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How young artist/facilitators use their unsettled identity to develop creative ageing practice

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Abstract: This article explores the practices of three young artist/facilitators, illustrating how they use their own age identity to develop expertise working with older people in residential care homes. A research process of reflective dialogues reveals that they respond to the arts and drama based workshop practices at creative ageing organisation Equal Arts with a growing value of their youthfulness. A self-defined 'unsettled' nature facilitates their work with older people, some with dementia who also share an 'unsettled' identity. The young practitioners are able to operate positively through relationships with older people, as well as re-view and re-new their own identity as artist/facilitators.

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‘I think they enjoy the young-ness of me, Liv and Aimee, I think they enjoy how we are a bit, kind of, *unsettled*’

Crawshaw

Poppy Crawshaw, Olivia Hunt and Aimee Robertson have been employed post-graduation by Equal Arts, a leading creative ageing organisation based in Gateshead, UK that aims to improve well-being through arts activities. Reflective dialogues illustrate how these young practitioners frame their own developing expertise within relationships informed by age. On-going research discussed here reveals their growing understanding of the specific nature of the work with older people and can be seen to indicate a shift from a leader of activities to an emphasis on *becoming themselves* as artist/facilitators.

My thesis of responsivity outlines how all practitioners are themselves open to development and change through the work (see Hepplewhite, 2016). Experienced workers value their own growth and change in response to the collaborative practices, as well as aiming for a beneficial experience for participants. This notion may be a surprise for less experienced artist/facilitators as their initial concerns (rightly) prioritise participant experience until they are able to reflect with greater complexity.

The three Equal Arts practitioners have a growing understanding of the value of their ‘young-ness’ (as Crawshaw identifies) and their own potential for change. I propose that what

Crawshaw recognises as an ‘unsettled’ nature aids development of their applied theatre expertise. Although not the subjects of this research, the older participants (many of whom have dementia) share this ‘unsettled’ identity and reciprocally benefit from the age difference within the work.

The three graduates worked as apprentices at Equal Arts for a year after their university placements, benefitting from developmental support and a programme of shadowing experienced artists employed at the organisation. The reflective dialogues cited here involve a research method designed to analyse practitioners in participatory work, including initial discussion about the context, previous workshops, and objectives for the activities (see Hepplewhite 2014). Recorded interviews were undertaken immediately after observation of the sessions in three care homes, where each practitioner was running a series of weekly workshops.

Discussion with Equal Arts co-director Alice Thwaite supported the analysis summarised here. Thwaite has commissioned work with older people over many years and is part of an international network of creative ageing work. Thwaite emphasised qualities of ‘noticing’ that contribute to successful artists’ practice in this field of work, ‘the artists do the noticing, they notice other people’s creativity, and validate it, and celebrate it. And I think that’s key to being really good at this work.’ She suggested the young practitioners were developing this quality. Her comments chime with James Thompson’s emphasis on ‘attentiveness’ that he sees as part of an ‘aesthetics of care’ involving a ‘set of values realised in a relational process’ (2015: 437).

The young practitioner’s focus on ‘noticing’ the old people was revealed when they analysed the sessions in the reflective dialogues. Hunt stated, ‘what I liked about that session was an exchanging in views and experiences ... not assuming that they are not interested in

modern-day things - music and dance'. The three have developed individual drama-based approaches including use of props, costume, music, craft and storytelling. Hunt blended sing along (accompanied by her recently acquired banjo playing) with shared stories about going out in Newcastle now and in the past, stimulated by a dance-hall photo. Crawshaw's session involved a section where residents got chance to wear a crown and discuss what they would do if they were queen or king for a day. All the work allowed space for participants to dwell in the processes their own way.

Robertson had organised a series of workshops themed by colour - this week blue - and encouraged the participants to interact with items pulled from a bag one by one. Objects stimulated different responses, imaginative applications and narratives from the group. Towards the end of the session, a small installation had been created on the floor that made up a character's figure. Holding 'her' blue sequined top against themselves, each woman then played out their version of this person, embodying and vocalising different interpretations. Afterwards, in our dialogue, Robertson discussed how she thought their own clothes were dull, in some cases chosen for them by a care worker, suggesting sensitivity to a perceived loss of agency for the residents. With the sparkly top, she said, 'they could get to go to the ball', perhaps also reflecting her own interest in dressing up to go out.

Robertson's workshop was conducted from the floor while those around her sat on chairs. She reflected this was partly informed by perceived ownership of each chair or area of the room; she did not feel she had the authority to take someone's seat. The older women had initially tried to get her to sit with them, '“come on bonnie lass you'll hurt your knees”', but Robertson seemed to enjoy how her arrangements represented a disruptive challenge. She asserted her own way of being in the space, although it unsettled the conventions in the home. Sitting on the floor was physically available to her and suggested a symbol of her youthfulness. The seating established a structure with the residents placed above the

facilitator, making an offer of renewed agency. She stated, ‘now, when I sit on the floor they know it’s gonna start’, signalling a shift in the dynamic.

Robertson’s observed enthusiasm was lively, with an infectious sense of pleasure that built up through the process of the workshop. The small group of women laughed a lot throughout. Robertson’s criteria for evaluating positive impact for participants prioritised their enjoyment. She proudly noted one woman’s expression of discovery ‘“we have fun over here”’. Robertson wanted the work to have ‘an energy that invites people in to play’. Rather than seeing their workshops as a set of activities to be completed, she also noted the need to attend to pace, sometimes slowing down to match the group. All the young practitioners were starting to value shared, sensory, creative experiences, that exemplify what Helen Nicholson described as ‘a slower process of inhabitation, experienced affectively, over time’ (2016: 250).

Crawshaw compared the pace with how she runs sessions for young people, ‘I don’t feel like there’s *less* activity, I just mean you’re letting things happen rather than planning [lots of activities] ... there’s no clamping on things, you just let things develop’. The ‘youngness’ of the practitioners may initially create a preference for ‘planning’ and activity in a secure structure. Even where their training highlights the need to be responsive with participants, allowing location and participation to guide the work in the moment had been learned through doing and discovery.

Geriatrician G. Allen Power promotes an experiential approach to caring for those with dementia, promoting therapeutic benefits of arts approaches that relate less to an *activity*, which mirror the concerns and drives of a younger people’s world of action, and more to the notion of sharing in a creative, sensory experience (2010: 117). Crawshaw’s

'letting things happen' chimes with Power's experiential approach and indicates a developing understanding of age and the potential of *being with* the older group members.

The benefits to well-being of bringing together younger and older participants in creative activity are widely researched but rarely focus on change for the facilitators. Work is credited, for example, with 'creating and sustaining intergenerational solidarity and transmitting life skills, culture, and history between generations' (Cook and Bailey, 2013: 411) and 'opportunities for meaningful social interaction' (ibid: 416). Although not an intergenerational practice in terms of the participants, these reflective dialogues suggest that age difference has an impact on the young artist/facilitators. Discussion revealed how perception of themselves as developing artist/facilitators was negotiating through engagement with the older people and contact with the experience of dementia. As Hunt stated, 'It's not just me going in and thinking that they don't have anything to offer ... not assuming that they're not interested in modern-day things'.

Crawshaw recognised the potential benefit offered by being herself, 'I used to think "I wish I was a little bit older, in my thirties or forties", cos I felt like a kid ... but actually now I see it as a massive advantage being this young'. Situating herself in the work fed her understanding and developed facilitation expertise. A focus on the age relations at the heart of the practice shows that the artist's youthful identity can enrich, rather than hinder, work with older people. Identity is noted by Nicola Hatton in her writing about performance makers working with care home residents, outlining how 'finding creative ways of expressing the multiplicity of selves that make up the identities of people with dementia ... [demonstrates] how identity and autonomy are experienced in relation to others' (2016: 254). Utilising a perception of 'unsettled' self (as Crawshaw articulated, above) within relationships in the work, the young practitioners are able to attend more positively to others, as well as re-view and re-new their identity as artist/facilitators.

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