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Community-based arts research for people with learning disabilities: challenging misconceptions about learning disabilities

Abstract

This article presents some of the community-based artwork of a group of men with learning disabilities, who aimed to challenge some of the misconceptions associated with learning disabilities. People with learning disabilities regularly face many forms of direct and indirect stigma. The consequences of such negative perceptions may affect individuals' social relationships and ensure that barriers are strengthened that prevent their full inclusion. The men in this project used a series of visual and creative methods to challenge some of these misconceptions by telling stories through art, demonstrating skill through photography, using poetry to talk about sexual identity, and improvising drama and filmmaking to challenge stigma, and through sculpture expressed their voices. Thus, by doing so, they were able to challenge some of the stigma associated with learning disabilities, indicating that community-based arts research is a valuable way in which to promote the voices of people with learning disabilities.

Community-based arts research – what does it achieve?

There is growing evidence that community-based arts projects can provide many benefits to health and social well-being, educational standards, neighbourhood renewal and economic development in communities (Selkrig, 2011; Lawthom et al., 2012; Harris et al., 2016; Sharkey et al., 2016). Community-based arts, however, has highlighted not only the positive benefits to individuals and groups, such as improving health and social well-being. Indeed, artistic interventions are a recommended part of healthcare provision in primary care and community settings (Crone et al., 2013), for example, for people with dementia (Department of Health, 2007; Camic et al., 2014). Lawson et al. (2014) go as far as to say that community arts can present opportunities for artistic expression, and community-based arts enables people, regardless of their ability, to develop skills relating to confidence, self-esteem and communication (Argyle and Bolton, 2005; Davies et al., 2012):

Community arts projects present opportunities for creativity and artistic expression, rather than therapy per se, and accept participants regardless of their initial level of artistic ability (Lawson et al., 2014, pp. 1–2).

Clennon et al. (2016) further suggest that the collective gain that may be achieved by participating in community-based arts can lead to transformative social change (also see Purcell, 2009; Swindells et al., 2013). This is in contrast to community-arts-informed research, which can be created for the sake of scholarship and research (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2007; Shannon-Baker, 2015), with a concern for advancing knowledge rather than developing visually pleasing works of art that is accessible to all (Cole and Knowles, 2008). Instead,

community-based arts can uncover knowledge on people's lives that may not be accessible through other means that are used in research (Ledger and Edwards, 2011).

Community-based arts research, however, has also been used to tell stories of oppression and exclusion of marginalised groups in society, suggesting that community-based arts research contributes to social justice issues. For example, Clennon (2013) explored the transformative effect of participating in community music sessions on young offenders' attitudes towards criminal behaviour. Furthermore, Chappell and Chappell (2016) examined public performance installations created by students based on the needs of bilingual families in schools, suggesting that critical arts-based pedagogies can build on collaborative processes that respect minority groups in contemporary society. Community-based arts research, therefore, can transcend the boundaries of those who can engage in this type of research, building safe and inclusive spaces wherein, for instance, people with learning disabilities are not limited because of their disabilities (Levy et al., 2017).

Community-based arts research methods and people with learning disabilities

One way of encouraging inclusion and participation in community-based arts research is through photographic methods. 'Photovoice' has been used widely with marginalised groups, particularly with people with learning disabilities, and is a way of using photography so as to find out more about people and their lives, which transcends many constraints associated with accessibility (Booth and Booth, 2003; Aldridge, 2012; Payne et al., 2016). Thus, the process of using photography can encourage people to use technology to represent their identity and emotions in a way that is accessible. Booth and Booth (2003) described Photovoice as giving people cameras to take pictures that capture their life in society. In other words, Photovoice puts people in control of how they represent themselves. For example, Rose (2007) suggested

that the 'visual' can act as a trigger for memories and thoughts, which is a powerful way in which to capture experiences in life. Moreover, Photovoice sets out to convey the perspective of the person using the camera, allowing them to think about their context and share the story of the pictures that they take (Teti, Cheak-Zamora, Lolli, and Maurer-Batjer, 2016).

Using Photovoice creates revealing forms of data (Hodgetts et al., 2011); similarly, using methods such as camcorders and arts and crafts, it can be used to represent how identity is represented in society and to share stories about life. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the use of participatory video filming, which may involve participants in the community raising topics to discuss concerning issues in their lives and creating a film to depict such thoughts (Shaw and Robertson, 1997; Hakak and Holmes, 2017). Typically, participants may take on the roles of co-filmmakers and use the camera technology provided, whilst creating a storyboard through collaborating with others (Davidson, 2015; Sitter, 2015). Throughout a range of methods, community-based arts research can be useful for people wanting to express their feelings or explaining experiences who have difficulties in expressing themselves orally (see Fullana et al., 2014; Bridger et al., 2016). Similarly, research has found that the use of drama in theatrical work with people who have learning disabilities can provide active participation and enjoyment, as well as skill development and social inclusion (Stickley, Crosbie and Hui, 2012). Drama can also be a way in which to be spontaneous and to escape from their day-to-day lives (Fenech, 2009; Trowsdale and Hayhow, 2015). Likewise, poetry may have a similar effect of empowerment and inclusion. Writing poetry can be a way in which to express issues relating to sexuality and oppression (Richards, 2017), and poetry has been used to tackle sensitive subject areas (Leavy, 2009), such as issues relating to social exclusion, enabling poetry to create spaces that may enable new ways of understanding the world better (Leggo, 2008; Redman-MacLaren, 2015).

Perceptions of people with learning disabilities

Community-based arts research, therefore, may not only act as a mediator (Leavy, 2017) between social exclusion and inclusion, but also help people to convey their thoughts and feelings in a way that is accessible, leading to people building self-confidence and relationships with people in their lives. Indeed, Hall (2013) argued that people with learning disabilities can transcend the exclusionary practices that inherently surround people with learning disabilities, and begin to transform what we understand, or not, about what ‘learning disabilities’ means. However, whilst the use of community-based arts research can provide benefits for people with learning disabilities, it is not clear as to whether this type of research is effective in challenging the misconceptions associated with learning disabilities. People with learning disabilities face many forms of direct and indirect stigma, as well as physical and verbal abuse, and subtle forms of disempowerment (Landman, 2014; Foster and Scott, 2015), e.g. through presumed sexual promiscuity and predatory behaviours (Azzopardi-Lane and Callus, 2014). The negative perceptions of people with learning disabilities may also be coupled with sentiments of ‘feeling sorry for them’, pity, and childlike innocence (Jahoda et al., 2010). The consequences of these negative perceptions may affect individuals’ social relationships and ensure that barriers are strengthened that prevent their full inclusion (Harris and Roulstone, 2011). In fact, the continued negative perception of people with learning disabilities is likely to continue, with an expected increase in the number of people with learning disabilities likely to become known to services over the coming decade (Emerson and Hatton, 2008). Additionally, this is at the same time that there is a decrease in funds going towards support and care (Power et al., 2016); therefore, challenging the deep-rooted negative perceptions of people with learning disabilities is more important than ever, albeit inherently complex.

With this in mind, the aim of this paper is to consider community-based arts research in the context of a project that was set up alongside a group of men with learning disabilities, using a range of visual and creative methods, to consider whether community-based arts research is an effective way in which to challenge the misconceptions concerning people with learning disabilities.

Project overview

Over a period of 12 months, 45 workshops were facilitated by the lead author (which lasted for three hours per week), in partnership with a local learning disabilities charity, and a museum. Creative and visual methods were used such as arts and crafts, photography, poetry, drama and sculpture to capture the men's experiences of their understanding of health promotion (Richards, 2014). Negotiations with the charity began when the main author volunteered with the charity and discussed the potential to collaborate with members of the charity in developing a project around health promotion around themes such as diet, exercise and self-esteem, as it related particularly to men. One of the workers at the charity was a filmmaker, and had worked with the museum in the past, and he suggested that we should contact the museum to see whether a project could be developed and be based at the museum. Subsequently, discussions with the museum led to a partnership, and the partnership with the museum meant that at the end of the project the participants could display their work in a six-month community exhibition within the museum, which added excitement and an incentive for all who took part in the project.

The men were over the age of 18 years (ranging from 28–65 years), lived in the local area and were accessed via the charity. The researcher worked with some of the charity's employees in identifying men who might be interested in taking part. Different men were contacted who

participated in other projects facilitated by the charity, including arts and sports projects; subsequently, the men were introduced to the idea of taking part in this project and decided whether they wanted to participate. Some men needed support and assistance, which meant that support workers and carers attended, and they would often assist in facilitating the group. Approximately 15 participants would attend each week, with up to 40 men being involved with the project at some point over the course of the year. The workshops were based at the museum and facilitated by the main author, who was assisted by an artist based at the museum, and the filmmaker based within the charity.

Role and positionality

The main author's role in this research involved initial contact with the organisations, getting to know the participants at the charity and acting as a negotiator between the organisations, despite being an 'outsider', i.e. not being a member of the charity, the museum or identifying as disabled. The positions of insiders and outsiders within participative research approaches can be viewed as existing on a continuum, on which the positions of individuals can alter during the course of the research (Bartunek, 2008; Ritchie et al., 2009). In this instance, the role was often renegotiated, continuous and changeable as the project developed. For example, at different points, the role involved being an activity facilitator, resource person, negotiator, researcher and befriender. As Naples (1996) identified, the fluidity of these positions often stems from social and cultural processes within the context of the study, therefore resulting in the multiple repositioning of relationships (Hooks, 1994). The main author would sometimes facilitate an arts and crafts activity, whilst at other times the role became more oriented towards a support worker role, listening to the participant's concerns about life or talking to them about family life. In addition, whilst the roles of the main facilitator were varied in a multifaceted

project, the authors of this paper do not identify as being ‘disabled’. This raises the issue of the extent to which the voices of the men in this project are authentically represented, and the extent to which scholars can represent ‘other voices’ (Schrock, 2013; also see Mietola, Miettinen, and Vehmas, 2017). However, speaking for others is often necessary so as to be able to present data and analysis that provide meaningful insights into the lives of people and their views of the world (see Aldridge, 2012). In this project, the data that is presented, and its analysis, is as close to the views of the participants as it can possibly be. Due to the passage of time, the actual draft of this paper was not scrutinised by the participants, but the paper still provides a testimony of the experiences of the participants in this project, and how the different methods were used to convey the stories, experiences and feelings of the participants. The aim was to represent the men’s views that would make them visible and through which a better understanding could be found of the misconceptions that they face that are related to learning disabilities through community-based arts research.

Some researchers have raised concerns in respect of the power imbalances and unequal benefits of a non-disabled researcher publishing research without the involvement of research partners or participants (Morgan, Cuskelly and Moni, 2014); however, the participants were provided with sufficient information, and were under no pressure to comply therewith, e.g. in relation to the likelihood that their work, including art and photography, would be published. With the work of the participants having already been displayed in a museum, which receives thousands of visitors a year, the items in the photographs in this paper are the same items that were displayed in the public domain. All names have been anonymised and a limited use of pictures has been presented, which reduces the possibilities of identifying the men. Moreover, the participants spent time choosing from hundreds of photographs, pieces of art, poetry and films from the work that they had produced; therefore, the items in the photographs (the author took the photographs of the items) were significant to the participants. The workshops were

designed in respect of, and driven by, participative principles in that we planned themes and topics with which to discuss aspects of health promotion such as self-esteem, diet, exercise, and what 'disability' meant to them. The group would then participate in an activity which was negotiated and led by the main author, most of the time. The project was ethically approved prior to commencement by the university ethics panel, and the museum and learning disabilities charity granted approval, alongside the participants, with regard to data presented in this paper being published.

Analysis

Over the course of the project, hundreds of pieces of art, photographs, film clips and poetry were produced by the participants. This made it a challenge for the participants to decide what they wanted in the community exhibition, because whilst the space was a large room, an exhibition typically is not cluttered with items or overpowering. However, the participants selected the items that they favoured the most because these items conveyed their favourite memories or experiences within the project and beyond. The items in the photographs that are presented in this paper were of significance to the individuals in the group, and are the items that will be considered in terms of whether community-based arts research, using creative and visual methods, can be a way in which to challenge the misconceptions concerning people with learning disabilities.

To make sense of the items that were selected by the participants in the photographs, and to understand the significance of the items, the photographs selected in this paper represent each of the main arts methods used in this project (arts and crafts, photography, poetry, drama and sculpture). Thematic analysis (see Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to help consider the key themes that emerged from how these methods helped the men to challenge misconceptions

regarding disability. Thus, what is presented is a thematic discussion surrounding the main themes that emerged from across the methods. The structure of this section relates to the key themes that emerged from using each of the main methods, with the themes organised around the modes of engagement with each method.

Telling stories using art and craft



Figure 1 - Gareth's painting of a church in Lourdes, France.

The project aimed to focus art and craft activities towards helping the men to express their insights into aspects about their lives. For example, in Figure 1, Gareth took part in a session that focused on 'favourite places' (a topic the men were interested in exploring through art), and Gareth's favourite place was his annual pilgrimage to Lourdes¹ in France. For Gareth, this was important because at other similar arts-based projects, he used the materials to draw, paint and create in a way that was prescribed to him by project facilitators. Gareth did not like this,

¹ Lourdes is a market town in France and is an important Roman Catholic pilgrimage site.

and instead enjoyed this project's approach of participating and deciding as a group, to make use of the materials around him, in his own way. Thus, Gareth was doing what he loved to do, without being told how to paint and draw the picture, which he felt made a refreshing change, and he felt empowered by using art and craft to tell stories about his life:

I don't like being told what to do. I can paint, I can draw, I can tell my stories about my life (Gareth).

In another workshop, the men wanted to tell stories about life and talk about some of their dreams and fantasies. In response, a volunteer artist (who worked with the group most weeks), suggested that the group could create a story about being super heroes, which would depict a story about the men trying to save a woman who had been kidnapped by an 'evil sorcerer'. The story ends with the evil sorcerer renouncing his evil ways and he unites with the super heroes, which is a classic comic strip storyline (see Figure 2). This comic strip was an opportunity for the participants to create 'humans', with special powers, that they wished they could be.

The super heroes were created individually by the men over a couple of workshops, using materials provided by the museum. The story was created through a combination of individual ideas, and group work, where the men developed the full storyline together. One participant wanted to be 'Barbados Man' because:

I want to dance and sing and do my thing (Callum).

Whilst another participant wanted to be 'Ice-Skater Man':

My superhero can glide and fly and be free (Mark)

In the end, a story was created that they wanted to share relating to fantasy and imagination, where the men felt included and collaborative, transcending conforming boundaries of exclusion and lack of choice they experienced in other community-based arts projects. For example, Gareth felt that in other projects he was not able to do what he wanted to do, instead:

I want to do things because I want to do them (Gareth).

Similarly, Steve also felt that he was stifled by sitting down in day centres all the time, and in his view, he felt that:

We should go out more often (Steve).

Importantly, for Joseph:

It is good to talk; I like talking ... can't talk at home.

Thus, the men were comfortable about engaging and relaxing in this project because they felt they could make choices, be included and able to express their opinions when it suited them. Through art and craft, and the creation of a giant comic, they challenged some of the misconceptions about learning disabilities that imply they do not know how to communicate effectively, or have no skills. By engaging in this form of art and storytelling, they opened up discussion through these methods, helping them to express their viewpoints and make choices about what they wanted to do.



Figure 2 – Giant comic strip that presents the story of the participants superheroes saving the day.

Developing hobbies and skills with cameras



Figure 3 – A collage of photographs taken by David.

The community exhibition that took place at the end of the project, over a period of six months, aimed to be visual and thought provoking in relation to how the men lived their lives. They wanted to showcase their interests, hobbies and knowledge, and through their exhibition, they wanted to challenge some of the misconceptions that relate to learning disabilities. Indeed, the participants were encouraged to use technology to represent their identity, emotions and feelings on matters of interest to them. For example, Jack brought his own film and camera equipment, and he became the 'official' photographer and filmmaker in the group. Using this equipment empowered him, because he felt there was 'something to do' (Jack), which he could feel he could be in control of, and, be able to make choices:

I like filming the group. It gives me a role in the group (Jack).

dominated the background to the art piece, which was a major characteristic of the buildings at the museum. Although there is no specific reference to any significance to the bricks, it does however suggest that the men considered their physical surroundings to be important to them and for them to be at this location participating in activities:

I love coming here. It's exciting and there's always something to do. It's a nice place (Steve).

This is a marked difference to the church halls, or day centres, they would regularly attend. The men felt free and excited at being in this building, away from their day-to-day lives, and this is represented vividly in the interactions within the photographs taken by the men. Using photographic technology, the participants felt empowered because they had something to do, that they could make choices about, and it helped Jack and David to build their confidence in engaging more with people.

Poetic voices and sexuality

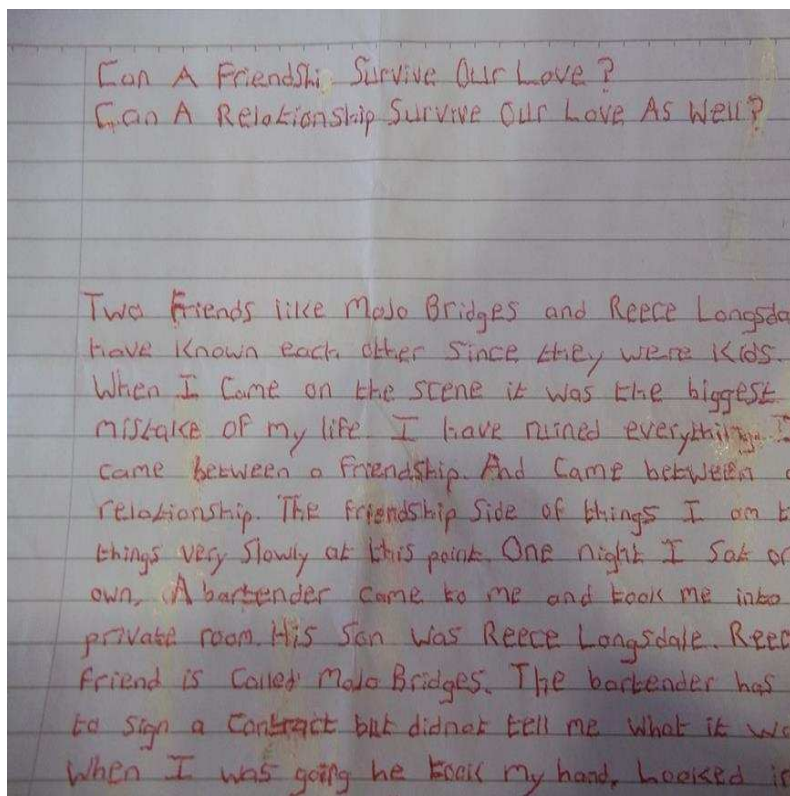


Figure 5 – An example of the poetry created by Mark.

One of the most insightful activities that took place was when the men developed some creative writing/poetry. This was the idea of James, a member of the group, who felt it would be a good idea for the men to do some writing, and for the men who could not write, to be supported by the carers and volunteers in attendance. Following this initial workshop, which involved the group writing about their 'favourite hobbies', Mark, a quiet, shy member of the group came to the group with a script of a poem about 'Love', which he presented to the group. (see Figure 5 – an example of Mark's writing). Consequently, Mark took this as an opportunity to discuss with the group that he was gay, which he revealed at the end of the poem. When Mark ended his poem this way, there were chuckles of laughter and shock throughout the group because they did not expect Mark to be so emotional in expressing his feelings about his sexuality. However, Mark received a round of applause after the initial shock, and he appeared very happy with what he had done. Mark shared his perspectives and experiences of

being gay with the men in the project using poetry as a way to engage with people and talk about a topic that is often a taboo for people with learning disabilities. Mark was not pressurised into doing anything, but at his own pace, he made the decisions about how he expressed his intimate and personal views (see Richards, 2017). In one instance, he commented on why he continued to write in this way:

I feel that people listen and I can't talk about this at home (Mark).

For Mark, writing and reading out his work made him feel valued in a way that he had not felt before. Using poetry was a way for Mark to talk about his sexual identity, and to seek the support from his peers. Without the use of poetry, Mark was unlikely to have discussed his sexual identity, and there would have been a missed opportunity to discuss a sensitive, but important issue for people with learning disabilities.

Dramatising stories and filmmaking



Figure 6 – Some of the men creating and filming a scene about ‘being clean’.

For most of the participants, the main activity they wanted to participate in was drama, mostly improvised drama. This stemmed from their previous experiences of participating in projects where drama activities took place. The men, or the facilitator, would suggest a topic, whether it be related to health (talking about exercise, and acting this out in a scene at the gym) or whether they wanted to copy a scene from a film or television programme, and then they would act this out in a space, often with dialogue or mime. In one workshop, the topic of ‘being clean’ emerged because for many of the participants, having regular showers, washing clothes, smelling nice and having a good appearance was important to them. However, many of the men had experienced negative comments about their appearance and hygiene, and they wanted to convey some of those experiences through drama (see Figure 6).

In one drama scene, the group decided to be a panel of experts, with Mark acting as the facilitator. They rehearsed what they wanted to say about their experiences of 'being clean', whilst Steve filmed the panel discussing topics related to their everyday routines of self-care. For instance, they discussed the importance of brushing their teeth, and washing their hands and body. Nonetheless, the drama scenes were not just ways for the men to have some fun and to be creative, but they provided an opportunity for the men to challenge the misconception that people with learning disabilities do not know about self-care and 'being clean'.. At one point, Paul made it clear about why he was conscious about his appearance:

If you want to kiss the girls, you gotta brush your teeth (Paul).

This suggests that Paul was aware of his personal hygiene, and for him to engage with other people, he felt that looking after himself was important. In addition, when he said this, the men laughed and thought it was funny, so whilst performing in front of the camera, they did not just aim to tell stories of personal experience that were negative, but they also told jokes and had fun. Furthermore, whilst the men had fun improvising and telling their stories, there was a tacit assumption that these men with learning disabilities were not 'clean', or they were not 'hygienic'. For example, Frank stated that:

I always wash my hands when I visit the toilet (Frank).

For most people, this would be an obvious thing to do, but Frank felt he had to emphasise that he always washed his hands because people assumed he did not know he should do this, or wash his hands at all. Overall, performing improvised drama scenes, and filming their stories,

was a way to highlight their knowledge and experience, but challenge the stereotypes associated with ‘hygiene’ and learning disabilities.

Expressing citizenship and rights using sculpture

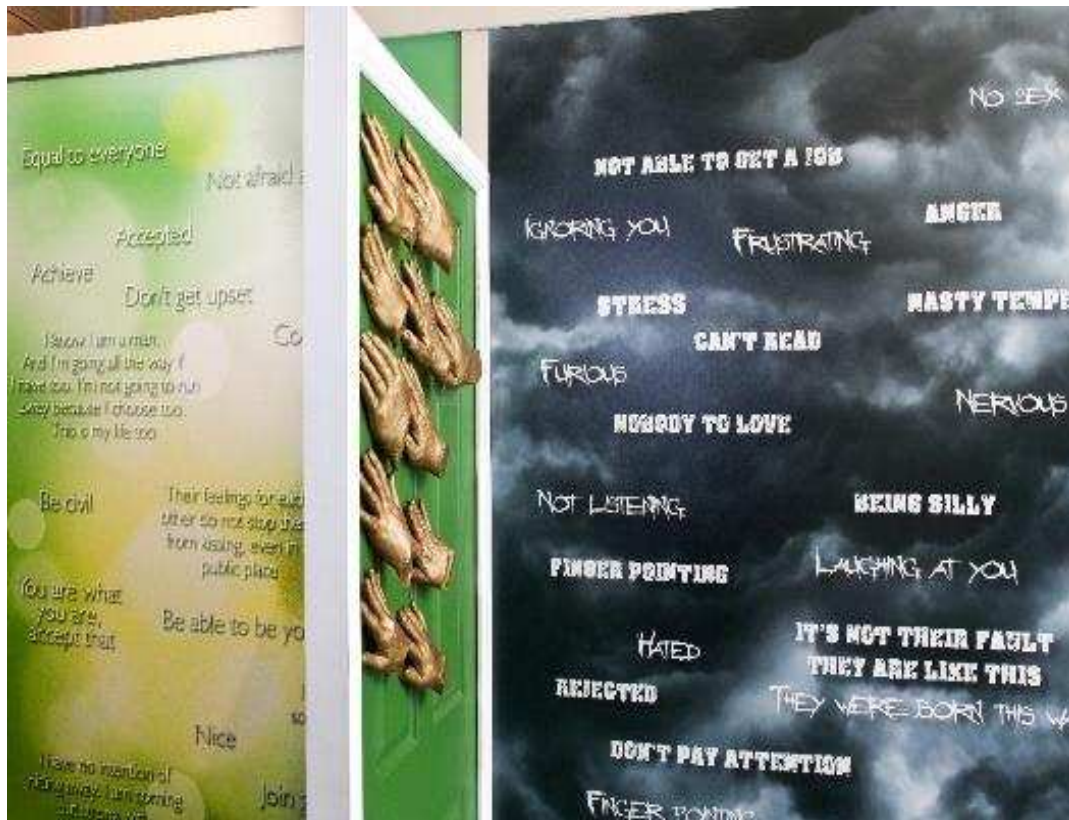


Figure 7 – The sculptured hands of the men trying to break down the barriers they face in society.

Whilst the forty-five workshops took place over the course of a year, the construction of the large sculpture in the community exhibition took place over four workshops. The artist associated with the museum had the initial idea of sculpting the men’s hands, with the intention of gluing the hands against a door, giving an impression that the hands were trying to break the door down. The door symbolised a barrier that the men were trying to overcome, a metaphor for the barriers they faced in life. The men placed words on one side of the door, which reflected

the negative aspects of their lives on the sculpture, and on the other side of the door, they placed words that conveyed their hopes for the future. At the first workshop, the men discussed some of the challenges they faced because of how people perceive them:

They call me an idiot. They don't think I know anything, but actually I do
(James).

The men had strong opinions about the negative stereotypes associated with the label of 'learning disabilities'. The development of the sculpture, and the meaning the men applied to the sculpture, was a collective response that they felt that their rights had been infringed during their lives, and they expressed this through words and the sculpturing of their hands. In addition, the men's knowledge of having rights to 'have sex', be 'accepted', not getting 'upset' or wanting people to 'be civil', suggested that the men wanted society to be more aware of their responsibility to behave respectfully and equally towards people with learning disabilities, in 'the way we (the men), want to feel and to be fully accepted as the people we want to be'. These examples were words/actions the men wanted to experience, but are depicted beyond the green door, out of reach, by their sculptured hands, because of the misconception and restraints made on them by wider society. However, by creating a simple sculpture that reflected upon their bad experiences and their wishes for the future, they were able to challenge some of the misconceptions associated with learning disabilities.

Discussion

Community-based arts research projects aim to empower participants, whilst aiming to provide a space wherein people can express themselves, and in this case, a space wherein the

misconceptions pertaining to learning disabilities can be challenged through these approaches. For these reasons, developing a community-based arts research project was an ideal way for men with learning disabilities to come together, use creative and visual methods and challenge misconceptions regarding learning disabilities. For example, photography was used to develop skills and hobbies that people with learning disabilities are not expected to be able to develop. Similarly, poetry was written in order to convey the feelings of one man who wanted to talk about his sexuality and fantasies. Drama was improvised so as to express the men's perspectives on health promotion, and sculpture and art were created to tell stories about some of their experiences and to convey the challenges that they have faced in their lives.

Using community-based arts to challenge misconceptions about learning disabilities

The participants in this project used a range of methods to tell stories about different aspects of their lives, including issues surrounding citizenship, expertise, skills, emotions, and general well-being. This is in marked contrast to other qualitative methods, such as focus groups and interviews, which are usually applied in participatory research with people with learning disabilities (Jurowski, 2008; Povee et al., 2013), ensuring that there are problems for people who need alternative forms of communication and accessibility. Whilst research relating to community-based arts research is developing, this research has already demonstrated that it can provide specific benefits, including towards health and social well-being (Selkrig, 2011), opportunities for artistic expression (Lawson et al., 2014), self-esteem and communication (Argyle and Bolton, 2005), and transformative change (Clennon et al., 2016). Thus, by using creative and visual methods, the men were able to challenge some of the misconceptions related to learning disabilities, such as not being able to work, the discrimination that they face regarding their experiences and knowledge, and how they relate to people. In other words, they

demonstrated their creativity (arts and crafts), skills (photography), sexual identity (poetry), knowledge and experience (drama), and used their voices to challenge misconceptions about learning disabilities (sculpture). In addition, not only did these methods act as tools for the men to express themselves within a project amongst peers with learning disabilities, their work was shared, via the community exhibition, with thousands of people who visited the museum, ensuring that their work extended to their wider sociocultural contexts. The community exhibition started with an opening ceremony which the men attended and wherein they met members of the public and representatives from charities and other organisations to discuss their work. Not only did the men feel empowered and excited about sharing their work with the wider public, the people whom they met felt that they learnt more about the day-to-day circumstances of being a person with learning disabilities, and one person commented that the exhibition had been ‘informative, thought-provoking, fun’.

The use of community-based arts research methods is important because it raises issues of subjectivity and reflexivity (Reavey, 2012) and brings the interpretation of data produced in research into sharper focus. This is crucial at a time when people with learning disabilities are being excluded, more than ever, in society, e.g. from paid employment, with the consequences of unemployment being associated with laziness and benefit scrounging (Goodley, 2014; Runswick-Cole and Goodley, 2015; Bates, Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2017). However, as the men indicated through the sculpture, they want to be ‘equal to everyone’ and to ‘achieve’ and be ‘accepted’. Yet, since the onset of austerity measures, people with learning disabilities have received bad press because of negative associations being made with receiving benefits (Briant et al., 2013). With an increase in the number of people with learning disabilities likely to become known to services expected over the coming decade, alongside the decreases in funds going towards support and care (Emerson and Hatton, 2008; Power et al., 2016), hearing their voices through creative and visual means is significant and may go some way to

challenging some of those misconceptions. The use of sculpture, for instance, highlighted that the participants wanted to engage with the world around them, not be excluded from wider society. Using sculpture helped the participants to make a statement of their beliefs, wherein they could express their views and share with the wider public in a way that was unlike that used by traditional forms of research.

Importance of community-based arts projects for people with learning disabilities

Whilst there is evidence that the use of visual and creative methods in community-based arts research projects is beneficial, there are still issues relating to control (Povee et al., 2013). For instance, the methods used in this project were essentially still facilitated by the researcher (lead author), volunteers and carers. This ensured that there were issues surrounding making choices, sharing expertise, and full participation (Richards, 2016), reducing the full control and development of using these methods with the aim of gaining full insight into the lives of people with learning disabilities. However, with health providers increasingly looking for more innovative ways in which to deliver services and reach health targets, especially with hard-to-reach groups, a range of creative approaches may be more suitable in community-based arts research projects (see Cowling, 2004; Kilroy et al., 2007). In healthcare, the arts is progressively being seen to have roles in enhancing processes of care and acting as a medium for sociocultural change (Abbott and Avins, 2006; McPherson, 2006; Coholic and LeBreton, 2007). Thus, art/the arts is a form of expression that may highlight values or communicate feelings, responding to the social and cultural settings within which a person or people live. For example, alongside poetry, photography and sculpture, drama and improvisation were used to depict stories or debates/discussions in relation to the men's lives, as a way of engaging and expressing feelings and thoughts, with facilitators supporting research participants in being the

performers (Fitzgerald, 2007). The participants not only used the opportunity of being on camera to improvise scenes from their favourite television programmes, but also developed scenes that involved the men debating key themes relating to health promotion, such as 'being clean' (personal hygiene). The scenes that the men created opened further debate and discussion surrounding issues about which they would not normally be able to talk due to the restrictive nature of their lives, e.g. not being able to set their own routines or talk about being sexually active.

Similarly, a good example of where strong feelings were expressed was that of Mark's poetry. He wrote poetry not only to talk about his hopes for the future, but also to discuss the difficulties that he faced due to being a gay man with learning disabilities. Mark used poetry to help the reader/listener to feel and hear his thoughts in his own words (also see Ward, 2011), meaning that poetry can provide the means to express what cannot always be voiced (Richardson, 2000). Thus, the use of poetry in research not only opens potential spaces for people to engage with and understand their contexts more (Clark-McGhee, 2015), but also may stimulate critical debate and reflection, which can highlight tensions and challenge or resist disempowering practices in professional life (Kinsella, 2006).

In the way that Mark's poetry constructed meanings about his life and sexuality, photography was also used to convey perspectives on how the men viewed their lives and contexts. The use of photography was useful for the participants to explore their own cultural, social and historical contexts. For example, the men took photographs that represented aspects of their identity, as well as emotions and feelings in respect of matters of interest thereto. Gauntlett (2007) emphasised the benefits of using visual methods as an embodied experience and, therefore, a worthwhile alternative to traditional interviews and focus groups. Thus, visual and creative methods may record as well as preserve and provide deeper meaning to the activities and feelings expressed in a way that people with learning disabilities, for instance,

can interpret for themselves. Subsequently, community-based arts research, using creative and visual methods, can be a way in which to promote inclusion and participation and allow the voices of marginalised people and groups to have a voice in social research (Goodley and Moore, 2000; Aldridge, 2012), meaning that people with learning disabilities can transcend exclusionary practices (Hall, 2013).

Conclusion

This article presented some of the community-based artwork of a group of men with learning disabilities, who aimed to challenge some of the misconceptions associated with learning disabilities. There is no doubt that people with learning disabilities regularly face many forms of direct and indirect stigma because of their label of ‘learning disability’, as well as physical and verbal abuse, and subtle forms of disempowerment because of presumed sexual promiscuity and predatory behaviours, accusations of laziness, and accusations of lacking in skill, knowledge and experience. However, the men in this project used a series of visual and creative methods to challenge some of these misconceptions by telling stories through art, demonstrating skill through photography, using poetry to talk about sexual identity, and improvising drama and filmmaking to challenge stigma, and through sculpture expressed their voices in respect of their lived experiences and hopes for the future. Thus, by doing so, they were able to challenge some of the stigma and stereotyping associated with learning disabilities, indicating that community-based arts research is a valuable and empowering way in which to promote the voices of people with learning disabilities.

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