Getting to Know
Alfred Wallis
Part 2
Start in Manchester
Manchester Mental Health and Social Care Trust
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“The course helped me to come out from under...
it was a chance to gain understanding of the self,
and build up confidence too”
Welcome to a voyage of discovery...

Take a journey with thirteen people who used art as the channel for their personal exploration.

All the participants in this project have four factors in common.

They share a love of art; they have experience of mental health difficulties; they see art as a central part of their recovery and continuing well-being; and they feel they have found significant help by coming to Start in Manchester

Start is an award-winning specialist arts and mental health service, part of Manchester Mental Health and Social Care Trust

All art work in this report is by participants and staff involved in the Start course and is reproduced by their kind permission
It may seem strange to have a medical director writing a foreword like this, but from my perspective the engagement of arts and medicine has a proud tradition, and nowhere more so than in Manchester.

Start has been working in a socially inclusive way for 20 years, and this paper evaluates one aspect of its work imaginatively. Helping someone to engage with education after a period of mental distress is worthwhile in its own right, but some of the comments from service users suggest that change is taking place at a deeper level, encouraging people to use their creativity and at the same time engaging with the wider world.

The paper has an overview of research and the theoretical models that link creativity and recovery from mental illness. This review is well-worth reading as it brings together social, psychological and biochemical views of personal experience. The research draws on participants’ experience in a structured way. This is a very different approach to clinical trials where outcome measures have to fit the whole group and people are randomly allocated to treatment or a control condition. Here the research method echoes some of the values underpinning the work itself, by drawing on personal experience and highlighting experiences of growth and development.

The final section draws on the action research tradition by looking at how the findings can and should influence the day-to-day practice of Start. Overall, this paper is worth reading if you are interested in service-based models of research that include the service user at the centre of the work. If you work in more traditional mental health settings, the work has a lot to say about the principles of “recovery” in everyday practice. Finally, if you use mental health services you can see the way in which the Start team try to embody best mental health practice with an inspiring message that arts is for everyone.
Executive Summary

Aims of the project

to help its participants’ recovery from mental health difficulties

to find out more about how and why art is so effective in helping to manage illness, and to recover mental well-being

to identify the ‘recipe’ of the project so that it may be possible to repeat its successful ingredients

This report is part two of a continuing study. It evaluates an intensive short course that mixed practical art with art appreciation, and recorded the ways in which participants’ knowledge, skills, and self-perceptions were affected.

An overview of the research that helped us to plan the course is included. This discusses the way art can help with stress levels, with personal coping strategies, with styles of thinking, with relaxation, confidence, social skills and feelings of social connectedness. We talk about why cultural institutions, such as galleries and museums, have a particular role to play in building public awareness of social and health issues; how they can influence tolerance and social inclusion; and how they can bring about personal change by the learning experiences they offer.

We detail the ways in which we have developed the course from its initial pilot, looking at the success of those changes in helping participants to cope with anxiety and stress, to articulate thoughts and feelings with more ease and accuracy, and to develop confidence. We discuss the benefits of working in a mainstream setting, and the importance of gaining the right skills mix on the team. We note that the partnership arrangement between Start and the Whitworth Art Gallery enabled us to challenge and stretch participants whilst still providing an effective safety net of support. We emphasise the importance of holding high expectations for participants’ learning outcomes.

Perhaps the most exciting section of the report is the discussion of the gains in confidence and skills that participants achieved. This section shows interesting evidence, gathered from participant feedback, that the vast majority of participants were conscious of significant personal growth and skills growth during the course. Even more interesting to our service is the fact that 70% of those giving feedback felt these benefits to be a continuing factor in their lives, this being stated at both a 12 month and a two year feedback exercise.

Towards the end of the report we seek to establish the ‘recipe ingredients’ of this successful project. We consider the course design, content, staff skills, student attitudes, and the setting. We note that the course, though overall highly successful, did not suit everyone as some participants left early on.

Finally we look at the potential of the report’s findings to influence our regular provision at Start, and conclude by a brief summary of our report, and an indication of our plans to use its findings. In the Appendices you will find the Aims and Objectives we set for the project, plus additional feedback from project participants.
**Who ran the project?**

The Getting to Know Alfred Wallis project was run jointly by Start in Manchester and the Whitworth Art Gallery Education team.

Start in Manchester works with people with serious and long-term mental distress. Using art as its main vehicle, Start in Manchester helps 'students' (service users) to recover good health, or successfully manage on-going health needs.

Part of Manchester Mental Health and Social Care Trust, Start in Manchester has won international and regional awards for its innovative and successful service, and is widely recognized as a leader in the field of arts and mental health.

By employing specialist artists, Start enables its students to produce consistently high standards of work, while helping them rebuild their lives and restore their good mental health.

Internationally famous for its collections of art and design, the Whitworth Art Gallery is part of the University of Manchester. It houses an impressive range of watercolours, prints, drawings, modern art, sculpture, textiles and wallpapers.

**Introduction**

In part one of the Whitworth project, we tested out a way of working that uses practical art and art appreciation skills. We wanted to know whether this approach could help people with serious and long-term mental health needs to make gains in areas such as self-confidence, anxiety management, emotional literacy, self-efficacy, self-perception, and broader perceptions about experiences of art.

We found evidence to suggest that all participants who completed the course made gains in some or all of these areas, and we showed how and why artistic and critical thinking processes caused these gains to occur (Teall, Tortora et al 2004).

Having drawn these conclusions, why did we choose to repeat the Whitworth Art Course ‘Getting to Know Alfred Wallis’?

The successful outcome of the first course led us to question whether this way of working could be described as a 'model'. To be a model, we should be able to describe the factors that work, and show that it is transferable as a process to other groups, and even perhaps to other situations and subject areas.

We were keen to find out more so we decided to run the course again, this time with another participant group, who, when compared to the first group of students, were generally less experienced in art, therefore having a different set of abilities, knowledge and expectations. Could this group make equivalent gains? How would they cope with the course format and would they gain practical, analytical and transferable skills like the first student group did? The answers to these questions would allow us to find out more about our 'model', what additions and changes it might need to make it more effective, how applicable it might be to a broader audience group, and what application the whole project could have to the team's work at Start.
What is the course and how did it run?

A mix of practical workshops, lectures, discussions and personal and critical reflection, the course built knowledge, skills and confidence over a six-week period. The course took place at the Whitworth Art Gallery, being taught by a mixed team of Start artists, gallery educators and curators. Its material concentrated on one painting, ‘The Island’, by Alfred Wallis. We chose Wallis because his life story has particular resonance for our participant group, and because his work often elicits a strong emotional response, whilst also having a technical complexity that makes it rewarding to study.

An important aspect of the project was the repeated use of feedback forms, specially devised by the project artists. These highlighted changes in perception achieved during the six weeks, and tracked emotional and intellectual responses as they altered.

Designing the course - the research that informed us (Objective 1a)

Part one of our study can be found on our website by going to this address: www.startmc.org.uk/pdf/lifeintheday.pdf.

In part one of our study, we looked at research around what happens in the brain when people engage in creative activity that also includes critical thinking (what Press (1997) terms ‘intelligent making’). We also looked at evidence about how these processes have the capacity to develop emotional literacy, coping strategies, confidence, self-expression, autonomy, and thus feelings of mental well being.

In this study, I want to add some additional background information that helps to explain our responses to expressive art in more detail and in other ways. I’d also like to take a look at the broader picture of how our work with the Whitworth Gallery fits into social inclusion agendas.

We designed the course elements carefully to encourage transformation and skills-gain for the participants. The course content, the way the content was taught, the setting of the gallery, the staffing group’s skill-mix, and the thorough logging of participant reactions - these elements all added up to a specific way of working in arts and mental health. We set the course up in this way to engage with the broad range of responses that Kerka (1997) says are reached by creative activities - that is the senses, feelings, critical thinking and self-expression. Engaging a broad range of responses in this way is important, she says, in helping us to shape our perceptions of the world and the way we fit into it. Finding this sense of self is shown by Pettie and Triolo (1999) to have real significance in recovery, because it helps people to come to terms with and even feel enriched by illness experiences.

In designing the course we were also aware of the need to set a balanced challenge. That meant providing sufficiently stimulating opportunities for our course participants to get a real flavour of success without setting impossible tasks that would cause anxiety.
Vulnerability to stress is strongly connected with mental distress, being both a cause and effect, and it is a significant factor in preventing people moving on from our service. Finding ways to reduce stress or cope with stressful situations is important for our student group.

Through our work at Start, and specifically on this course, we aimed to help in a number of ways: first by avoiding, where possible, common triggers for stress highlighted by research; and second, by helping people to build strategies to cope with stress triggers, if encountered. Common stress triggers include poor environment, lack of coping skills, low levels of engaging activity, having low social status and inadequate social networks (Zubin and Spring 1977). Negative thinking patterns can be another stress trigger; as Sorenson (2002) clearly describes: ‘How a person thinks about their self or the world around them seems to make a major difference to their level of vulnerability to stress. This is more than simply being optimistic or pessimistic - there are certain thinking methods which help people to cope better than others.’

Research shows that participation in arts activities, especially group-based activities, tends to develop a whole range of helpful strategies, including thinking methods that can reduce vulnerability to stress. Creek (2001) and White (2003) both talk about evidence that creative activity builds flexible thinking skills, or what the writer on thinking and learning, Edward de Bono (1992), describes as ‘Design Thinking’. An ability to think around a situation, ‘to create solutions…and achieve what we desire’ (de Bono) can act favorably on coping systems, and thus help with anxiety management.

This type of flexible thinking is connected to the experience of viewing and making art, and its provable chemical effects on the brain.

Some of our students report feeling noticeably calmer and more contented - ‘on a high’ - for some hours or even days after their art session (from video interviews with Start students 2005). We know that this is due to the fact that expressive artistic activity releases neurochemicals, including endorphins, into the brain. These neurochemicals assist deep concentration, slow down pulse and breathing, reduce blood pressure and boost the immune system through what is termed ‘The Relaxation Response’ in some well-known research from the Behavioural Medicine Clinic, Harvard University (Benson and Klipper 2000).

This is perhaps the source of flexible thinking. By inducing relaxation, in our case through expressive art, we open the door to joined-up left/right brain thinking. This is where the rational (left hemisphere) and the emotional (right hemisphere) centres work in balance through the neurotransmitter serotonin. The more this relaxed and joined-up thinking state is practiced and understood, the more likely we are to be able to control emotional and negative responses, even when stressed (Carter and Frith 1998). It is also likely that we will experience enhanced learning potential, because we can call on both sides of our brain to help us process information (Buzan, 2001).

Our course was purposely based around exercises that demanded left/right brain
thinking. We surmised that these exercises would enhance general flexible thinking skills that might cascade into other areas of participants’ lives. Evidence quoted by White (2003) and Creek (2001) shows this cascade effect in action, following group-based arts workshops.

Building activities around group work was another aspect we consciously included, because research shows that social networks are critical in long-term recovery (British Psychological Society Report 2000, Spiegel 1999). Community-based arts activities have a special role to play here, Lynch et al (1996) and White (2003) show that they are particularly effective in encouraging social and community bonding and in increasing social skills. “Participation in the arts and the humanities unlocks the human potential for creativity and lifts us beyond our isolated individualism to shared understanding” adds Kerka (1997), quoting from the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities 1997, p. 1, and referring to her premise that the arts can transform both oneself and one’s interaction with the world.

So in our course, we were looking to work with the whole person - the thinking, feeling, doing and perceiving person - because this accords with recent thinking that promotes a whole person approach to mental health recovery (British Psychological Society 2000).

More than this, our approach looked at the wider community context in which people exist, because however much personal development work an individual may achieve, if society still excludes him or her then there are real limitations to that person’s future. The Manchester Mental Health Promotion Strategy 2004-10 is one of many documents and research papers that discusses the crucial importance of educating the public and other organizations about social inclusion and mental health issues. It sees this remit as a broad and shared responsibility, but agrees with many other commentators (e.g. Mind Policy Briefing 2002, Sayce and Morris 1999) that some leadership will initially need to come from health and social care services forging partnerships outside their professional spheres. Sayce also points to flaws in some older approaches to mental health education. She shows that good news stories and educative initiatives are not enough - inclusion must be real to be effective. ‘Inclusion is a powerful way of changing non-disabled people’s beliefs. When non-disabled people get to know disabled people, in a context in which disabled people are at least equal, and where positive messages are generated... this does influence belief systems’ (Sayce 2003). So in working as a team comprising gallery staff, Start staff and Start service users, and by creating a public exhibition from our work (held 2006 at the Whitworth Art Gallery), we aimed to build community capacity for social inclusion too.

The choice of working with a gallery was well considered. Cultural institutions such as galleries can be influential agents of social change because they are seen as respected guardians of and spokespersons for culture. If galleries, for instance, adopt open door policies to their communities, and even more than this, develop inclusive
programmes of learning, then they are clearly promoting and validating agendas such as social regeneration, social inclusion and feelings of cultural entitlement that can lead to social change. Innovation in the thinking behind some gallery exhibitions has shown just how effective galleries can be in fostering social change (O'Neill 2002, Barr 2004). Equally, commentators have shown galleries and museums to be effective catalysts for personal change as well, and of course personal change, if adopted by many people, leads to social change.

Let’s take a quick look at one writer’s thoughts around galleries and personal change.

Carr (1991, 2001) is passionate about the opportunities that galleries, and other cultural institutions, offer us to ‘engage mindfully, grow intellectually, and construct a life of independent learning’. He sees every visitor as starting with his or her own unique reaction to a display, this reaction being made up of personal taste and experience. If we then have a critical conversation with ourselves, questioning some of our initial reactions and beliefs, we can find ourselves learning to think differently. This kind of learning is ‘challenging, sometimes even painful’, because it can lead to difficult questions, but museums deliver what Carr calls ‘emancipatory’ experiences that are intense and individual (Carr 2001, p 176). This is the process that leads to personal growth and transformation. Carr says: ‘we are assisted to find powers of thought and speech... that we may have previously concealed, even from ourselves’ (183). As we will see later in this study, Carr’s words are exactly applicable to the experiences of our own group of Start students on the Whitworth course.

Having looked at some of the research that led us to set up the course and the partnership, now let’s take a look at the Start students’ reactions to the course.

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**Developing the course and understanding its methods better**

1. **Benefits of changes to the course (Objectives 1b, 1c, 2a)**

   Our main interest in repeating the course was to see how well it would transfer to another group of participants, and to understand its ‘recipe’ better:

   We kept as many factors constant as we could between the first and second course runs - content, delivery, learning environment, partnership working, student: staff ratio, and gallery staffing - but we did make a few changes that our initial evaluation recommended.

   The first change was to add an introductory session. This incorporated a visit to the Whitworth Art Gallery and a chance to meet everyone connected with the course, before the course itself began. The idea of this was to reduce the anxiety some course members reported they felt at the start of the first course, due to experiencing too many new elements all at once. We also hoped the session would promote conscious anxiety management strategies.
By making an initial visit, students would know what situations they were facing, and would have time to discuss and prepare ways of coping with any factors they found anxiety-provoking.

The change proved a success. Not only did participants say they felt relatively at ease, but some reported real gains in anxiety management.

I liked feeling comfortable in an art gallery as on my own I can find galleries - 'the art world' - a bit intimidating…

Being with new people [was] anxiety provoking but I found it so interesting [it] made me stay- I was quite amazed that I stayed so long. I’d get there early to make myself comfortable, more relaxed. Seeing the paintings beforehand enabled me to ‘psyche myself up’ and focus.

In this last comment, it’s interesting to note that students began to create their own management strategies around anxiety, and to use these independently - an example, perhaps, of those flexible thinking patterns mentioned above.

Another change was in ways of supporting participants to communicate more accurately and fully when filling in their questionnaires and feedback forms. In the first course, we noticed that some participants responded, on their feedback forms, in a limited and general way about their experience during the workshops. On the whole, they did not easily reflect on emotional experience, either through a lack of vocabulary, feelings of embarrassment, or a lack of understanding that such accounts would be relevant to the study. We felt that more specific answers around these issues would reveal a truer account of the experience of being on the course, and the changes to which it led.

These were the changes we made, to help us gain more specific feedback:

- We added in more precise questions around emotional experience
- We allowed more time to fill the feedback forms in (which we renamed 'diary sheets')
- Tutors built evaluation time into their timetable to look at the feedback in detail every week and make adjustments to the course according to the needs of group
- We added in guided discussions in small groups, each being led by a tutor. This proved the best process of all, as it was responsive to varying confidence levels and helped participants to explore complex thoughts and ideas. It also helped people to speak up who lacked confidence in a larger group.

With these modifications in place, tutors were surprised to observe how quickly participants grew in confidence when speaking about art. Here are some improvements the tutors saw in confidence and skill amongst participants:

- Gains in developing and expressing personal opinions
- Better ability to make connections between subjects and ideas
- Improved insight into personal development
- Responses on feedback forms fuller and more specific
- Full engagement in feedback process despite participants describing process as challenging

To help us measure the effectiveness of the course in teaching critical and analytical thinking, we introduced a final change.
the last workshop, participants gave a critical evaluation of a chosen piece of artwork. This was an opportunity for each person to demonstrate their improved confidence and critical skills in a presentation to the rest of the group. It was also a chance for the tutors to witness these changes to behaviour, to record the expanded use of vocabulary (appropriate artistic terminology), and to note the increasing sense of group bonding demonstrated by the supportive atmosphere in this session.

This exercise yielded some persuasive evidence of gains for group members, including:

Confidence to present to the group, which was a great step forward

Emergence of wider vocabulary from start of course to end of course; words are tools for thinking, and so this empowered participants to be able to say what they thought with increasing clarity

More accuracy and ease in recognising and describing emotional responses (emotional literacy)

Growing respect for each other’s opinions

More skill in giving constructive and supportive peer feedback

So in adding in these improvements, we were able to observe definite benefits to the second student group. They engaged well with the course and its content, they felt better able to manage anxiety, they felt empowered to give more precise feedback on their learning experiences, and they felt empowered to demonstrate their new knowledge, confidence and skills more clearly to themselves and others (Objectives 2a, 2b, 3a).

2. The importance of place: inclusion in the artistic community (Objective 3b)

One of our objectives was to encourage participants to compare their experience on the Whitworth course with that at Start, and see what ideas this comparison might generate.

Participants made positive comments about their pleasure in feeling part of a true artistic experience, and especially one that removed them altogether from a mental health environment and put them in a mainstream setting.

I felt quite happy to be in the company of artists...there was a sense of belonging... I gained confidence in learning that there are other like-minded people...artists.

I liked working in a place where the general public were, rather than an NHS environment...Getting out of the mental health stigma - nobody was judging...I felt accepted as part of the mainstream.

I loved it - like the realisation of a secret ambition...exciting...scary... great.

These comments show a delight in regaining a sense of being part of ordinary
life. We know from research (for example Mind Policy Briefing 2002, British Psychological Society 2000, Sayce 2003) that for many people, the experience of being labelled and therefore stigmatised is the most disabling aspect of illness.

'The impact of stereotypes is profound. Discrimination impacts on identity and increases risk of mental ill health. It leaves people with complex dilemmas about whether and how to disclose their mental health problem, and how to disprove the assumptions they expect to encounter if others know of their diagnosis.' (Sayce 2003)

The experience of being on the course not only removed this complex dilemma (mental health needs were declared, understood and entirely accepted), but also took participants to a place where they were expected to succeed, and succeed quite highly.

3. The importance of the right skills mix on a staff team: expectations, perceptions, and feelings of safety

This raises another interesting point. For some, having a label of mental illness causes them to under-achieve because they feel others expect less of them, and so therefore they also expect less of themselves.

... even though I had a tough and challenging time personally.....I had a real desire to pursue the course...the course was so interesting, the way it was formulated, where it took place, what it was about was highly motivating.

Studying .... in an intense and focused way...is more difficult...[but] getting into [this] depth...is more rewarding...
I am amazed at myself. Completing the course is a rewarding feeling…

It was a top-notch experience both socially and in terms of the exercises…

4. Gains in confidence and other skills - what sorts of gains have been made and how lasting are they? (Objectives 3a, 3c)

Here are some typical comments from course participants about changes to their confidence levels:

[The course] made me more confident, as my own thoughts about artistic expression have been confirmed… I found the confidence to talk in a group.

If I went to a gallery with a friend, I’d feel more confident talking about it. I’d get into depth more - there’d be more to talk about.

I feel more able to talk about my art and [other people’s] art clearly, which makes me feel more confident.

This is interesting evidence of the course’s value, showing that confidence gains were experienced in the areas of talking about art and talking in a group. But what is intriguing is that, in some cases, we have evidence of confidence-gains being long-lasting and even cascading into other spheres of life besides art activities and visits to galleries.

We know this because we have recently conducted a follow-up evaluation of the course, gaining feedback from ten of the thirteen students who participated across both courses. For six of the students, it has been twelve months since the course ran, whilst for four of them it has been two years. Here is an analysis of some of the evidence for lasting and, in some cases, wide-reaching change.

(For a full analysis of the feedback, by category of gains students felt they had experienced, see Appendix 2)

70% of the students reported continuing gains in confidence, with these gains being, for 50% of the students, related to discussing and understanding artwork and going to galleries.

50% of the students reported better anxiety-management levels, accompanying these gains in confidence.

Several students described a cascade effect on confidence in social situations and groups, because of the practice they had had in formulating and voicing personal opinions in front of others, whilst on the course.

‘The course helped me come out from under’, said one, whilst another reflected: ‘[With regard to] meeting and talking with strangers….since doing the course I have had more confidence to talk in groups than I have had for years’.

20% of the students had become involved in further public events since the course. One had found the confidence to act as an arts columnist for an online arts diary, which involved being in a busy gallery, meeting the public and expressing artistic opinions. Another student gained the confidence to speak in public, and this lead to her giving a joint presentation with a Start staff member in front of medical staff, during which she described herself as ‘very relaxed’.

100% of the students who gave feedback felt they had made technical and artistic gains, with 50% of students consciously using their new skills in their artwork on a regular basis.
100% of students who gave feedback felt they had made gains in being able to appreciate and be open-minded about a work of art, with 80% feeling better able to look analytically and critically at a piece of art. Some students said that they felt these critical thinking skills were very important and had a wider relevance to their lives: ‘Critical analysis is a life skill appropriate to all manner of circumstances’

100% of students felt better able to formulate and express an opinion in words, with 90% feeling more confident in talking about art in a group, and 80% feeling more able to talk about their own work to others.

Some students saw the opportunity as one both of artistic and self-exploration, with art providing a mirror for personal reflection:

[I saw the course as a chance to] ‘learn and gain understanding of the self, as art is the relationship between the viewer and viewed. Art is an expression of mind and only exists through mind via the relationship’.

Another student recorded similar awareness of self-development:

‘I am more aware of my own biases and prejudices which in turn gives more control over mind’.

70% of students recorded changes to self-perception, feeling they would be more likely to call themselves artists. One student said:

‘Learning about Wallis...made me realize that I’m an artist too, because I have creativity and skills’.

90% of students said they now view and use galleries differently. They described a new feeling of belonging, using terms including comfort, understanding and confidence. One student, who used to visit galleries with a support worker, the worker choosing the galleries and exhibitions, has now taken charge of choosing the galleries himself, because of his new confidence

Most of these students also commented that they now understood and appreciated the importance of context - in other words, to appreciate an artwork, it helps to know something about its historical and social context, and that of the artist:

‘Interesting to know about the artist’s life...I have developed more of an appreciation of the painting through study.’

‘I was quite surprised that understanding the whole picture more [composition, mood, colour etc] made me appreciate it more. I’d be more open-minded about a picture now.’

Comments around gained confidence in use of language are interesting. One student now uses a reflective diary regularly, whilst another found that the writing aspects of the course gave him confidence to experiment with writing on a computer, a significant step forward for this student who struggles with literacy skills. A third student commented that he can think his artwork through more because he is able to use artistic language. A fourth student said that he now has the confidence to express himself, his likes and dislikes, and feels able to take and hold a contrary view in a group, whereas before he would have gone along with others’ opinions.

90% of students felt the course had had a significant lasting effect in some or all of the ways stated above. Feedback
shows they have felt able to embrace new opportunities since the course, because of their raised confidence, better anxiety management and different outlooks.

The fact that 70% students said they had continued to experience significant growth in their levels of confidence since the course, whilst 90% felt the course had enabled them to make lasting changes in various ways is very interesting to us. We are particularly keen to find out what factors within the course made it so helpful to its participants and created this ‘snowballing’ effect.

5. What is the 'recipe for success' of the course? (Objectives 4a, 4b)

Students repeatedly praised the course format (theory partnered with practical and technical exercises) as positive. This combination enabled students to get a real grasp and understanding of the artwork and artists’ intentions.

More than this, students commented that the combination of activities had had an empowering effect as it gave them knowledge, insight, appropriate, language and the ability to make connections when looking at other art and when making their own, resulting in the heightened confidence already noted.

Students found the expressive writing exercise to be skills-expanding, and we have seen that they felt the benefits of verbal and written language development in a variety of ways.

Students responded favorably to the setting, and the chance to influence people’s beliefs about mental health, so an inclusive setting is significant.

Students were appreciative of the way they were treated during the course - that is, with respect; expectations of their abilities were high, and they were therefore offered the best in terms of resources, staffing and curriculum. ‘We were treated with such respect’ said one student, ‘it felt like great trust was placed in us. The fact that we could handle the Wallis painting, for instance, was absolutely amazing.’

The course diaries, though a challenge, proved important. Many students clearly felt a sense of achievement during the course, which they were given the opportunity to put into words through their course diaries. There was detailed assistance available to do this, during the second course, and students benefited from this help. The chance to write down their thoughts crystallized their experience and achievements, and helped them to feel ownership. Achievement and motivation are known to be clearly linked (Creek 2001), and so this built further enthusiasm for the course.

Students tended to be positive about working in a bigger, mixed group (although with appropriate support levels) and working with different media.

Students appreciated the skills mix of the staff team and recognized the level of skill and knowledge made available to them.
Tutors noted that the ‘episodic’ nature of the course, though of most benefit if experienced in full, allowed students to miss some sessions and still make gains.

Tutors also noted that the course format was as accessible to the second group of students as to the first, with some minor changes.

On a different note, some students left the course early on for a range of reasons, some related to the course and some not, so the course format does not appeal to everyone. It is important to be aware of one’s participant group and its readiness to cope with challenge.

So these findings give us insight into the most effective elements of the course. Let’s summarise them in a more generic way:

- Inclusive setting, and the comfortable, positive experience within that setting
- Mixed group of learners
- Mix of theory and practice, seen as stimulating and empowering
- Emphasis on critical analysis - questioning, analysing, assessing
- Care taken to present everything accessibly and within a clear context
- Discussion and opinion-sharing with others, practised in an encouraging and accepting environment
- Creative writing exercise and writing the diaries
- Staff team’s skills

What could Start learn from the course?

The course differed from regular sessions in that it offered the space and structure to debate and practice in depth. It also took students out of their comfort zone and allowed them to prove their skills in a new setting. They had to rise to many challenges that do not present in the same way in the familiar setting of Start, so the course offered a chance to move forward.
and broaden horizons. As a result, tutors saw significant changes to areas such as students’ confidence, communication skills, social skills and critical skills. These grew more quickly than in sessions. This was initially unexpected, and certainly something we would like to build upon now that we have more understanding of why this happened.

**Recommendations for practice changes: (Objective 4c)**

Like the practice changes we made as a result of the Design Course, with initial changes being piloted through our award-winning project Crowning Glories, we plan to try out some of the above ‘recipe ingredients’ in a pilot scheme that is aimed at newer students at Start, some of whom have more complex support needs. This will again help us to draw out new learning, and potentially benefit another group of Start users.

We would also like to investigate the use of a validated measure of self-esteem or social inclusion as part of our next scheme.

**CONCLUSION**

This study has described, and set out evidence for, some of the ways in which practical and critical art studies help to stimulate emotional literacy, conscious coping strategies, self-awareness and confidence amongst Start’s service users. The study has also looked at the way arts activities can help stimulate, in the individual and the community, inclusive attitudes, and the special role galleries and museums can play in this.

Through our study, we have re-analysed the thinking behind our course and examined the benefits of the changes introduced into the second course-run. We have also checked the validity of both of these against participant feedback and observed changes to life skills.

Participants’ feedback has been carefully scrutinized. It reveals an exciting picture of significant and lasting personal growth as a result of the course, some particularly outstanding changes being achieved around artistic identity, confidence and knowledge, and more generically around self-confidence, expressing opinions and coping with anxiety. The results of the long-term feedback (at 12 months and 2 years) are especially compelling and show that further studies of this nature, perhaps using a validated measuring scale, might be well worth considering.

Our study has also looked at what elements of our course ‘Getting to Know Alfred Wallis’ were most successful and why, and it has revealed a generic ‘recipe’ that should help us to expand practice changes within Start.

The experience of running ‘Getting to Know Alfred Wallis’ for a second time was essential in letting us confirm and clarify what we learned through the first course-run, and to demonstrate the accessibility of the course to a variety of experience levels. Our staff team believe that there is now good evidence to support the development of a more intensive style of art course, or other themed project, that mixes critical thinking with practical making. How regularly this might run, and how widely it might recruit, remains to be piloted, but we can now evidence that such provision, innovative within arts for mental health as a field, strengthens our user group’s engagement with art, enhances the effectiveness of art as a mental health intervention, yields faster and broader health and life-skill outcomes, and stimulates a lasting sense of self-transformation.
Thanks

Thankyou to everyone who has contributed to this report and to the project as a whole, especially the project participants whose feedback has been so crucial to this study.

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Appendix 1

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES FOR THE COURSE

Aims

1. To analyse and further develop the model of working established in Getting to Know Alfred Wallis

2. To investigate the suitability of this ‘intensive arts intervention model’ for work with different ability and experience levels in our student group

3. To gain further evidence of students’ self-development resulting from participation in the activities provided by the arts intervention

4. To establish a ‘recipe’ for this type of working and recommend its further application at Start, for client benefit (and staff training?)

Objectives

By the end of the second part of this study we will have:

1a By reference to relevant external sources, to place the planning and design of the course in a mental health and social inclusion context

1b Made recommended changes to the course (from Course-run no.1) and delivered the course incorporating these changes

1c By reflective scrutiny and reference to relevant external research/theoretical writings, we will assess whether these changes benefited the course participants or course outcomes

2a Engaged a student group with a varied profile of experience and ability level

2b Observed and recorded reactions to participation in the course from this varied student group

3a Used improved feedback mechanisms to establish evidence of students’ self-development

3b Enabled students to compare their experiences at the gallery with those at a regular Start session, and reflect on the connections between the two

3b Used longer-term feedback mechanisms to investigate how lasting any observed benefits to students may be

4a Identified the key elements of content and delivery for this intensive style of working (by evaluating all the above points)

4b Created a generic and flexible recipe for this style of working, incorporating good practice guidelines, resourcing levels and partnership working principles

4c Made recommendations for how the findings of this evaluation could be used by Start in its core delivery and its development work
Appendix 2

The following is an analysis of feedback received from 10 students who have participated in the ‘Alfred Wallis’ courses (a total of 13 participated, 3 have not given feedback). For 6 of the students, it has been twelve months since completing the course, for 4 it has been two years.

Students were asked to respond to a set of questions and their feedback is listed below, in categories that reflect the areas they were asked to tell us about.

Overall, feedback yielded that students experienced a ‘snowball’ effect on different levels and in many areas, and students experienced ‘change’ in significant ways.

The Course Format

All students responded positively to the format of the course - ‘the course was so interesting, the way it was formulated, where it took place, what it was about was highly motivating, even though I had a tough and challenging time personally. The talking and discussing was very tiring, but I had a real desire to pursue the course’.

Students have repeatedly raised the course format (theory partnered with practical technical exercises) as a positive key point about the course. The bite-sized chunks of information and exercises were stimulating and manageable. The content taught core technical art skills and language which had an empowering effect because students felt they had gained knowledge and insight, and were able to make connections when looking at other art and when making their own.

One student commented, ‘It was a top-notch experience both socially and in terms of the exercises we were given to do…”

One student indicated that he felt there was too much writing on the course.

Technical Skills

All students indicated they had gained improved skills technically in one or more areas of the following: drawing, colour, composition, expressive writing.

Half of the students continue to use specific skills in their artwork on an on-going basis.

All students indicated they had gained knowledge and understanding particularly in composition.

One student stated that the expressive writing exercises had given him the confidence to experiment on the computer. This is significant for this student, as his literacy skills are limited and are a great source of anxiety.

Another student now uses expressive writing to keep a diary of her current college experience.
One student indicated that he ‘thinks things through more…thinking how colours relate or clash…being able to use artistic language appropriately’ when making a piece of his own artwork.

Another student now carries a sketchbook ‘for opportunities to draw and sketch’.

**Confidence**

7 of the 10 students indicated that they had experienced significant growth in their levels of confidence. For 5 of the students this related directly to their artwork ‘I feel more able to talk about my art and art clearly, which makes me feel more confident’.

For 2 students, their confidence levels were improved when in the public domain, ‘the course helped me come out from under’. Another indicated that increased confidence enabled him to participate in an event in a larger, busier art gallery and that he feels different about visiting art galleries: ‘I feel more confident in my likes and dislikes with the confidence to express myself’.

Being in a situation where opinions had to be shared in a group had a significant impact, with the majority of students indicating significant growth in their confidence levels. One student said: ‘Meeting and talking with strangers….since doing the course I have had more confidence to talk in groups than I have had for years’.

Students liked and responded to the theory of art teaching and believed they understood art issues more effectively as a result. This increase in knowledge gave them the information to support their personal opinions and this in turn has lead to a growth in confidence in social situations or in groups.

**Critical Analysis**

Talking, discussing, debating, expressing personal opinions, writing, and reflecting played a big part on the course. Students indicated that they had improved significantly in their knowledge about appreciating a piece of art and examining a piece of art. This belief in increased knowledge enabled the students to feel they could communicate more effectively when talking about art, and when expressing their own opinions about a piece of art, ‘I feel more confident in my likes and dislikes with the confidence to express myself….to take a contrary view in a group’.

All 10 students indicated that they felt more able to appreciate a piece of artwork whether they liked it or not following the course.

8 of the 10 also indicated that in addition they felt more able to examine and talk about what makes a piece of art successful - 'I am more open minded…I used to be more opinionated in a narrower sense'.

9 of the 10 students felt more able to participate in group discussions about art. 8 of the 10 students felt more able to talk to others about their art, why they make it and what it's about. One student stated that he is better able to listen to others.

One student indicated that she now views being able to work in a larger group as an actual skill.
One student has since participated in two Madforarts events in public art galleries, having to communicate about art to the general public. His view now is that ‘critical analysis is a life skill appropriate to all manner of circumstances’.

**Anxiety**

Half felt better able to manage anxiety levels, one stating that participating in a group helped generally.

One student highlighted that she has recently participated in a case study presentation, and experienced increased ability to manage her anxiety levels, stating ‘I was very relaxed’.

Half did not respond to the question.

**Self-perception**

7 of the 10 students indicated they would be more likely to describe themselves as artists, one stating: ‘Learning about Wallis….made me realise that I’m an artist too, because I have creativity and skills’.

One student now sees the course as an opportunity not only to learn how to appreciate art, but also as an opportunity to learn and again understanding of the self. ‘Art is the relationship between the viewer and viewed. Art is an expression of mind and only exists through mind via the relationship’.

**The Gallery Setting**

Students responded positively to working in a public gallery - one said: ‘I have always liked visiting art galleries and museums. Now, I think, I look at paintings and other art forms with open eyes’.

9 of the 10 students indicated that they now use galleries differently to before, stating that they either felt more comfortable about it, felt they had more understanding or were more confident in the setting.

One student made the comment that ‘I see them and use them differently now - I take my time more, look more closely at the art…it was certainly an in-depth exploration of the potential offered at the Whitworth’

One student would visit galleries with a support worker on a regular basis with the worker choosing the gallery and exhibition. Now this student makes the selection and actually conducts a tour for the worker, using his gained technical knowledge and confidence to talk about the art work.

**Lasting Effects**

All but one student said that the course had a significant lasting effect. The following are statements taken from the feedback:
‘...having the opportunity to do a new course like this can help you gain confidence to try the next new thing to come along’.

‘I will always remember the course with affection...’

‘I am more aware of my own biases and prejudices which in turn gives more control over mind’.

‘Increase in confidence and greater control of anxiety...’

‘I loved learning about Alfred Wallis, who he was and how he worked’.

‘I look at pictures and other artwork more carefully, to get a better understanding of why the artist has chosen the scene and colours’.

‘I now like to know the history behind the artist. To me this helps in seeing the picture’.

‘I have a lasting memory of the different contexts that art involves’.

‘Maybe it’s made me more likely to visit art galleries’.

**Doing Another Course**

All participating students indicated they would do another course. The following are some of their reasons why:

Because of the outcomes of this course, students were keen to study a similar course to learn more about art and other art forms, and to learn more about themselves

Other reasons to study further included to practice anxiety management, to increase confidence and social skills, for enjoyment, to work in a gallery again, to gain further skills in communication

‘Studying the artist in depth was very interesting’.

‘Because I learned so much’.

‘I would use a further course to continue learning about my own perceptions and perhaps change some aspects of my own mindset’.