

Arts groups as community-based criminal justice interventions

Sarah Goodwin looks at the benefits for the people who attend and the organisations that run them



The value of arts programmes in criminal justice is under-theorised. This is especially true of programmes based in the community, where concerns about reducing reoffending may be less pressing. The Together Women Project (TWP) is a one-stop shop for female offenders and those

at risk of offending. Service users become involved through referrals from agencies and the local courts, which currently make particularly extensive use when sentencing of the Specified Activity Requirement, which allows the court to require attendance at the project for a certain number of days as part of a community sentence. TWP provides individual sessions and group classes, both intended to tackle the causes of offending.

Within this model, the weekly arts group is a staple of TWP's timetable, providing the space and materials for service users to enjoy creating art and crafts. It is an unusual group within TWP for not explicitly teaching skills (those 'in charge' are often volunteers with little artistic training) and being relatively unstructured: there is an activity suggested every week but freedom remains for anyone to do other projects.

In this article I suggest reasons for which informal arts groups can be beneficial, both to the individuals who attend them and to organisations such as TWP. Perhaps unlike arts programmes in prisons, there is no unrealistic expectation among staff or service users that the TWP arts group will directly and significantly contribute to reduced recidivism (Cheliotis, 2012). This is made viable by the relatively fortunate position of community provision such as TWP, which explicitly sets out to provide holistic support to its service users. It therefore evaluates its service as a whole entity rather than evaluating its separate group programmes. I base the following thoughts on my time attending and running the arts group at TWP over a number of months and conversations with attendees and staff members.

Arts as social support

One way in which the arts group can make a positive impact on its attendees is through its social aspect. The group's relaxed and unstructured nature allows women to talk freely, sharing news, conversation and forming friendships. The regularity of the group encourages women to build on relationships as they are able to see the same people week after week. These social interactions can grow to provide meaningful social support (Nugent and Loucks, 2011), but from my experience of the group, I think that this is uncommon, with low-level social benefits being much more prevalent. Certainly none of the attendees voiced an expectation for the arts group to provide them with friends (perhaps because of a disinclination to intentionally become friendly with those who may be more caught up in offending than themselves, or maybe a reluctance to voice the desire for new friends). However, all valued the opportunity to sit down somewhere friendly and have a casual chat. It may be that this interaction has more significance than it first appears. One staff member highlighted the importance of attendees talking to others in order to become less defensive or offensive in their speech while at the centre, and giving attendees something positive to talk about, rather than complaining. This aspect can directly benefit the attendees, by encouraging a positive attitude, the centre, by creating a welcoming and positive atmosphere and the staff, by removing unhelpful barriers: it denotes a positive social experience through arts groups.

Arts as expressive

Despite the basic nature of some of our arts pieces, the group provides opportunities for self-expression. There is always freedom to work on personal projects, or join in with the group tasks. There is rarely a 'right' or 'wrong' thing to do in the sessions, and there is an atmosphere of appreciation of others' work so that criticism is rare. This space for creativity has allowed personal styles to emerge and occasionally the opportunity arrives for more directed self-expression, such as a group collage of 'hopes and dreams', or self-portraits. Such tasks encourage reflection and expression of inner thoughts and aspirations, but are sometimes criticised by attendees for being 'too deep' and requiring too much thinking or effort. In extreme cases, some opportunities for self-expression in the TWP arts group have been hijacked by individual participants as a bid for attention from the rest of the group and staff. There is also the danger of disclosure of serious issues in the group where immediate

individual support is not necessarily available. Therefore, more thought must be given to why self-expression is thought of as beneficial. Is it because attendees have freedom and therefore control over their own work? Does it bolster self-confidence (see next paragraph)? Does the reflection sometimes involved in self-expression aid sober thinking about the past, present and future, thus encouraging desistance? There are many possibilities which deserve exploration.

Arts as engagement

The arts group can provide the practical benefit of promoting wider engagement with TWP's services and staff. Sometimes women are directed to the group before other group sessions so that they gain reassurance that the centre is worth engaging with. This engagement can also work through building self-confidence in participants, or by introducing women to other service users with whom they feel comfortable and can share an interest. It certainly seems that the use of arts sessions in encouraging engagement is recognised elsewhere within criminal justice (Miles and Clarke, 2006), and that it can prove useful in transitioning participants to more intensive courses, such as education, through improving self-confidence (Nugent and Loucks, 2011). At TWP, the arts group also provides an ideal location for new volunteers, or those transitioning from service user to volunteer, to become accustomed to having responsibility within the centre and improve their confidence.

Arts as usefulness

I was surprised at how often staff and participants told me that the arts group was good because it gave them something to do in the day. I suspect this was both to stave off boredom, and the slightly more important task of producing feelings of usefulness in participants. Indeed, when the task was seen as too simple, it was not uncommon for someone to voice a desire to do some more meaningful art. Although some arts programmes provide worth in inspiring achievement (Miles and Clarke, 2006), it seemed that the women at TWP appreciated doing something, even if it was never fully

completed. Some sessions allowed attendees to learn new skills, which were obviously enjoyed (so long as they were viewed as worthwhile). However, it seemed to be the doing, not the achieving, that was important to the attendees.

There are many ways in which the assumed benefit of arts groups can be conceptualised, and this article merely offers a suggestion of some of the more obvious values of such groups. The social nature of

such groups, especially in community settings, must be examined for its benefits, and appreciated by those who run them. The value of artistic expression, limited though it may be in such groups, should be explored rather than just assumed. The potential use of arts for engagement purposes should not be ignored, given the many ways in which such engagement can be made possible through one group.

Finally, the benefit of providing a group which fills part of a day and gives the opportunity to be useful should not be underestimated, especially for good mental health. While it is perhaps wise to concede that arts groups have no direct effect on desistance, there are many indirect effects that come through the functions I suggest here: such as positive mindsets, better social interaction, improved self-confidence, and reduced boredom. We would do well to investigate these more fully, both for the benefit of attendees, and for the satisfaction of funders who desire proof of reduced recidivism. ■

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References

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