

Case Study

Anvil Arts

Finding the Words...



Age-Friendly

Finding the Words is a poetry project for people living with dementia that we piloted in May 2016 and was repeated again for a second run in September 2016. A professional poet worked with a group of around ten people to facilitate themed discussions and create poems out of the words shared by the participants.

Whilst the poet was able to rearrange words to create poems, she was not permitted to insert any of her own words, thereby ensuring that the participants shared ownership of all of the finished works.

Sessions were held at Newman Court Resource Centre in Basingstoke and lasted for one hour at a time. Both projects ran for six weeks and were celebrated with a sharing event for all participants, which was held at The Forge (inside The Anvil building). The poems were compiled in a booklet as a way to install an element of legacy within the project as participants could refer to it in their own time when the project was completed.

This year will see an extension of the project, working with more artists Applewood Care Home, for three blocks of six weeks: one of poetry, one of music/singing and one of dance/movement.

How did it aim to reach or have relevance to older audiences? What impact did you want it to have on the size or profile of your visitor base?

The aim was to work with older groups as participants rather than as an audience members so there was no real aim for it to impact on the size or profile of our visitor base.



What other objectives were you hoping to achieve?

We endeavoured to achieve our aims in the following ways:

- By working with a professional poet who has experience in delivering poetry projects to vulnerable adults to create a four-week programme that will encompass the reading of existing poetry, explore the use of language to paint a picture and write original pieces either as individuals or as a group (depending on whichever works best with the group in question).
- By developing a website (or a webpage within the Anvil Arts website) where work can be shared and returned to at the leisure of participants and others – if developing a new website then a partnership will be sought with a local college to see if they are able to take on the project as part of their existing studies.
- By creating a user-friendly form that requires participants to consent to their work and/or image being shared and which will be referred to throughout the project in order to ensure that the participants are still happy with what they agreed to.
- By making contact with Newman Court Resource Centre in the first instance and discussing the project in order to ensure that their vital input and expertise are taken into account during the planning and delivery stages of this project, as well as contacting staff to make them aware of what the project involves and what to expect from the sessions. Also by the rapport developed between the Workshop Leader and the participants (and their friends and relatives) throughout the process – this will be achieved by listening to their needs and opinions, communicating in a way that is comfortable for them and by enabling them to withdraw from the project if it becomes clear that they are not comfortable being there.
- By entering into a contract with the Workshop Leader at the outset of the project to ensure that the sessions are delivered at the rate and on the dates and at the times agreed.



Were there opportunities for this activity to be intergenerational?

During one of the sessions in the first run we were able to invite a work placement student from a local school to assist the poet, including helping fill in feedback forms. Also, during the showcase event, we contacted a local college to source a musician to perform, so he was able to join in towards the end. There will definitely be opportunities for further intergenerational work in later incarnations of the project.

What worked well, what challenges did you face?

The sessions worked well in terms of structure and how well the poet facilitated conversations. The participants all enjoyed talking about their lives and there was much more laughter than anticipated! It was excellent to be able to invite them to our venue as well, which rounded off the project nicely and was thoroughly supported by staff here and at the Resource Centre. We faced challenges in terms of some input from support staff at the sessions; they were very friendly and helpful but sometimes did not allow participants enough space to speak, which was essential to the creation of the poems. Guidelines for carers and family were given to the Resource Centre prior to the start of the project but it is not clear that they were distributed accordingly. This will be addressed early on in future incarnations of the project so that staff are clear on what is expected of them during sessions in order to best develop a creative and safe environment for participants.

The poet, Maggie, said:

I've enjoyed working with the group very much. Writing up the responses into a free verse group poem has been a rewarding activity. Having the poems made into a booklet and displayed at the centre is an excellent way of celebrating the group's work.



What have been the most important things you have learned?

We have learned that working with small groups of people over long periods of time is beneficial to the participants, and allows the workshop leaders/artists a better opportunity to foster creativity.

What will you do differently next time?

Next time we will work with the group over around five months at a time in order to develop more of a relationship and allow them to experience a range of art forms. We will also arrange the showcase event to take part during Dementia Awareness Week so that we can tie it in with other local events and shout about our achievements. We will also invite friends and family to attend, and encourage them to attend sessions along the way so that they also feel connected to the project. We will also aim to work with a recognised organisation (TBC) in order to acknowledge any changes to participants, such as improved cognition or general well-being, such as their mood or diet, for the duration of the project.

What “top tips” about engaging older audiences would you pass on to other organisations?

- Don't assume anything and don't talk down to people – their language may be affected in some way, as might their hearing and/or perception, but speak to them exactly how you would speak to anyone else.
- Ask them what they are interested in – there is no point going in with a project that they don't want to do as it will be a waste of their time and yours! And they won't get as much out of it as they would do with something that they're keen to engage with.
- Factor in time to enable conversations to flow – their enjoyment of their time with you is the most important thing and if they want to stop for a chat then let it happen. Bring them back on task eventually but the more organic your sessions are the happier everyone will be.

Some comments from participants were:

Brilliant.

Just nice.

Relaxing.

You remember the different things.

It's funny how one memory leads to another.

I enjoyed hearing about what everyone did.

You remember the happy memories more than the bad ones.

Enjoyed the companionship. Enjoyed it all.

Author:

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