

‘Moving On’ Creative Wellbeing Workshops reflections

Recce + 5 sessions at Headway Devon, The X Centre, Exeter EX2 4AD

Jan-Mar 2020

Background

‘Moving On’ is an integrated arts project taking place in Devon from 2020. This aims to promote wellbeing and social cohesion for diverse audiences, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The project engages creative interventions to help people acknowledge and process set-backs / challenges and to ‘move on’ in ways that are meaningful to them, by noticing and embracing sources of strength. The project vision incorporates community workshops, visual arts, contemporary dance, music composition, singing and poetry in schools to generate hope, confidence and participation. Indeed, there is much evidence that creative processes help build resourcefulness, resilience and wellbeing.

‘Moving On’ is underpinned by helping people to (re)connect with nature and the natural world, connecting at different levels: my life / my community / my planet (sustainability issues). As part of this, Creative Beings CIC ran a series of Creative Wellbeing Workshops with Headway Devon in Exeter.

Over 5 weeks, participants explored the theme of ‘Moving On’, helping to build strength and resilience. They noticed and captured things that made them feel good about themselves and stored these in and on crafted memory / ‘sources of strength’ boxes that they created. Participants were encouraged to come to all 5 sessions however each session worked in isolation.



Planned outline of 5 sessions

1. Introduction to the 'Moving On' theme, the output we are heading for over 5 weeks, warm-up exercises:
 - a. brainstorming word association on 'setback', 'hope', etc
 - b. loosening up with blind contour sketching
2. Box-making (with secret compartments and foldout sections?) or scroll-making
3. Exploring the power of words, creative writing, expressing words with colour and pattern, recording our voices, deciding how to store them in/on our boxes/scrolls
4. Play with clay, creating tiles / icons of things that make us feel good and then making special compartments in our boxes / pouches on our scrolls to hold them
5. Paint & movement, listening to music while combining simple movement activities and painting with long sticks. Painting clay tiles. Creating communal artwork and then choosing a bit to cut out and add to boxes.

Artist facilitators

The sessions were led and supported by 3-4 artists each time, with the overall structure being held by Val and Martin:

ARTIST	PRACTICES
Val Davies	map-making, textiles, memory boxes, creative facilitation
Martin Staniforth	sculpture, life drawing, creative facilitation
Sue Holland	map-making, textiles, creative facilitation
Claire Taylor	print-making, life drawing, creative facilitation
Daisy Harrison	contemporary dance choreography, creative facilitation

In addition, each session was supported by several Headway staff and a few university student volunteers. This made for a very rich conversational environment in which many clients could be supported 1:1.



Observations & reflections

The experimental nature of these sessions led to some initial client hesitancy as to whether to join in. To help break the ice, I ran a recce session where, with Jess Voysey, Team Lead Devon and Exeter, I met several clients. We introduced ourselves to each other and had a chat about what might happen in the workshops and how people would be very free to drop in and drop out. One person began the conversation by saying “I’m not doing it. I’m not going to do art!” then ended with a more reflective “If you do it then I will too”. She went on to be one of the most engaged participants. The reassurance of this recce was probably a key success factor as to why we had a large attendance with 18 clients participating over the five weeks.

Jess said “We expected a small group to join in and I was overwhelmed when I came back and saw how these guys had tackled something new. I’m really proud of these guys. What’s made the difference? Your energy and inspiration as well as being open to ideas from the individuals, rather than having a fixed plan and telling everyone what they had to do.”

This contrasted with feedback from the artist facilitators in that there were challenges in having so many possibilities on offer (!), and perhaps it would have been more manageable to have a more restricted range of options. It’s interesting to note the different take-outs from the clients and facilitators!

Jess also commented “I saw how this meant a lot to R* who created a special box to share with his daughter. Also S1* is usually never keen to be here but today he was really excited to be able to join in.”

The plan to use music as inspiration for mark-making was one of the most challenging activities in the workshops and, indeed, two people found it hard to be expressive. However, others allowed themselves to go with the flow and produced some very meaningful marks and maps on paper. Jess said “It was enriching to explore music and to try something new with links between music and art.” K shared “It was great that we could draw to the music without anyone judging us. I realise that I’ve drawn what’s going on for me in my life right now and I’m going to share this with my family.”



* client names have been omitted for confidentiality reasons

We noticed that people were hesitant to speak out to the whole group and so learnt to keep the introductions very short and get on with the activities and 1:1 conversations. However, it was also important to keep hold of the aim of these sessions, and so stimulate meaningful conversation rather than just provide activities to occupy time. J1 took particular care to bring in a wealth of pictures and items then curated them thoughtfully on the table each week. He seemed to really value explaining what these meant to him and how they connected to his past. J2 asked “Can I put something in that I don’t like?” and this led to a conversation about how there are lots of things in the outside world that can bring us down, so the aim of this project is to put those things to one side and focus on sources of strength and inspiration.

In particular, we were conscious of the need to balance the acknowledgement of hard times with reflection and moving forwards. Clearly Headway clients have been through a lot and so it was agreed that we should not focus on past difficulties, though naming them rather than glossing over them, was a sensitive way to engage. For instance, P* responded to one piece of music with mark-making that conveyed anger, and to another piece with more extensive mark-making that showed calm. Through discussion, she chose to cut out some of the ‘calm’ marks and put them in her treasured memory box, leaving the angry marks behind. This was highly significant.

Another was reminded how painting had helped her overcome addiction and was overheard saying “I think I’m an artist” and then this was validated by someone else saying “That’s cool!” M took great pride, with a gigantic smile, when S2 asked if she could see her memory box and then read out all the special people and sources of strength written on it.

Although these 5 sessions are over, the project will continue at Headway as people carry on adding to their boxes and storing meaningful things inside. Jess added “I imagine there’s lots of demand for these workshops with other vulnerable groups. Please run some more!”



What next?

This pilot series of workshops has been a success all round. What does that mean? There is a clear need for creative interventions that use techniques from the arts / communication worlds to help people process their feelings around setbacks, draw meaning and gather sources of strength to support themselves in the future. Indeed, the workshops facilitated a different quality of conversation for some people. As well as benefitting Headway clients, the process was two-way in that the artist facilitators also 'moved on' by experiencing, considering and internalising the impact of these Creative Wellbeing Workshops in terms of working with people with more diverse needs.

Key learnings included:

- Engaging volunteers before / at the start of each session means that the 'work' of each session can begin earlier
- 1½ hours was too short and so the sessions were extended to 2½ hours. For different client groups, sessions could be ½ day
- Each session could start with a warm-up activity to explore a different aspect of creative intervention, before rejoining the main project activity
- In the earlier sessions, a lot of time was taken up with the mechanics of box-making rather than exploring what might go in/on them. That phase could be sped up by having a standardised box size or even pre-fabricated boxes
- There is a clear need for Creative Wellbeing Workshops and their structure and content resonated with the charity clients, staff, volunteers and artists. This pilot could be easily and usefully adapted and extended to a range of other groups, including those supporting vulnerable people.

Martin Staniforth

19th April 2020