Art in Mind: Evaluating the impact of participatory arts on improved mental wellbeing.

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November 2015  DPAFM 15/1
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Abstract

There is increasing recognition of the role that participating in the arts can have on improved mental wellbeing and increased confidence and self-esteem, however participatory (community) arts programmes are not yet fully valued by health professionals. This paper explores the evaluation methods of visual arts programmes in the UK and highlights the emphasis traditionally placed on outcomes and impacts and the lack of arts-based methodologies being adopted within arts and health research. The use of an arts-based research approach, called participatory mapping, combined with semi-structured interviews, was adopted as an innovative and creative approach to qualitative enquiry. Learners on an arts and wellbeing course were invited to create a visual map of their experiences on the course and the impact that being creative had on their personal wellbeing.

The mapping session was observed, and then followed by individual interviews with each learner, using their map as a prompt for discussion. Four main themes emerged: place/space, involvement with others, learning and achievement. The most revealing of these themes was the importance placed by learners on the creation of a safe place to be with other people with experience of mental health issues and come together to be creative. The research demonstrates the potential of using an innovative arts-based methodology as a means of enhancing the quality and depth of data production and analysis within arts-based research and evaluation. Used in combination with more traditional interviewing techniques, the adoption of an arts-based approach to the evaluation of participatory arts programmes could provide a paradigmatic shift in the way in which such initiatives are monitored and as such offer a more creative way of evidencing the impact of participatory arts on improved mental wellbeing.
About the Author

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Contents
Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 7
Arts and Wellbeing .............................................................................................................. 8
Arts and Health .................................................................................................................... 9
Participatory (Community) Arts ......................................................................................... 9
Participatory Research ....................................................................................................... 10
Participatory Mapping ....................................................................................................... 11
Arts-Based Participatory Research .................................................................................... 12
Methodologies .................................................................................................................... 13
Background of Participatory Methods .............................................................................. 13
Participatory Practice ......................................................................................................... 14
Visual Research Methods ................................................................................................. 14
Semi-Structured Interviews ............................................................................................... 15
The Research ..................................................................................................................... 15
Research Ethics .................................................................................................................. 15
The Mapping Session ........................................................................................................ 16
The Interviews .................................................................................................................... 17
Thematic Content Analysis .............................................................................................. 19
The Art of Discovery .......................................................................................................... 20
Warm-up Exercise ............................................................................................................. 20
The Mapping Exercise and Initial Themes ....................................................................... 20
The Maps ........................................................................................................................... 21
Concerns Surrounding ‘Getting it Right’ .......................................................................... 21
Working Together ............................................................................................................. 22
Exploration of the Creative Experience .......................................................................... 22
Place/Space ......................................................................................................................... 23
Time for me (to be creative) ............................................................................................. 24
Flow .................................................................................................................................... 24
An Arts and Wellbeing Course ......................................................................................... 25
Lack of statutory provision ............................................................................................... 25
Involvement with Others ................................................................................................. 26
Reduced Isolation ............................................................................................................... 26
Inspiring Creativity ........................................................................................................... 26
Art in Mind

Emily Bradfield

Being with others with mental health challenges ........................................... 27
Learning .............................................................................................................. 27
New art forms and techniques ........................................................................... 28
Being Creative ................................................................................................... 28
Challenges ......................................................................................................... 29
Achievement ....................................................................................................... 30
Aspirations for the future .................................................................................. 31
Art Club ............................................................................................................ 31
Reflections .......................................................................................................... 31
Conclusion ......................................................................................................... 34
Bibliography ..................................................................................................... 35
Notes .................................................................................................................. 38
Acknowledgements

Thanks goes to the learners from Cambridge Community Arts’ (CCA) Arts and Wellbeing course who participated in the participatory mapping and interview sessions, who should be acknowledged due to their acceptance of the researcher, the methodologies adopted and their consent to being filmed, quoted and named in this paper. As well as the learners, thanks goes to Jane Rich, Director of CCA, who made the research process possible and was encouraging and supportive throughout the research sessions and subsequent interviews and follow-up. Finally, the film maker, Toby Peters, of Marmalade Panic Films, should be acknowledged for this unobtrusive filming, empathetic nature and words of encouragement.

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Discussion Papers in Arts and Festivals Management is an occasional series produced by Arts and Festivals Management De Montfort University. It aims to provide an opportunity for the open discussion of issues, debates and theories pertaining to this area of study.

Series editors: Chris Newbold & Jennie Jordan

DPAFM 2015/1

Arts and Festivals Management
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Leicester LE1 9BH

Introduction

Over fifty years ago German playwright Bertholt Brecht said that “Every art contributes to the greatest art of all, the act of living” (1964, cited in White, 2009a, p.39). Art by its very nature can help promote positive mental health in everyone. This paper discusses the impact of a participatory arts programme on improved mental wellbeing. While there is evidence of the efficacy of participatory arts and associated personal outcomes, Stickley (2012) believes that in order for creative approaches in mental health to be more valued in practice, more arts and health work needs to be researched and evidenced. Similarly, White (2009a) stated that he “would like to see the benefits of participation in the arts recognised more widely by heath and social care professionals” (p.37). While art therapies are widely recognised, the many community arts projects which are “attempting to establish a continuum of support for people with mental health problems to improve both their wellbeing and creative skills” are not receiving the recognition they deserve (p.37).

People who benefit from participatory arts programmes are often those trying to re-engage after a period of crisis, though they may simply be looking for inspiration or to re-visit old interests. However, community initiatives are predominantly assessed in terms of outcomes and impacts, rather than by analysis of the role of participation in creative activities as a catalyst for personal transformation (Ramsden et al, 2011). If “the ultimate goal of research in the creative arts is understanding how to best meet the needs of the people who use its services” then using a research method, based on creative activity to which the participants are accustomed, could be an innovative way in which to gather data and measure impact (Spaniol, 2004, para.2).

A review of existing arts-based research has shown that, in spite of a variety of qualitative methodological approaches being adopted, there has been little research on participatory arts initiatives which have used an arts-based methodology. Similarly, participatory action research models which empower participants to produce and analyse their own experiences have been deployed in developing countries, but are not currently being utilised in evidencing the benefits of participatory arts programmes (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). Nonetheless, several aspects are common to both qualitative research and the arts, most significantly “the subjective nature of human experience” (Boydell et al, 2012, para.3). Stickley (2012) supports this by stating that “the very nature of art demands that the focus of research inquiry be more upon the individual’s personal experiences, perceptions and unique expression of their inner world” (p.213).

All participants involved in this research had some experience of mental health challenges, including schizophrenia, depression and anxiety. Their motivations for attending the arts and
wellbeing course varied from a desire to meet and work with people, to an interest in trying something new, or as a stepping stone towards integration back into the community after being socially isolated. Research was carried out towards the end of the group’s thirty week arts and wellbeing course, throughout which they had experimented with a range of painting and drawing techniques. The first session involved a participatory visual mapping activity which allowed learners to reflect on their experience of the course.

In order to gain a richer understanding of each individual’s experience of participating in the arts, semi-structured interviews were carried out with each learner following the participatory mapping session. While interviews involved some discussion of the individual’s experience of mental health challenges, learners were encouraged to describe what the benefits of participating on the course had been for them. Harvey & Taylor (2013) support this approach, arguing that when measuring health and wellbeing we must “involve people in a meaningful dialogue about their perceptions of need” and the impact that participating in the arts has had on their quality of life (p.2). However, according to Boydell et al (2012) including the arts in qualitative research can provide a better opportunity for “enhanced engagement of participants…and a method for generating data beyond the scope of most interview-based methods” (para.1).

Stickley (2012) believes that researchers “need to be prepared to experiment with creative methodologies and have the faith that the imagination can inform us” (p.214). This paper therefore demonstrates a pioneering approach to an evaluation of the impact of a participatory arts programme on improved mental wellbeing, by combining traditional semi-structured interviews with an innovative participatory mapping activity. The group worked together on a visual representation of their experience on the course, which was then used as a source for discussion in the subsequent conversations. The triangulation of research methodologies empowered the individuals “by giving them a voice and facilitating their reflection on conditions and issues that matter to them” through the use of visual data production (Boydell et al, 2012, para.3).

Arts and Wellbeing
An exhibition entitled Read Between the Lines held at Belfast City Hall in April 2015, showed a collection of prints by artist Pat Ross, who used drawing to depict his struggles with schizophrenia. In an article in the Belfast Telegraph, Ross described that when he was ill words failed him.

“I couldn’t capture how I was feeling and could only communicate it through my art, which helped me relieve my feelings during my illness. It is freeing to get them down on paper.
Even in the depths of my illness I would get a good buzz after drawing” (Ross, quoted in Belfast Telegraph, 2015).

Arts and Health
Over recent years there has been an increasing appreciation of the impact of participation in the arts on health and wellbeing. The National Alliance for Arts, Health and Wellbeing (NAAHW, no date given) describe ‘Arts in Health’ as the “effect that active engagement can have on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities”. ‘Arts in Health’ can be broadly divided into five areas of intervention: Arts in the Health Care Environment, Participatory Arts Programmes, Medical Training and Medical Humanities, Art Therapy and Arts on Prescription (NAAHW, n/d).

While most people are familiar with the idea of Art Therapy as an alternative to more traditional ‘talking’ therapies, awareness of alternative interventions is less well recognised. However, according to the National Alliance, the integration of ‘Arts in Health’ has increased over the past 30 years, as art exhibitions in hospitals and understanding of wellbeing and arts activity in medical training become more widespread.

In addition non-clinical, arts-based approaches such as ‘Arts on Prescription’ schemes, or the more generically termed ‘Social Prescribing’, are being developed. In contrast to traditional approaches towards improving mental ill health, such schemes use the arts to “see and value the patient as a whole person, not just an illness or symptom” (NAAHW, 2012, p.1). Similarly, according to Donnellan (2004) one avenue for improving the mental wellbeing of communities is by increasing participation and social inclusion through greater access to arts and creativity.

Taggart and Stewart-Brown (n/d) define mental wellbeing as synonymous with positive mental health and relate it to both feelings (happiness, satisfaction...) and psychological functioning (self-confidence, self-esteem...). As awareness of mental wellbeing increases, so does the range of interventions aimed at improving wellbeing and the integration of wellbeing into local and national government agendas (Fujiwara & Mackerron, 2015). Due to limitations of this research, the focus of this paper is on participatory visual arts programmes.

Participatory (Community) Arts
An often underplayed component of ‘Arts in Health’ is the plethora of participatory (community) arts projects across the country which encourage individuals to “take responsibility for their own health” by engaging in art production (RSPH, 2013, p.4). However, while initiatives which build confidence and self-esteem are essential in promoting mentally healthy communities, a study by the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC) highlighted the lack of research into the contribution of community-based arts organisations and the impact of participatory arts activities for the promotion of mental wellbeing (Ramsden et al, 2011). According to Scott (2012) the acquisition
of new skills and increased confidence can lead to improved wellbeing. This argument is supported by Sagan (2015a) who describes how voices born out in narratives with artists with experience of mental health challenges “do not so much illustrate as deliver the argument of art practice and improved mental wellbeing” (p.xv). Her research demonstrates that art can be used for “expression or ejection of destructiveness or misery as much as for hope and repair” (p.xv).

A guide to community-centred approaches to health and wellbeing highlights the importance of community-centred approaches in “promoting equity and increasing people’s control over their health and lives” (South, 2015, p.4). However, the briefing document supports the TSRC study results by confirming that the current evidence base does not “fully reflect the rich diversity of community practice in England” (p.5). The guide encourages local government, the NHS and third sector groups to recognise the scope for action within a range of community methods which can be used to improve both physical and mental health. White (2009b) highlights the importance of developing evidence which demonstrates how “value structures are formed from participatory arts activities and how they can impact on a social model of health” (p.202). For White, the most successful participatory arts projects are those which “lay down a social pathway to channel awakened enthusiasms” (p.204).

Everitt and Hamilton (2003) describe community arts projects as “art for conversation” distinguishing them from “art for therapy” (p.48). This distinction implies a level of equality amongst participants and facilitators and uses art to “mark moments, express feelings and celebrate” in an attempt to understand direct personal experience (p.50). Community arts projects use creativity as a vehicle to address personal development and wellbeing and build self-confidence and self-esteem - “If you can succeed in this you can succeed in other things” (p.65).

Moreover, Goldie (2007) believes that the arts provide

“a non-threatening medium through which those with experience of mental health problems can tell their stories and connect with others on a personal level” (p.38).

Participatory Research
While traditional methods of health research have focused on “knowledge for understanding”, Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) believe that participatory research focuses more on “knowledge for action” with an emphasis on a bottom-up approach involving reflection and action generated by both researcher and participants (p.1667). Such approaches were first developed in the 1970s when ‘mental maps’ were developed by geographers as a means of allowing people to visualise their spatial environments.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) was developed considerably in the early 1990s by social science researchers who wanted to “create knowledge that was directly useful to specific groups
of people especially those that experienced discrimination and oppression” (Spaniol, 2004). While PAR draws on qualitative research methods including focus groups and interviews, the emphasis is on visualisation which “provides opportunities for local people to explore, analyse and represent their perspectives in their own terms” and “reveal[s] much that is masked by verbal communication alone” (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995, p.1671). The emphasis is on the process rather than the outcomes through its capacity to empower participants to engage in the research process and develop solutions to local problems.

While participatory methods have primarily been used for research into notions of place and community, they can be expanded to incorporate techniques of “performance, art and storytelling” (p.1671). According to a report by PraXis arts and health (2012) at a time when there is increasing recognition of the importance of evaluating arts and health projects, participatory research methods can provide a more inclusive approach. The report highlights the difficulty in evaluating arts and health work due to the reflective nature of the activities alongside the complexity of adopting traditional evaluation methods in the context of arts interventions. Indeed, the suitability of participatory research methods within arts and health does not come without its own difficulties, considering that evaluation is often conducted within complex and potentially sensitive environments (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995). Nonetheless, White (2009b) argued that participatory social-mapping models could enable researchers to “gather data from a diverse sample of participants” and help to produce more rigorous evidence base (p.223).

**Participatory Mapping**

By the 1990s, participatory mapping had become a well established part of the PAR paradigm, which enables participants to work together to produce a visual image which can be used to explore social problems or questions. Participatory mapping empowers the participants by allowing them to define and visually represent situations which are important to them. It is participatory by nature, through the opportunities it provides for participants to share observations and stories as the map is produced.

“... a community-generated process of knowledge creation; it invites dialogue and enables the reflection of individual and shared experiences. Participatory mapping is designed to overcome many social boundaries by focussing on visual and informal information and enabling participants to contribute ideas easily and without pressure...” (Pathways through participation, 2010, p.11).

A participatory mapping approach was adopted by the Circuit group in Cambridge, as a means of evaluating the experience of group members. Circuit is a programme run by Tate which aims to connect “young people and galleries to spark change” (Circuit, n/d). The focus of the evaluation was on creating simple methods of reflection and making the process fun. The adoption of a participatory mapping approach provided a useful tool for breaking down barriers “between the
‘expert’ researcher and the ‘subject’ of the research” (Chambers, 2006, quoted in Pathways through participation, 2010, p.12).

Throughout the development of a large paper ‘map’ participants’ conversations provide an important element in the mapping process, as they reflect and evaluate their own concepts and themes and discuss them with other participants.

“Maps are more than pieces of paper. They are stories, conversations, lives and songs lived out in a place...” (Rambaldi, 2005, cited in Pathways through participation, 2010, p.1).

By using a visual method participants are able to express their ideas in an enjoyable format. Both the exchange of ideas during the mapping exercise and the reflections afterwards allow participants to explore their own perceptions of the activity within the context of their experience of participation.

**Arts-Based Participatory Research**

If creativity, as described by Everitt and Hamilton (2003), is about learning and discovering and can help develop wellbeing, then it seems appropriate to incorporate visual imagery into arts and wellbeing research. Rather than be simply an adjunct to traditional methods of qualitative research, arts-based research can offer “…art as a tool for integration, rather than just an activity” (Boydell et al, 2012, para.3). This argument is supported by Leavy (2009) who believes that art is intrinsically interpretative and that involving participants in creating art, which ultimately serves as data, gives participants a voice and facilitates reflection. The visual image draws attention to the interpretative process of production and “has the capacity to highlight differences and commonalities and to promote dialogue and problem-solving” (Leavy, 2009, p.229).

Clacherty (2006) adopted a PAR approach in *The Suitcase Project* which supported refugee children in South Africa, affected by experience of war and displacement, by allowing them to explore their journeys and experiences through a creative mixed-media approach. By exploring their experiences through developing a suitcase of memories the children were able to explore their potential by responding intuitively to the unconventional art tools. This created an emotional distance, which would not have been possible through traditional talking therapy. As described above, a central principle to art-based research methods is an emphasis on the individual’s process of making, with no interference by facilitators. Clacherty highlighted the importance of allowing the children to play with the materials and reinforcing the idea that there is no right way of working. Indeed, she described how the level of healing could be measured by “the extent of engagement with materials” (p.124). Furthermore, the springboard effect described by Leavy can also be seen in *The Suitcase Project* with the artwork being used to facilitate story-telling, as children were invited to describe the story behind their suitcase.
Indeed, within qualitative research, reflection and empathy are vital components of the research process. Butler-Kisber (2010) highlights the need for empathetic understanding and trust between researcher and participants within phenomenological inquiry.

“the ability to enter into the lived experience and perspective of the other person, to stand not only in their shoes, but also in the emotional body – to see the world with their eyes. This requires not only empathy for the other, but the ability to make an imaginative and intuitive leap into their world” (Hawkings, 1988, p.63, quoted in Butler-Kisber, 2010, p.52).

Butler-Kisber also describes how the use of other experimental material, including artwork, diaries or drawings can provide a stimulus for discussion and offer a richer understanding of the features and commonalities of the individuals’ experiences. In addition, the iterative and reflective process of arts-based research should be emphasised. In contrast to a prescriptive, scientific structured interviewing approach, qualitative enquiry should be viewed as an ongoing process which develops throughout the research rather than being clinically agreed before the start.

Methodologies

Background of Participatory Methods
Over the past decade there has been “a surge of participatory and community-based art projects all over the world” (Macbeth, 2015). Lowe (2012) defines participatory arts practice as that which “involves an artist working with at least one other person to take part in a process that the artist facilitates” (p.3). The form, content and aims of these projects differ greatly, ranging from those with the purpose of facilitating creative inquiry to others which use “a group of people as material for a creative process that they define” (p.3). Several approaches have combined participatory action research with art production, particularly of note in work within indigenous and/or outsider communities.

Participatory visual methods include a number of creative forms of communication and expression including photography, visual arts, drama and film, which encourage “participants to reflect, learn and talk about issues which are not openly discussed” (Macbeth, 2015). Visual arts-based methods are “a specific set of practices for incorporating visual art into the research process”, such as photo elicitation which uses photographs as a prompt to accessing knowledge during an interview; and photovoice which allows participants to take photographs within public health research to aid community improvement (Leavy, 2009, p.227). Similarly ethnodrama provides an alternative method for communicating health-related issues and creates a voice for marginalised groups through performance (Leavy, 2009).
Participatory Practice

To ensure that arts-based research is participatory, some of the control over the image-making must be handed over to the participants themselves (Richards, 2011). Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2010) describe “the notion of the visual not as ‘data’, but as a collaborative medium for the generation of knowledge and critique” (p.82). They go on to explain that a focus on images can “provide research participants with a means by which to express complex experiences in an indirect, metaphorical or less threatening manner” which may reveal more depth than traditional interviewing techniques” (p.83). Within art theory there are two main concepts in participatory arts practice: ‘Relational Aesthetics’, which uses art to explore new relationships between people; and ‘Dialogical Aesthetics’, where art is used to enable people to communicate and see their environment differently (Lowe, 2012). *Cambridge Community Arts*, the partner organisation for this research, has adopted a ‘Dialogical Aesthetics’ approach to its community arts’ programming which allows learners to “explore and reflect on the narratives of their lives” and also informed the research methodologies for this research (p.7).

Visual Research Methods

A participatory visual approach was chosen for this research because of the nature of the method which allows participants to “*show* [...] how they perceive the world, rather than just *tell* [...] in a focus group, interview or survey” (Richards, 2011, p.1). At a basic level, this approach offers an alternative to prescriptive, ‘top down’ models of research, by engaging the research participants in the creation of their own visual data and giving them “a sense of ownership over the research process” (p.7). The use of visual methods further aids participation because images are more accessible than an academic or scientific approach, particularly in the context of a community-based arts and wellbeing course. By using media with which the participants are familiar to construct the data, the disconnect between the arts activity of the group and the collection of qualitative data is removed.

In an interview on 6 July 2015, Jane Rich, Director of *Cambridge Community Arts* explained that they have been using WEMWBS, the Warwick and Edinburgh Wellbeing Scale, to assess improvements in learners’ wellbeing. However she believes that while such questionnaires provide some basic information, with other methods such as informal conversations “you get much more in depth feedback”. While she had not previously come across participatory visual mapping as an evaluation tool, she felt that

“It was a really powerful engagement tool...it gave them the time to think whilst they were actually mapping and drawing in a quite different way. I think it allowed them to really think about it and we got a much better understanding of their own understanding of what they got out of the course”.
Semi-Structured Interviews

Traditional discussions on the way an interview should be carried out were questioned by interactionist sociologists, such as Howard Becker and feminists such as Ann Oakley, in the early 1970s. They suggested that rather than a distance between interviewer and interviewee, interviews should be more conversational in nature (Westmarland, 2001). Moreover, feminist researchers, influenced by Oakley, rejected the word ‘subject’, believing that involving the participants in the research facilitated a more equal relationship, which in turn increased the validity of the research. Such approaches to interview techniques offer “a unique way into thick data of ontological depth which can offer a glimpse of meaning making” (Sagan, 2015a, p.9). Semi-structured interviews were particularly relevant to this research, with people with experiences of mental health challenges, as they can convey a “deeper feeling for or more emotional closeness to the persons studied” (Jayaratne, 1983, cited in Westmarland, 2001, para.21).

The Research

The research for this paper was carried out in partnership with Cambridge Community Arts (CCA), a community arts organisation which uses “the creative process as a tool to empower individuals by tapping into their own creative resources and improving their mental wellbeing” (CCA, n/d). While the organisation offers a range of creative courses including photography, music and drama, learners from the Arts and Wellbeing course were invited to participate in the research, which is focussed on the visual arts. The group had been working together on the course for nine months, following a programme which involved experimenting with a range of drawing and painting techniques.

The qualitative research methodology adopted was based on the structure of an initial mapping session, followed up by a second session to carry out individual semi-structured interviews. In actuality the second session provided the opportunity for learners to finish their visual maps, whilst interviews were conducted in another room. While the interviews were conducted with seven learners, only five were present at the mapping session the first week. Therefore the maps produced by the two who were not present for both sessions were limited. In spite of this, it was considered important to include their comments and maps in this research, since they had both been active participants of the course and therefore formed an integral part of the group dynamics.

Research Ethics

“Part of ethical research practice is ensuring that all participants are kept safe, are supported and have the opportunity to consent, withhold or withdraw their participation” (Farrant, 2014b, p.43). Furthermore, in order to deliver an ethical research project “informed consent is dependent on the appropriate communication...of clear and accurate information about [the] research study”
All participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form, in advance of the session, so that they were aware of the aims of the research and its relevance in terms of their own self-reflection and evaluation. Each learner signed the consent form to confirm that they understood the purposes of the research, confidentiality and agreed to be filmed throughout the activity.

A film maker was commissioned to enable the researcher to make observations on the interactions and conversations after the mapping session and analyse the interviews. This ensured that the researcher was able to facilitate the session and interact with the learners, rather than by sitting on the sidelines observing. Within the context of mental health research, the production of a natural and safe environment is of utmost importance. According to Margrove et al (2013a) this is best achieved by “providing relaxing, welcoming art groups in community venues” (p.29). Previous workshops on the course, which was held at a community centre, had also been filmed so the learners were already accustomed to this. Two of the learners did not wish to be filmed during the interviews, therefore audio recordings were made and their maps were filmed. The unobtrusive nature of how the film maker worked was of particular note.1

The Mapping Session
The mapping session took place as an evaluative workshop within the programme of the course. The aim of the mapping was to provide learners with a visual means of reflection on their experience of participating on the course; and to consider what impact engaging in different activities and the topics addressed had had on their mental wellbeing. As the course was drawing to a close, the reflective nature of the mapping exercise fitted logically into the course schedule and therefore was not viewed by participants as something out of the ordinary. Learners were free to choose from the materials with which they had experimented throughout the course so that they felt confident using them (Richards, 2011). Similarly, workshops had been delivered by variety of arts practitioners and therefore the group were used to seeing new faces and engaging in different artistic techniques. The session took place during the Mental Health Foundation’s Mental Health Awareness Week and started with an introduction to the aims and objectives of the research. Learners were reminded of a number of key issues: they did not have to participate if they did not want to, they could stop at any point if they felt uncomfortable and that they should use the experience as an opportunity to reflect on their journey.

An image of a back-pack was shown to the learners, as a metaphor for their psychological journey throughout the course, inspired by The Suitcase Project. The use of visual metaphors is supported by Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2010) who believe that metaphors can encourage more reticent participants to express themselves, by stimulating engagement and reflection. Learners were prompted to consider any negativities which had been metaphorically removed since
attending the course, and any positivities which had formed part of their improved mental
wellbeing. Following the introduction to the research, learners were reminded of some of the
topics and different art forms they had engaged with throughout the course. These were
presented on coloured paper to ensure consistency with the visual aspect of the methodology.
Stickley (2012) highlights the relevance of qualitative research in arts activities due to the ability to
make the research fun and artistic in the process.

As noted by Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2010) when using a visual methodology it is vital that
the rationale for the use of visual mapping is provided to the participants. Therefore the
researcher ensured that learners understood that the ‘process’ of creating the map was the
object of the exercise, more than creating a perfect piece of artwork. The learners were asked to
reflect on their own journey since the start of the course, considering activities which they had
enjoyed and the emotions they associated with these activities. As a warm-up before starting to
put pen (or paint, or collage) to paper, learners were asked to write their favourite activity, best
emotion and ‘what next?’ in terms of their artistic journey, on three separate pieces of paper and
were then asked to share their thoughts with the group.

Before starting the mapping exercise learners were asked if they had any questions. One
participant said that she had not been involved on the course since the beginning and therefore
did not know whether her input would be relevant to the research. She was reassured that each
person’s map was a personal visualisation of their own experience and therefore that her
experience, however limited, was indeed relevant and valuable. An emphasis was placed on the
fact that there was no right or wrong way of approaching the exercise and learners were
encouraged to undertake their map in their own way, so that no-one should feel nervous about
making a mistake (Clacherty, 2006).

The learners spent the next few hours absorbed in creating their artwork on one large sheet of
paper which ensured that the mapping was a collaborative activity. The researcher engaged in
conversations when appropriate but ensured that the session felt like one of their normal weekly
workshops, so that learners did not feel they were in exam conditions, in order to lessen the fear
of failure. The researcher felt that this was particularly important as it would facilitate the most
natural and honest maps from each learner, as they were able to fully express themselves. In
addition, creating visual data rather than written evaluation, was less onerous for the learners and
the data created was therefore extremely personal (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2010).

The Interviews
The semi-structured interviews were held one week after the initial mapping session. This allowed
the learners and researcher to reflect on the mapping activity, before discussing the individual’s
experience of attending the course. Since the learners had not finished their maps in the first
session, the second session allowed them to continue with their work. Furthermore, two learners, who had not been present in the first session, were able to participate in the mapping activity too, even if not in such great depth. The researcher asked one of the learners to explain to the two additional learners the aims and objectives of the exercise. This was an opportunity for the researcher to gain an insight into how this learner had understood the introduction presented by the researcher the previous week. It also gave the learners ownership of the activity, which according to Richards (2011) makes participants more likely to invest time in the research.

The interviews were carried out in a separate room so that they could be conducted and filmed in privacy and without interruption. Learners in the other room continued with their maps at this stage. While the room was set up somewhat like a film set, to ensure a high quality film could be produced, the experience of the film maker ensured that once the conversation started, neither interviewer nor interviewee were distracted and were able to have an open and honest discussion. Furthermore, for two learners who did not want to be filmed, the film maker was able to film the map and record audio, without making the learner feel uncomfortable. The room was set up with the individual’s map (which was cut out from the group’s map) on a table in front of the interviewer and interviewee, to ensure that the map formed the focal point for discussion.

The researcher had prepared an outline for the discussions, but was aware that due to different individual’s mental health issues, formal questioning would not be appropriate. Rather than ‘interviews’ as such, the session allowed the researcher to gather rich, qualitative data through in depth conversation with each learner, based around ideas on improved mental health, reduced social isolation, improved self-confidence and development of creative and artistic skills. Furthermore, the maps provided “means of creatively explaining subtle or challenging aspects of personal experience” such as personal development and the role of the course in providing a ‘safe’ space for creativity (Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2010, p.87).

Harvey and Taylor (2013) support the importance of developing a meaningful dialogue when measuring health and wellbeing. Research into wellbeing is not just about the data, but more importantly is about facilitating a conversation which allows individuals to describe their perceptions of need and development. “Change in quality of life may be the most important outcome for many enduring conditions” and cannot be measured by quantitative methods (p.29). While some learners needed a relatively structured format for discussion, with the researcher asking a lot of questions to prompt reflections on the individual’s map, the majority openly led the discussions and were forthcoming in describing their experiences. It is interesting to note that the film maker commented on the significance of trust between the researcher and the participants, and the manner in which the researcher enabled this sense of trust through building a rapport with learners from the outset.
By basing the discussions around the visual maps that each learner had created, the researcher was able to naturally delve into the meaning and significance of the map produced, which according to Savin-Baden and Howell Major (2010) can lead to a “more personalised form of engagement” (p.84). This approach demonstrates one of the benefits of adopting a participatory visual method as it revealed how the learners chose to represent themselves and how much they wished to divulge about their lives (Richards, 2011). Measurement of wellbeing needs to be based on outcomes rather than outputs, and therefore qualitative methods which involve engagement with the learners were more suited to this research than numerical statistics on number of sessions, number of participants etc. The use of semi-structured interviews was also in keeping with the qualitative nature of the research and provided learners with time to talk about their experiences, which were prompted by open-ended questions when required.

**Thematic Content Analysis**

Data was interpreted using thematic content analysis, considered to be one of the most common methods of data analysis within qualitative research. This approach used open coding, which involved collating words and phrases from dialogue amongst the learners, and in subsequent interviews with the researcher, which referred to their experience of participating in the arts and the impact of these experiences on their mental wellbeing. Any discursive data where the learner had gone ‘off topic’ was not included in the coding (Burnard et al, 2008). Similar categories were then grouped together to highlight commonalities (or individualities). The analysis was an iterative process in itself, as the researcher found that using a spreadsheet to collate themed data was not consistent with the visual methodology of the research. Therefore a visual mind-mapping approach was adopted in order to carry out the content analysis, which enabled the researcher to visually represent content and emerging themes.

Stickley (2012) acknowledges that researchers in arts and mental health are “inevitably sympathetic to the arts and believe in the projects they are researching”, however all research is biased in some form and therefore “transparency in the research process is what gives the research validity” (p.ix). Furthermore, he believes that the more evidence that is produced on arts and health, the more the validity of the research base will grow. Interpretation was carried out through systematic and thorough reading and re-reading of data, and watching and re-watching of film footage to identify the themes which emerged. The findings have been written up using a combined findings and discussion approach to ensure that each category or theme is supported by relevant research, where possible (Burnard et al, 2008).
The Art of Discovery

In addition to the positive experience of art making itself, interpretation of the data leads to an insightful discovery of the importance of the creative space, which can enable a sense of belonging, routine and inspiration (Stickley, 2012). The indented quotes, unless referenced, are direct quotes from learners which provide representative examples of the emerging themes.

Warm-up Exercise

“[Art gives you] permission to be obsessive, but in a good way.”

All seven learners engaged in the warm-up exercise, by writing their reflective words onto separate pieces of coloured paper or post-it notes. However, one of the learners, the only one to use post-it notes, kept what she had written hidden as she was concerned about it not being right. Her reaction to this simple activity immediately revealed some of her anxieties, or lack of confidence. She did however share her reflections with the group, along with the other four learners who were present for the first mapping session.

The initial reflections in this short exercise revealed the unique impact which each person’s participation on the course had, in terms of different activities individuals enjoyed, the feelings they had experienced and their aspirations for the future. Some research shows concerns around the success of community-based projects in facilitating links for the group into the wider community. Similarly, participation in the arts is viewed by some as a hobby “rather than serious pathways to recovery, employment and re-integration” (Cowling, 2004, p.85). However for most of the learners, many of whom had been socially isolated, their ideas about next steps demonstrate aspirations of re-integration and moving on.

These aspirations support evidence which shows that “participation in the arts can provide a non-threatening and alternative way to engagement” (ACE, 2007, p11). Learners openly revealed how their own participation in the arts had made them feel. This freedom of expression supports the methodological approach adopted in this research. In spite of the range of individual experiences and aspirations, which became apparent through these initial reflections, some commonalities started to emerge.

The Mapping Exercise and Initial Themes

The learners did not take long to engage in reflecting on their journeys since beginning the course and immediately started to create a map of their own experiences. What was interesting from the outset was the individuality in both the media learners chose and their approach to putting pen to paper. Materials ranged from oil pastels to paint, collage to pencil. It was also interesting to witness the diversity of interpretations on how to approach the mapping exercise that learners took. While some members of the group were eager simply to create, others were keen to take
instructions literally. For a couple of learners there was a definite concern over doing it ‘right’, in spite of the researcher’s emphasis during the introduction that there was no wrong or right way of mapping their journey.

The Maps
The maps ranged from literal visualisations of the different activities which learners had participated in and creative expression using their preferred art form, to more personal representations of the impact that the course on their feelings and personal development;

“Thoughts, thoughts that came into my mind before I came...and probably the stuckness that I came with. Now I don’t know if all of this kind of reflects that, because I haven’t done, you know, panic in big letters going out...”

In the interviews, when describing the rationale behind their maps, the honesty and trust of learners was overwhelming, as they described some extremely personal experiences without hesitation. Participatory mapping provides a useful tool within a mental health environment as it “is designed to overcome many social boundaries by focussing on visual and informal information and enabling participants to contribute ideas easily and without pressure” (Pathways through Participation, 2010, p.12).

Concerns Surrounding ‘Getting it Right’
One learner in particular was concerned that, since she had not attended the course since the beginning, her map would not fit into the research. However, once she had started writing it became clear that it was the thought process around how to approach the mapping which she was struggling with. Nonetheless, Yvette remained concerned that she still was not doing it right. She commented that she had included negative thoughts in her map, which was made up of a series of words describing her emotions before coming and after she had attended her first session.

In actuality, she may have produced the most insightful map of the group as she literally mapped out how participating on the course had impacted on her wellbeing, and described her emotions at different stages of her involvement. During the interview when the researcher remarked on these fears about getting it right, the learner responded;

“And I remember thinking thank you for saying that because you know art for me isn’t just this enjoyable little hobby. It does have a lot of meaning and I have been through real ups and downs with it.”

This is another example of the benefit of using a visual methodology as it “invites dialogue and enables the reflection of [the] individual” (Pathways through Participation, 2010, pg.11).
Furthermore it highlights the significance of each individual’s experience, as each learner reflected on their journey based on their own knowledge and experience.

**Working Together**

Although individuals worked intensely on their own maps there was a strong sense of support amongst the learners as they gave each other ideas and reassurance throughout the mapping session. People asked each other how they were getting on, what they were doing, how they could resolve any concerns, and there was a strong sense of collaboration;

> "It’s been important to work on the big piece of paper as we’ve been working together."

According to Emmel (2008) participatory group maps are best done with homogenous groups. The sense of collaboration amongst the learners was facilitated by the researcher setting up the room so that learners were in a contiguous setting, working on the same piece of paper, rather than on their own individual sheets.

**Exploration of the Creative Experience**

The mapping exercise was filmed to enable the researcher to observe interactions amongst the group and hear conversations between learners which could not be observed or heard during the activity itself. Furthermore, the “tangibility of the map is an important feature” as it allowed the researcher and learners to discuss features of the map in the subsequent interview (Emmel, 2008, p.3). The interviews were also filmed. The films were used by the researcher to analyse and interpret the commentary provided by the learners, which is an essential aspect of participatory mapping, considering that maps should always be “understood with the meanings and explanations given to them by the participants who produced them” (p.7).

The OECD guidelines to measuring subjective wellbeing (2013) define subjective wellbeing as “how people think about and experience their lives” (p.3). The guidelines identify three aspects of subjective wellbeing: life evaluation, affect (feelings and emotional states) and eudaimonia (sense of purpose). However, as described by Emmel (2008) “it is only the individual who can provide information on their evaluations, emotions and psychological functioning” (p.10). The NEF Five Ways to Wellbeing (2008b), part of the government’s Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project, identifies two main elements of wellbeing as “feeling good and functioning well” (p.2). The report highlights the importance of positive relationships and emotions (affect) and having a sense of purpose (eudaimonia) on positive wellbeing. The five ways are: connect, be active, take notice, keep learning and give, and will be considered throughout the following analysis.

The overall impact identified can be described as a concatenation of outcomes which are connected through the learners’ experiences of participating in a structured, but relaxed arts and wellbeing course. During the mapping exercise and interviews four main themes emerged:
• Place/space
• Involvement with others
• Learning
• Achievement

Within each theme a number of sub-themes were also identified. Analysis below has been categorised under these four main themes, however these categories are inter-related and therefore some categories fall under more than one main theme. Although the learners had experience of mental health challenges in common, there were no judgements based on diagnosis amongst learners and tutors.

Sagan (2015a) highlights the importance of this within community arts and states that one should “...bear in mind that behind the sometimes upbeat, often funny, frequently reflexive...stories...is a person, not a diagnosis” (p.13). She believes that the individual’s artistic experience and the “space to ‘be’ as a person” are the most important aspects of a community arts programme (p.50). With this in mind any discussion of an individual’s mental health challenges which took place in the interviews has not been referred to in the interpretation below. Although the original methodology had planned for this information to form part of the analysis, the researcher made the decision to focus on the individual stories and the impact that participating in the arts had had on their mental wellbeing, rather than focussing on their medical diagnosis.

Place/Space
The overriding theme which emerged was the importance of place/space to each of the learners. This indicated quite clearly that it was not simply the act of participating in art which had impacted on their wellbeing, but that it was also important to be in a safe creative space with other people with experience of mental health challenges. Watkins (2013) supports this by arguing that participatory programmes are “not therapy groups in any direct sense but are first and foremost creative arts groups” (n/d). In addition, White (2009b) highlights the importance of providing a safe and calm place for individuals to “look out for each other with trust, positive regard and respect” (p.78). Sagan (2015b) describes this as creating a space in which individuals can develop a voice;

“A lot of people hear voices, but people have voices as well.”

“You’ve got to construct an artificial area for them to work in, but that’s not happening.”

Under the overall theme of place/space, there were a number of factors which facilitated this comfortable space for the learners. These are discussed in the sub-sections below. Furthermore, under take notice, in Five Ways to Wellbeing, NEF (2008a) highlights the importance of reflecting on
experience as a step towards positive wellbeing, which the learners did as they mapped their journeys.

**Time for me (to be creative)**
Each of the learners referred to the significance of having the opportunity to come and create art ‘with other people’. A number of them commented on the impact that this had had on reducing their social isolation. For others it was simply having the time to be creative, when everyday life at home does not always allow for that. Community arts programmes enable individuals to “make art to deal with overwhelming anxiety and with the irreconcilable conflicts and paradoxes of existence” (Sagan, 2015a, p.iii);

“I do find coming here it’s just been an enormous help actually because it’s easy how everything at home overwhelms.”

“Sometimes, especially when I was involved, and the time had disappeared, I got this little feeling of real pleasure, which is something else I don’t tend to feel at home. I certainly don’t.”

All of the learners described how they had benefitted by having a specific time each week when they knew they could come, forget about what was going on at home and simply create. Cowling (2004) believed that people engage in participatory arts because they enjoy them and that “by definition, creative work takes unpredictable paths; that is its great strength, and one reason why its impact is potentially transformative” (p.21).

**Flow**
Conversations also focused on the impact that engaging in creative activity can have, in terms of transporting you to a different place or time, through complete engagement and focus on the task at hand. This sense of ‘flow’ can be seen in different activities, however participating in artistic production in particular seems to have had a significant impact on all of the learners. Sagan (2015b) considers art to be more challenging, confrontational and rebellious than other activities such as gardening and is therefore instrumental in people’s mental wellbeing;

“...you feel elated, taken to a different place...art immerses you.”

“I’m not going to do anything else, I’m not even going to think of anything else except this piece of paper in front of me, and you know, that’s kind of quite freeing.”

Watkins (2013) supports the significance of being engaged in art which can “take you ‘into yourself’ as well as ‘out of yourself’” (n/d). It enables individuals to explore their lives and emotions through the safety of visual methods. However, once again, the importance of place/space had a significant role to play in facilitating this sense of flow, as learners with previous art experience had previously been struggling with creativity at home. The sense of having the space to develop oneself as an artist was expressed by a number of learners, a process which
Sagan (2015a) describes as “how people develop resilience by making artwork for themselves and others” (p.v).

An Arts and Wellbeing Course
While several learners had previously participated in other arts courses, one described how participating at CCA had given him the opportunity for “freedom of expression”. In comparison to other courses he felt that learners were “more free to create” and his motivation for coming was simply to do art;

“Painting’s definitely been the best bit...just sort of well, basically making a mess with the paints.”

Similarly, another learner compared her experience at CCA to studying at art college, explaining that participating on the Arts and Wellbeing course had allowed learners to be more creative;

“...this is a lot more relaxed and open and, yeah, it’s a bit more experimental in a way because it’s, it’s less pressured, a lot less pressured than it was at college....a lot more enjoyable way I’ve got to say.”

“I’m really sorry it’s coming to an end because I can come here and I know I can handle it, whereas other places might be more of a challenge for me.”

Lowe (2012) defines ‘dialogic participatory art’ as using art to enable people to see the world and themselves differently. It allows people to construct their own narratives through exploration and reflection on their own lives. However the first element of this practice is “creating the space in which it can happen” (p.8). This is followed by the artist’s practice which facilitates the process of creative enquiry. Under NEF’s five ways to wellbeing Give includes ideas of “seeing yourself, and your happiness, linked to the wider community” and how this can create connections with those around you, in an environment such at CCA (NEF, 2008b, p.10).

Lack of statutory provision
Much discussion revolved around the large hole which has been left in Cambridge since the closure of a day centre a number of years ago which had a big art room. Since the closure of such services, people suffering with mental health challenges have had to grasp every opportunity that comes along. Sagan (2015a) supports this by stating that “the withdrawal of public provision demands of individuals an increasing ability to look after themselves” (p.iii):

“...and that’s why I’m here, because I know that I have to take advantage of what’s offered, because it’s good for me.”

Watkins (2013) refers to research carried out by Secker in 2011, which highlighted how involvement in participatory arts can lead to positive outcomes including engaging in creative activity as an opportunity for self-expression and time out from the stress of everyday life. Sagan (2015a) reiterates the importance of providing a space which is not “about the past, about the
illness; it [is] about the now and the moving forward, about creating, meeting, talking, and re-configuring your story” (p.50).

Involvement with Others
The majority of learners also reflected on the role that ‘involvement with others’ had played in their motivations for attending and the progress they had made in terms of increased confidence. While ‘active’ in the Five Ways to Wellbeing refers mainly to exercise and physical activity, it also includes getting outside (NEF, 2008a). Therefore, for those learners who have been living a hermetic lifestyle, the simple act of getting out of the house to come to the course each week has been instrumental in improving their wellbeing.

Reduced Isolation
A number of the learners had been socially isolated for a long period of time and therefore the social interactions at CCA had a significant impact on reducing their isolation and improving their sense of wellbeing. Dialogic participatory art uses “creative, non-linear, ‘right brain’ processes to explore alternative perceptions about their own identity and those of others” (Lowe, 2012, p.6);

“Sometimes it’s sort of, just been difficult to get out of the house and um, meet up with other people and not feeling like doing very much. Whereas coming here gives me sort of something to look forward to and um, enjoy.”

“Nobody has really criticised anybody, as far as I’m aware, and we’ve all enjoyed doing what we like doing, and have a bit of company doing it.”

Inspiring Creativity
In addition to the impact of reducing social isolation, having the chance to be creative within a group environment also emerged as a consistent theme. Furthermore, learners described the value of being with others to inspire creativity;

“I think it’s having an audience and sort of all being involved in a similar thing, it’s stimulating.”

“The opportunity to create art with other people, bounce off them, get ideas, and also have other people saying well done there, you know where you can improve, what you can work on, or what you can pat yourself on the back for doing, which is nice.”

Several of the learners knew each other from previous courses or having attended the day centre together and for one learner that made it easier to decide to come. However, for another learner coming on the course was an opportunity to meet people and described how everyone got on from the start, even though they didn’t know each other. This again links with NEF’s action of connecting with others.
Being with others with mental health challenges
For some learners the understanding of others, which comes from being on a course with other people with mental health challenges, was a key factor in them feeling comfortable enough to attend;

“I think it’s the fact that we’re all, although we’ve probably all got different things that are a challenge to us, we all have an understanding of each other because we know that we’ve got difficulties and no-one’s phased by anything. If someone sort of throws a wobbly they just go out and come back in and it’s fine.”

The last quote is from a learner comparing her previous experience of conventional courses, which had not been successful as she had feared that other people might not have understood her reactions to things. However, she is optimistic for the future, saying “but that’s the next sort of step, isn’t it?” This demonstrates an incredible step forward for this learner, who has not previously been able to complete a mainstream course.

Learning
The course has offered many learners the opportunity to try new techniques and learn about different styles of art. Watkins (2013) argues that the primary aim of participatory programmes is to “encourage and develop an individual’s creative expression through various art forms” (n/d). For many of the learners learning new skills has been both inspirational and motivational, while for one learner it has been life changing. Before the course at CCA she had not done any painting since trying a little watercolour at school. However, having experimented with acrylic paint she said “I just seemed to take to it...since then that’s all I do”.

Throughout the interview this learner described the impact that coming on the course and learning a new skill had had on her life. Sarah had been extremely socially isolated and been out of work, so the simple fact of attending the sessions was a notable step forwards for her. Even more than that she has found a natural talent in painting and, since the interview took place, started volunteering in the office at CCA. This is a clear indicator of her improved self-confidence since attending the arts and wellbeing course. She described the tree in her painting as a tree of life, which she sees as a reflection of herself;

“...it’s absolutely brilliant. It’s been, umm, a real life saver really, I think, coming on this course... I was just floundering and now I feel like I’m popping up to the surface. I was sort of drowning a bit...That’s why it’s so bright, not bright, but shiny and glittery and lots of colours, because that’s sort of like, you know, I feel like I’ve been brought to life a bit by this...”

While the majority of learners commented on the importance of learning new skills, it is important to note that for one learner, an accomplished artist, learning was not a desired outcome of participating on the course. For Rod, the course offered a place to inspire his creativity;
I mean, art’s given me a lot and it’s, um, you know, when things have been really bad, I’ve always been able to get some threads of delight. It’s fed me spiritually.”

One explanation for his increased motivation to be creative could be linked to the supportive and meaningful nature associated with developing social networks, which links back to the main theme of place/space (NEF, 2008a).

New art forms and techniques
Learning about aboriginal painting particularly enthused a couple of learners. One learner has since been inspired to paint at home, while Lauren was inspired more by learning about aboriginal culture and their view on art and artists;

“I didn’t know anything about the aboriginal art. That was really interesting actually because it’s kind of all encompassing in their culture and they view everyone, or they viewed everyone as an artist.”

Several learners were interested in learning about different painting techniques and experimenting with colour. One learner in particular was enthralled by the freedom of simply blending paint on a canvas. Tom had painted at home before but in a much more structured style, such as painting flowers and portraits;

“...here they kind of show you technique and let you get on with it, whereas at proper college, you sort of have to do it a certain kind of way, so here you’re more free to create.”

In addition to painting, the group had sessions on drawing. For one learner this led to a deep interest in drawing which he has since explored through practice. However, Emmanuel’s desire to learn has gone even further since he discovered that drawing engages only the right side of the brain. Evidence shows a correlation between adult learning and positive wellbeing, including feelings of “satisfaction, optimism and efficacy” (NEF, 2008b, p.9);

“But if you’re drawing, it’s the only activity known to mankind where the left brain, the verbal, the thinking in words part of us conks out, cos it can’t handle it, it’s not designed for it so it will get bored and conk out. Then the right side of the brain which thinks, but doesn’t think in words, thinks in lines and images, emotions, feelings, things like that...and the best training for is it art, especially drawing.”

Being Creative
The more experienced artists in the group talked much more about the motivation of being with others and having a space and time to create, rather than specifically learning new skills. However, according to NEF (2008b) “goal-directed behaviour has also been shown to have a positive impact on an individual’s wellbeing, especially when the decision to engage in learning is concordant with intrinsic motivations and values” (p.9). Therefore the course at CCA unwittingly provided learners with the space to be creative through its structured programme;
“Put it this way, I’ve had so many good nights of sleeping after a good art class...woke up so blissful, so happy, so content, so at one with myself and everyone around me.”

Since the closure of the local day centre the learners are all too aware of the importance of having the space to create and its impact on their own mental wellbeing;

“I’m still criticising and I know I’m still stuck, but then, I’ve also made something as well...which I probably wouldn’t have been able to do. Well, I know I couldn’t do it. I was struggling to do anything.”

“...it’s good for people with mental illness, in fact it’s vital.”

Rod spent 12 years attending the local day centre, painting every day. During that time he was admitted to hospital once;

“When it closed, the next, what five years, I was never out of hospital. I spent months, you know, in hospital. I was so ill.”

He described how he had tried to explain the therapeutic benefits of being creative to health professionals, but that even his explanation of the impact of the closure of the day centre on his illness had fallen on deaf ears.

Challenges
While learners reflected on the variation of pleasurable experiences throughout the course, it was not all plain sailing. A number of the topics in the programme touched very close to the bone for some learners, particularly the subjects of body image and bullying;

“It was after the painting, we started doing a thing about identity and body image...and I did find that quite difficult. I found that a bit triggering...”

“The body image one brought all sorts of stuff out the woodwork, which err, kind of I suppose I knew was there...I think the bullying, yeah, but I didn’t go into it too deeply because I didn’t really want to go there...”

However, in spite of finding these issues difficult, these learners could both see the benefits of addressing challenging topics, even though they were hard to deal with. They realised that they had learnt something about themselves and discovered that they were able to cope with the situation, something that leads back to the importance of creating a safe space in which to address difficult issues;

“It hasn’t changed anything, but it’s good to get things out of the closet and look at it sort of at another date.”

In addition to addressing challenging issues, learners also experienced challenges and frustrations when producing their art;
“If I wasn’t so negative in myself maybe I could get further, you know. But yeah, it is a very rocky journey... I suppose it’s always an on-going thing.”

“I keep going over the top with everything... but that’s what I do, nitpick!”

In spite of developing an interest in drawing for example, Emmaunel described how it had also been the most challenging aspect of the course. He believes that you can hide in music (he also attended CCA’s music and wellbeing course);

“Where in art you feel so exposed because it’s all out there, so it challenged me to be braver and to come out more and not be so scared and people will judge me on what’s inside.”

In spite of these challenges it became apparent with all learners that they were extremely self-reflective and they did not let their own frustrations of struggles get them down or affect the group. They were all able to look at the positive aspects, learn from the challenges and look forwards because they were aware that they had achieved something – either about themselves or in their art work. According to OECD (2013) these actions demonstrate the learners’ reflective assessments of their experiences on the course, under the aspect of life evaluation.

Achievement
Another of the main themes that became apparent throughout the mapping exercise and interviews was the sense amongst learners that they had actually achieved something, and how good this sense of achievement made them feel. Although for several of the learners there was also a sense of fear in creating, the realisation that they had created something seemed to relieve that fear;

“I much enjoyed that because, I saw it as a challenge.... and when I completed it I was very happy and chuffed.”

“My god, I’ve actually made something.”

The thought process behind creating something that was ‘good’ created a lot of stress and anxiety for some learners, but through their involvement on the course they realised that actually they were capable of achievement and that gave them a great sense of joy. These outcomes are significant for people suffering with mental health challenges, who can feel that they are unable to achieve anything, and demonstrate the eudaimonic aspect of subjective wellbeing (OECD, 2013). A sense of achievement can be seen as an indication of the benefit of participating in the arts and can lead to outcomes of increased self-confidence, self-esteem and good psychological functioning.

In addition to each individual’s own sense of achievement, the group were collectively rewarded for their achievements with an end of course exhibition held at Addenbrooke’s Hospital, Cambridge. The exhibition provided a positive outcome for the group, some of whom had not previously done art at all, let alone exhibited. It also was an exhibition in keeping with the
hospital’s arts programme, which aims to enhance the hospital environment through displaying the work of local artists in its gallery spaces.

Aspirations for the future
For people with experience of mental health challenges the simple fact of having aspirations of moving on again demonstrates the impact of having participated in the course itself, but for some of the learners this small thing is in reality an incredible development in their improved mental wellbeing and eudaimonia. Many of the learners felt motivated to start creating work at home;

“It has actually really helped motivate me to do it on my own a lot more, especially this part of the year. So I’m definitely going to carry on.”

“...it’s helped me in other areas of my life because I can see now that I have got something I can do and pursue ... otherwise I just didn’t have anything to get up for, sort of thing, but now I’m thinking, I should be doing some art.”

While learners were motivated to continue with their art, a few of them remained reserved about their abilities;

“I wouldn’t want to push the boat out and say I’d like to work as an artist, cos that’s just a far off, fetched dream...but I could improve with practice.”

Art Club
Some discussion was held around the idea to set up an art club to enable the learners to continue being creative together. Since the interviews the group have formed their dream of an art club, where they continue to meet on a weekly basis and simply do art. At a graduation event, where learners from all of the arts courses at CCA received their certificates, one learner explained that the art club is going to be a life-saver for her. Sagan (2015a) describes the sense of community which develops in arts and wellbeing courses, which facilitate “the formation of identity and [provide] a bridge to the wider community” (p.50). The Director of CCA sees the creation of this club as one of the most positive outcomes of the course.

Reflections
One of the problems of evaluating the impact of participatory arts interventions is the fact that many of the outcomes observed are ‘soft’ — those which describe internal or attitudinal changes, which have to be considered in the context of the individual and their experience (Pujara et al, 2014, p.17). However, this research has shown just how unique each individual’s learning experience can be and as seen in the OECD guidelines, the outcomes also have to be measured by the individual. Based on these arguments, measuring soft outcomes such as raised aspirations and improved skills through quantitative methods seems most suitable when evaluating the impact of a participatory arts course on improved confidence and self-esteem.
While soft outcomes are seen as directly relating to the individual’s experience, hard outcomes “involve a clear and observable change in a service user’s life, or the lives of a community” (Pujara et al, 2014, p.17). Nonetheless, hard and soft outcomes are often inter-related since improved wellbeing of individuals does not only impact the individual, but has a broader impact on the local community, such as when increased confidence leads to aspirations to return to work for example. According to Pujara et al, the arts “demonstrate a capacity to bring these hard and soft outcomes together in project delivery, and to develop innovative approaches to evaluation which use the arts to capture the participant’s journey” (p.21). This demonstrates the relevance of adopting the reflective nature of the arts when evaluating the impact of such interventions.

However, the impact of the art on wellbeing is far from a new phenomenon. In his 1886 essay *The Aims of Art*, William Morris discussed the motivations behind creating art and its fundamental function.

“...the aim of art is to increase the happiness of men, by giving them beauty and interest of incident to amuse their leisure, and prevent them wearying even of rest, and by giving them hope and bodily pleasure in their work; or, shortly, to make man’s work happy and his rest fruitful” (Morris, 1886, quoted in Belfiore & Bennett, 2008, p.97).

Another view on the capacity of the arts was proposed by Koopman, who believes that the value of participation is due to our “complete commitment and absorption when creating...” (cited in Belfiore & Bennett, 2008, p.97). This was demonstrated in the themes of ‘flow’ and ‘time to be creative’ discussed above.

“Impacts are actual or intended changes in human development as measured by people’s wellbeing. Impacts generally capture changes in people’s lives” (UN, 2009, cited in Farrant, 2014a, p.32). Farrant argues that within mental health programmes, these changes can be as simple as “a fleeting new expression on a service user’s face [or] a moment of electric connection with an isolated person...”(p.30). Sagan (2015a) corroborates the role of community arts initiatives which offer “the transitional place and space for this ‘tiny little thing’ to be enabled” (p.51). These arguments highlight the significance of the changes described by the learners at CCA, which include increased confidence to create art and aspirations to move into volunteering, which may seem small, but for some individuals have been life changing.

The discovery of the importance of the creative space was particularly remarkable to the Director of Cambridge Community Arts who said “It’s interesting that you’ve defined it like that, because we talk a lot about providing a supportive environment and an understanding” (Interview, 2015). She also explained that her original ambition when establishing the organisation had been to create a community arts studio, which would be a safe place for people to come and be creative. This is something that she hopes to build in the future. She also highlighted the
importance of qualitative feedback from learners “I think probably the best evaluation has been informal feedback from learners, because you know, we’ve developed quite good relationships with them... so actually talking to them one to one gives us better information than we’ve had on paper.”

Farrant (2014a) goes on to substantiate the importance of including images into evaluation, which may appeal to the participants themselves and can also help retain the creative and imaginative grasp of the arts programme, within the context of an arts-based research. This further supports the methodologies which were adopted for this research, which incorporated visual representations of individual’s reflections in order to gain insight into the transformative power of participating in the arts. Such innovative methods are encouraged by Stickley (2012) who believes that in order to develop the evidence base and show-case the varied arts and mental health programmes across the UK, new ways of evaluation and research should be experimented with.
Conclusion
This paper investigated the impact that participating in the arts can have on an individual’s improved mental wellbeing and increased self-confidence. The concept of a community arts programme was placed in the wider context of ‘Arts in Health’, a growing field which seeks to incorporate engagement in the arts within a range of health settings. While there are a plethora of community arts programmes across the country, there are also a diverse range of evaluation methods. Therefore, this research adopted an arts-based methodology in order to explore how using an innovative visual approach to research could also impact on both the production and gathering of data.

This inventive approach ensured that visual art remained central to the research process, from using visual prompts during the warm-up exercise and allowing learners to choose from a wide range of materials in the production of their maps, through to the content analysis which was carried out using mind-maps and the commissioning of a film to collaborate the findings. Visual mapping was combined with semi-structured interviews, providing a visual starting point for discussion of learners’ journeys. This enabled the researcher to gather a rich set of data, which came directly from the voices of the learners themselves. By contrast, conventional questionnaires which ask for outcomes on a scale of one to ten provide a much less detailed account of the learner’s personal experience.

Detailed analysis revealed the significant impact that participating on the course had on the learners’ sense of wellbeing. Four main themes emerged from the mapping sessions and interviews: place/space, involvement with others, learning and achievement. The reduction of social isolation is particularly significant when working with people with mental health challenges therefore the emphasis placed on working with others by learners is of interest. Not only did it provide an opportunity for some learners to meet people, but it also stimulated creativity amongst others. Similarly, the enthusiasm for learning is not insignificant considering that for many people with poor mental health lack of confidence can hinder someone from thinking they are capable of such activity. Moreover, the self-belief that one is capable of achieving anything can be unimaginable for someone suffering with a mental health issue such as depression. Therefore, the real sense of achievement in actually creating something facilitated a definitive increase in self-confidence for the majority of learners.

However, perhaps the most interesting discovery was the importance of the creation of space in which these individual’s felt comfortable enough in to explore their creativity and develop their artistic skills. This is a distinction which should be considered in future research or evaluation of the impact of engaging in the art, which has previously focussed on personal and social outcomes. For people with mental health challenges simply engaging in the arts by visiting an art gallery or
going to a local drama club are often not achievable. The simple act of getting out of the house and regularly attending a course demonstrates a significant increase in self-confidence. Being with other people with experiences of mental health challenges, in a safe and creative environment, was crucial in the development of these individual’s improved wellbeing.

While a more traditional methodology may have drawn out similar themes and conclusions, this pioneering approach facilitated a visual exploration of the impact of participating in the arts, through methods with which the learners felt comfortable. Even though the process was more time consuming than solely using interviewing or questionnaires, for the learners, the act of engaging in artistic production for gathering of data provided them with a piece of artwork to add to their portfolio (which gave them a sense of achievement) and a creative means of personal self-reflection. It is recommended that such an approach could not only be employed within other arts initiatives across different media such as theatre, music and photography but could be a step towards researchers adopting more creative methodologies to evaluate the impact of arts and health initiatives.

Bibliography


Notes
1 The researcher commissioned the film maker to produce a short film to capture a visual overview of the mapping session and to share the voices of the learners and some of the main themes which emerged. The film was edited to include film and audio from the mapping session and interviews and is consistent with the use of visual imagery throughout the research process. The film can be viewed online at https://vimeo.com/135914364.