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Art engagement and mental health: experiences of service users of a community-based arts programme at Tate Modern, London



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To examine the experiences of mental health service users who took part in an arts-based programme at Tate Modern, a major London art gallery.

Study design: Exploratory qualitative design.

Methods: Data were collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews with 10 mental health service users who had taken part in a community-based programme at Tate Modern. Additionally, six art educators from Tate Modern were interviewed. Concepts that emerged from the text were identified using thematic analysis.

Results: All participants valued the gallery-based programme. The three overarching thematic areas were: the symbolic and physical context in which the programme workshops were located; the relational and social context of the programme workshops; and reflections on the relationship between the arts-based programme and subsequent mental health.

Conclusions: Art galleries are increasingly seen to function as vehicles for popular education with mental health service users. This study adds to the growing body of evidence related to how mental health service users experience and reflect on arts-related programmes targeted at them. This study indicates that emphasis on how users experience gallery-based programmes may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between art and mental health.

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Introduction

Increasingly, arts engagement aimed at improving community-based health is linked to numerous public policy agendas, including public health policy, building community

cohesion and reducing social exclusion.¹ There is growing evidence that participative arts can have a positive impact on health and well-being, including mental health,² and that interventions that promote well-being also play an important part in recovery from mental illness.³

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While there is widespread commitment to the notion of engagement with the arts as a positive undertaking, there appears to be little agreement regarding how to evaluate the impact of the arts on health and well-being, and the ways in which change in users' behaviour and attitudes can be facilitated. Indeed, it may be a question of whether or not impact can be measured at all.^{4,5} Recent recommendations for improving evaluative research in the area by the Royal Society of Public Health have pointed out, among other approaches, that studies capturing process aspects investigating how such projects take place and the quality of the experience itself, or what happens when people experience an arts intervention, are particularly relevant.⁶

In this context, it is increasingly common for arts organizations in the UK to run participative arts programmes for various groups, such as older adults, mental health service users, and adults and young people with learning disabilities. Tate Modern is a large, high-profile modern art gallery in central London. As well as being one of the most-visited galleries in the world, Tate Modern runs a busy community-based arts programme. This is situated within the Learning Department, and has demonstrated a commitment to an ongoing engagement with individuals, communities and groups, frequently using wide-ranging health services, since Tate Modern opened in 2000.

There is a growing body of literature reflecting on the relationship between engagement in art and positive mental health outcomes.^{7–12} Indeed, a recent review by Van Lith et al.¹³ categorized benefits into a number of dimensions, including psychological, social and clinical, across a range of settings, including community-based mental health organizations and rehabilitation services. The aim of the current study is to complement this emerging body of literature by identifying the ways in which mental health service users experience and reflect upon the community learning sessions at Tate Modern, with a view to unpacking the notion of 'value' for those who represent the intended audience for the programme. This article also presents empirical qualitative findings on how, and in what context, reported change associated with programme participation occurs.

The 'Art into Life' community learning programme at Tate Modern

Community learning workshops entail a facilitated viewing of a small number of selected pieces of art in the gallery. A typical 'Art into Life' session takes place at either Tate Modern or Tate Britain for 90 min, and is aimed at a group of adult informal learners. This article reports on the experiences of adults attending a mental health service users group. The size of each participating group varies from five to 15 adults. Learning outcomes are based on the profile of the individuals attending. For the studied group, these included: building practical skills in terms of using the gallery as a learning resource, including how to use a sketch book, finding a stool to sit on, and the materials that can and cannot be used in front of the art works; and higher-level skills including, for example, focusing on particular technical aspects of selected art works, and discussing three or four art works in detail in a

very busy public environment. All aims are developed and agreed with the group before the visit.

The informal learning 'Art into Life' group workshops are facilitated by members of Tate community learning staff, who normally have fine arts/history of art training in addition to educational and other qualifications. The facilitator always begins with a welcome and introductions, so that participants learn each other's names and understand that the process is that of an interactive workshop as opposed to a lecture, and that all participants are comfortable and have practical materials to use in the galleries. The participants visit the gallery and sit in front of each art work selected by the facilitator for approximately 10–12 min. The facilitators use guided discussion and open questions, accompanied at times by participants handling resources, and then making notes or drawings in response to the art works. These activities are aimed at enabling the use and understanding of different learning styles, for example, by using a collection of organic and inorganic materials that resonate through relation or through direct analogy with the art work on show. The aim of using handling resources is that participants can engage with the ideas of the art work, irrespective of whether or not they liked the art work. The handling resources are used to prompt memory, simile and metaphor. Throughout the workshop, the facilitator asks pen-prompting questions so that participants can discuss ideas in pairs and then share these responses as a large group. A key learning objective is for participants to build and develop skills to enable independent cultural visits in the future.

Methods

Design

The study adopted an exploratory qualitative approach recruiting a sample of mental health service users who had attended a community programme session at Tate Modern, and a sample of Tate staff who are involved in the running of the programme. In total, 16 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted between August and December 2011.

Participants

A volunteer sample of 10 mental health service users was interviewed, all of whom lived in Greater London and were participants in arts programmes run by Portugal Prints, part of Westminster Mind. Portugal Prints is a work and rehabilitation scheme that works with people affected by mental health problems to enable them to further understand and manage their mental health and to gain confidence, achieve greater independence, build upon skills and assess their potential for employment. The user sample consisted of seven women and three men with an age range of 35–66 years. Recruitment to the study was facilitated by staff at Portugal Prints who distributed information about the study to their members, and arranged interviews for those interested in taking part. The focus of interviews with service users was the experience of the community programme session, including perceptions of the space, the facilitator, the art works and the group; and

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