Artists Experiences

Over the last three months we have had the pleasure of working with some amazing people with incredible talent. Their progression in terms of technical skill has often been astounding; they have been able to reach extremely high standards in terms of sound engineering and video editing, these are people who have had no previous experience of either. One man that we are working with in Stobhill created three-dimensional text to compliment an animation he created using a very complex graphics programme in one afternoon. This same person a few weeks earlier was in the middle of an intense psychotic episode and was having difficulty communicating with others and although his thought processes were still occasionally fractured he was able to concentrate for long periods of time on something that engaged with his high level of intelligence. Members of staff from Stobhill have commented that it is unusual for this person to engage in activities.

It takes some people a long time to decide to engage with the workshops; usually people will stay for only five minutes on their first visit but will return each week, and, each week, staying a bit longer. Slowly, and in their own time, they will start to join in with the workshops and develop confidence in their abilities.

Specific Cases

Around four weeks prior to the Christmas a man was brought over from Leverndale to the Southern General, he has been a long-term patient for around twenty years. He was brought over because the staff thought that the music workshops would appeal to him and this was certainly true. He is a talented songwriter and musician, however over the years he has played less and less, after a few weeks we were able to record one of his songs, we invited Andy, a musician who works regularly with Theatre NEMO, to listen to the recording, afterwards he requested to come along and meet the man, this was organised for the last session of the year and the resulting “jam session” was, in a word, amazing. This encouraged others to join in with singing and requesting songs; it was a lovely way to end the year. The musician from Leverndale has now been revisiting his song writing past and is slowly bringing to the present that which has been lost over time, an ambition he had long given up on, his resulting excitement is contagious and there have been a few emotional moments shared by the whole group through the sharing of his songs.

This is a good example of how our way of working, with a flexible structure, can help to create links and opportunities that would certainly not exist if it were a traditionally structured music lesson.

It is important to note that most arts projects follow a similar pattern, where an artist would work with a specific group over a specified time period. There are many reasons that this pattern can not work in this situation, for example, patients will often be in for only a short period of time and only feel well enough to attend during the last two weeks of their stay in hospital, so nearly every session will have new faces and many from previous sessions will have been discharged. A lot of people who are experiencing psychosis, or particularly manic stages of their illness, will find themselves unable to cope with group work, we have also noticed that these same people will often have very specific ideas about what they want to create, whether this is a piece of music or a story for an animation. Because of these factors we have adopted an extremely relaxed way of working, and we allow ourselves to be led each week by the participants.