Enhancing mental health through social pedagogy:

A case study of a music course for troubled adults

Chris Kyriacou

*One of the major challenges facing society is how to offer help and support for troubled adults experiencing mental health problems. The practice of social pedagogy often involves working with others in ways that will help to enhance their self-esteem and self-confidence, and empower them to engage in actions that will improve their lives. The case study reported here was based on observations of six teaching sessions and interviews with ten troubled adults taking part in a course on music designed for troubled adults living in the local community. The study identified aspects of social pedagogic practice evident in how participants experienced the course, and how such practice was perceived by participants as enhancing their mental health.*

***Keywords:*** mental health, social pedagogy, troubled adults, music.

**Introduction**

A major challenge facing society is how to offer support to individuals who have mental health problems and are facing adverse circumstances in their lives (Lewis, 2014; Newlin *et al.,* 2015). There is a huge diversity of practices involved in supporting such individuals. For example, Rhodes (2016) has described a project which encourages homeless people to engage in psychological treatment and support. This project involved the staff and two psychologists working at a hostel for homeless individuals, promoting opportunities that would facilitate growth, recovery and enablement, which included running a therapeutic art group. Another example, reported by Hatton (2014), looked at the use of a performing arts project with older people in a residential care home. Her study focused on a series of workshops, which allowed residents to creatively explore the sounds of the care home. It has become increasingly evident that the supportive and encouraging manner that staff employ in their social interaction with such individuals can enhance their mental health. It is in this respect that social pedagogy can contribute to enhancing such benefits (Lone, 2012).

The practice of social pedagogy, in essence, lies in the social pedagogue interacting with the individual on a regular basis in ways that will help the individual to become empowered to deal with adverse circumstances they face. A key feature of this involves building up a relationship with the individual based on the individual seeing the social pedagogue as a caring and trusted adult (Kyriacou, 2015; Stephens, 2013).

A vast number of schemes have been in operation for many years in which individuals facing adverse circumstances in their lives have been invited to join a community-based social activity, where one or more of the professionals or volunteers running the activity have employed a social pedagogic approach in their interactions with the participants (Hatton, 2013).

This study sought to explore the extent to which social pedagogic practice was evident in the ways in which participants experienced a music course for troubled adults.

**The course**

This course recruits 15 participants from the local community who are experiencing mental health problems and facing adverse circumstances in their lives, for whom engaging in musical activity in a social setting could benefit their mental health. The course comprises twelve three-hour workshops held at a community centre once a week. Registration is free of charge. The course is funded by charitable trusts and sponsorship. The course aims to offer:

• Regular, enjoyable, life-affirming experiences of practical music-making in the company of others that participants will want to commit to consistently over a sustained period of time to engender a community spirit and a sense of belonging;

• A ‘whole person’ approach to the development of music skills that takes into account the emotional needs of individuals as well as their prior music experiences;

• Opportunities to participate further through event-management of a gig for course participants; working as a course volunteer on this or other courses offered at the community centre; and attending peer group meetings to talk about mental health issues.

The overall aim of the course is to enable these individuals to lead fuller and happier lives.

**The Study**

This study aimed to identify the extent to which social pedagogy was evident in participants’ experience of the course, by noting the occurrence of the following three key characteristics of social pedagogic practice:

• The course tutors were experienced by participants as trusted and caring adults.

• The relationship between participants and tutors was experienced as non-hierarchical.

• The activities engaged in, including all interactions between participants and tutors, were experienced as enhancing self-esteem and self-confidence; empowering; enabling; respectful; and valuing.

This study was conducted over an eight-week period during which the researcher made eight visits to the course, to observe sessions and to conduct interviews with ten participants. A semi-structured interview was used to explore participants’ motives for joining the course; whether participants felt the course has benefitted them personally in any way, and if so, in what ways and how; the aspects of the course participants thought have been the most beneficial for them; and how participants thought the course could be improved. Notes were also made during the observation of the teaching sessions.

**Findings and Discussion**

The first theme that emerged from the interview data was that the course offered **structure and purpose to their lives**. One participant commented “If you are unemployed and have mental health problems, it’s very easy for your life to completely lack any sort of routine or purpose. The course gave me a chance to get some purpose and meaning back into my life”. Another participant commented that “Being punctual was a secret benefit of the course. I haven’t needed to be punctual for anything for a long time, and you stop thinking about it. Being punctual has made me feel a lot better about myself. It’s hard to believe really just how much being punctual when I come here means for me”. All the participants interviewed reported that they were thoroughly enjoying the course. One said it was “something I really look forward to each week”.

The second theme was **building up their** **confidence.** A number of participants said they were desperate for some opportunity to do something that would build up their confidence and self-esteem. One participant said “When I heard about this course, I thought, why not give this a go?” Another participant said “I’ve been in a dark place for a long time”. All the participants interviewed reported that the course had increased their confidence and self-esteem. One participant said “I’m not working or healthy mentally, so being accepted by other people makes a big difference to me. There are people here I can rely on and relate to me, and boosted my confidence. My well-being and happiness have definitely gone up.”

The third theme was **social inclusiveness.** Several participants referred to their course experience being enhanced because all participants had personal problems. This created a sense that they were with other people with whom they shared a common bond, and that they were all thus more understanding and positive towards each other in all their interactions. As one participant put it: “I heard that it would help people who have mental health problems or were struggling. Getting together to do music appealed to me, and it meant I would be with people who were like me and would understand me”. Another participant said “I really like listening to other people’s perspectives on things, and it’s great meeting like-minded people who suffer from similar things to me.” Social inclusiveness also coveredmaking new friends, and interacting with tutors and other participants who were “nice” and “supportive” towards each other. One of the younger participants said that “I really like being with older people as it helps me with my life problems and my emotional well-being. I like learning from others and I have made new friends”. The tutors were described as always being encouraging, and also went to great lengths to ensure everyone “had a go at doing something”, and were never sidelined or marginalized in any way. One participant said that “It gave me inclusiveness, a supportive atmosphere, it helped me develop my confidence. I think the inclusiveness was the most important part for me.”

A fourth theme was **empowerment.** The course experiencegave participants the opportunity to help themselves and others. One of the key features of the course is how participants are empowered to coach other participants in various ways, and to act as volunteer helpers on other courses that take place in the same venue at other times. One participant said “I volunteer on Mondays to help with a group of adults who have learning disabilities”. Another participant said that “This course is helping to revitalise the local community. It gives an opportunity to local people, and it has knock on effects when we go out helping others and doing gigs. People get to know about something great that is happening around here. This area is run down and people don’t have money, and what is happening here is great for the community.” There were also many one-to-one conversations going on in the margins of the course, between tutors and participants, or between participants, concerning personal mental health and well-being issues, and these conversations were also experienced as empowering.

Turning our attention to the observation of course activities, the data analysis here served to confirm what participants had said during interviews in terms of these four themes. The following three extracts from the analysis of my observation fieldnotes illustrate this.

I observed a tutor running a workshop on writing and singing a song. He sat at the keyboard, and there were five participants who sat in an arc around him, plus two volunteer helpers. They started by composing a verse for a song, five lines in length. Everyone then took turns singing the verse, suggesting changes to the words and the word order, trying different types of tunes (reggae style, country and western style, soul style). There was much support, positive banter and encouragement by the tutor and amongst participants for each other. All suggestions made by participants were welcomed and respected. After each participant sang the verse, there was plenty of praise, and the participant was usually asked to sing the verse again (sometimes twice) adding some type of change or refinement to the way they sang the verse. At no time was anything said that could be regarded as negative or discouraging.

I observed two staff and two participants having a discussion, as a working group, to explore how best to promote a gig. At all times throughout the discussion, there was a high degree of mutual respect and courtesy towards all the ideas considered and developed. This single activity seemed to embody, in essence, the empowering ethos of the course as a whole.

I observed the course director outlining the activities that would be occurring in the last part of the session. This included setting some time aside to hold a one-to-one conversation with a participant about the types of activities he would like to undertake in the coming weeks. This care and attention to personalisation was a key feature of the course, in empowering each participant and giving them a sense of ownership over what they do.

Taken as a whole, the data indicate that this course appears to embody the three key characteristics of social pedagogic practice explored and to have improved participants’ mental health. This aligns with other studies of how this type of experience can enhance mental health (Hatton, 2014; Lewis, 2014; Newlin *et al.,* 2015; Rhodes, 2016).

However, there are two issues that need to be considered here. Firstly, such studies deal with participants who are currently taking a course, and presumably are doing so because they feel it is beneficial to them, so the data collected cannot address how beneficial such a course would be for troubled adults who do not wish to enroll for such a course, or who started such a course and then left. Secondly, there is an underlying problem here of dependency. An ideal course of this type might be so beneficial that the participant is empowered to cope with life without feeling the need to continue attending the course. In this study, most of the participants appeared to be long-term attenders of the course, who re-enrolled for each new block of sessions (thereby limiting places for any new participants). This suggests that the widespread provision of such courses, whilst beneficial to participants, does not offer a short-term fix for troubled adults.

Conclusion

The data presented here indicate that an arts based course for troubled adults, which incorporates features of a social pedagogic approach, can have a positive impact on participants’ mental health. A key to the success of this course appears to be the way that staff have created a positive climate of support and encouragement for the participants. This study supports the view that course-embedded social pedagogy can play an important part in addressing the mental health needs of troubled adults. However, the data considered here suggest that such courses may benefit long-term on-going participants, but is unlikely to act as a short-term panacea for troubled adults.

**Correspondence**

**Chris Kyriacou**

Professor of Educational Psychology

University of York

Psychology in Education Research Centre

York YO10 5DD

Email: chris.kyriacou@york.ac.uk

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