

# Art of Living Creatively

Apex Arts in Collaboration with Plymouth Mind

Newsletter 2 Winter 2016



Apex Arts working in collaboration with Plymouth & District Mind are now half way through delivering a two-year singing/song-writing, creative arts and performance project in Plymouth entitled The Art of Living Creatively (ALC). Funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation's Explore and Test grant the bi-weekly project is aimed at people who experience anxiety and social isolation which may inhibit them from leading a creative and fulfilling life. The grant is looking to see whether participation in and ease of access to the arts makes a difference to their lives. The project is being evaluated by Operation Emotion.

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## **Resume**

The end of the first quarter of the project saw the ALC participants working creatively together, writing original lyrics, starting to understand melody, forming a project theme, forging friendships and a growing commitment to the project and each other. With a core of 7 people all now confident at sharing their writing ideas everyone was looking forward to continuing after the summer and also welcoming new participants.

## **Moving Forward**

Apex wanted to keep up the momentum reached in the first quarter and so quickly returned to working on the original song lyrics generated from the emotional drawings. Initially working in small

groups participants were encouraged and supported to come up with melodic ideas to accompany the lyrics that had already been written. These were then captured on a recorder and performed back to each other. This approach reinforced confidence in performing and sharing ideas and it also inspired some participants to write extra verses at



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home, in one case completely finishing a song.

The recordings were used between sessions to find chord structures and rhythms under the melodies for the band and it was always a delight to be able to play these back at following sessions as most people couldn't remember the tunes they had come up with and wouldn't have believed they had written it if it hadn't been recorded. We then worked in a large group, accompanied by the band, learning and improvising around these vocal ideas, looking for extra parts and harmonies. These sessions were also recorded and played back so the group could decide themselves what parts worked or didn't work within the song. The group saw how a song takes on an identity and some people started having costume/performance ideas based on this.

We also started the quarter with a new song using the set of themed lyrics provided by a participant and written in the style of one of his favourite groups – The Rah Band.



It was decided that the group would put on a small informal performance to friends and colleagues working at Plymouth Mind on the last session of the year, December 13<sup>th</sup>. We aimed to have finished and rehearsed four complete songs to perform and emphasised that this was a 'work in progress' to lessen anxiety and allay pressure over

performance expectations whilst still providing the next step in performance experience.

### **Attendee changes**

Over the quarter period we have retained our 7 core members with a new percussionist joining us for a few sessions but unfortunately deciding against joining. Another new member joined for a couple of sessions, recruited via the positive comments of a participant,



however he decided he was "looking for more of a community choir rather than a therapeutic group". However, we have now had interest from a further two people interested in trialling the session in the New Year.

Due to the anxieties most people feel around large groups it has been decided to keep numbers down to 10 participants. Participants' ages maintain a range from mid-twenties to sixties with a ratio of 3:4 female to male. No current participants are diagnosed with Learning Disabilities but all experience social isolation and anxiety due to either having mental health issues or being on the Autism Spectrum.

### **Feedback from attendees**

Feedback continues to be a regular feature at the sessions both planned and informal as the group becomes more familiar with each other. The feedback is always used constructively and ideas incorporated into future sessions. Feedback from participants who leave



the group is also shared as it all helps determine the group: "Russell has decided the effort of getting to and from the session and socialising whilst there does not balance with time spent singing and playing – it tires him out too much. We are very impressed with the songs and musicianship achieved by the group. Russell has regained confidence in his percussion skills thanks to you all." Feedback is also used for people to unite whether by expressing their pleasure in singing or expressing their performance anxieties – the feedback enables the group to be able to support each other. One participant, caring for his terminally ill father, came along to the group as in his own words "you guys help recharge my batteries".

### **Anecdotal progress from attendees**

Progress has continued in this second quarter enabling the group to grow stronger as they confidently create together. One new support worker kept repeating "I'm amazed!, I'm amazed!" as he looked on in wonder at the participant he accompanied, working alongside





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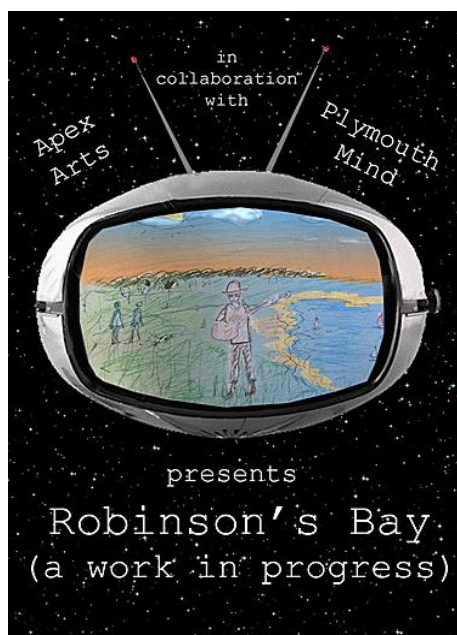
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another participant, coming up with vocal tunes for a verse and chorus.



Another person, who had never sung in front of people before, took on a lead vocal at the December performance stating “Your encouragement is very inspiring and motivating. You have all given me confidence to find my voice and sing”.

Towards the end of the quarter Apex asked the participant who had initially named Robinson Bay whether he could sketch his impression of Robinson Bay. This participant had previously brought in his sketchpad to show the trainers his drawings. A couple of hours later he brought along a painting that was coloured and used in the performance programme.



## Skills learned

Introductory games, toning and vocal warm-ups were a regular activity making sure that everyone was calm and focussed - one participant mentioned using toning at home to stay calm. Exercises based around rhythm, humming, clapping, articulation and breathing all provide essential musical skills ie learning snatch breaths for faster sections of songs with lots of words, counting in at the correct tempo and staying in time.

The songwriting processes described above helped the group understand that there were no such things as bad ideas –



all were part of the process used to reach the final musical decision and in the end people couldn't remember who'd actually come up with the final ideas – so everyone took ownership of the songs.

The performance enabled some participants to perform and sing in front of an external audience for the first time (encouraged by those who had previously performed). A couple of participants sang lead vocal at this performance for the first time and one very shy participant spoke a solo narrative to the audience gaining performance experience.

## Next steps

We had initially aimed to have written all of the six songs and started some of the visual work before the end of this quarter. However, the group became so confident with their ideas that they wrote interesting and intricate melodies and

structures that required more time and work and so we ended up focussing on finishing 4 songs this year. The group would like to keep refining these songs alongside finishing the other 2 lyrical ideas from the emotional work. These songs will be rehearsed and worked up into a show ready for two performances in May/June.

Also visual work will start on the theme of Robinson's Bay, written by one participant and adopted by the group, which has already been visualised and images recorded for use in the coming quarter. Names, colour schemes, costumes and other outcomes will be decided within the group at the forthcoming sessions but it will initially be focussed again on the performance.

## Lessons learned by trainers

Over this quarter the trainers have learnt to be more flexible with the participant's bi-weekly commitment, sharing their support and that of the rest of the group when people are unable to make it whether it be due to trips abroad to visit family, interviews with benefit offices, bereavements, bad days or other commitments that have made attendance difficult on workshop days. By keeping the dialogue and door open it has made it possible for those having missed a few sessions to be able to return, still feeling welcome and a part of the group.

Unfortunately the group is not suitable for everyone - one person struggled with the break times and social aspect which is



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such an important part of the session, others only wanted to sing songs, more like a choir or karaoke and another disliked singing completely and only wanted to be creative. However, we have learnt that the sessions still held an important role in allowing people to make decisions and find out more about themselves. In total there have been

four people who have decided to leave and each time their messages have been relayed back to the group. This has not dampened the group's spirit as they continue to try to enrol other people "I can't help sharing my enthusiasm for the benefits of the Tuesday meetings". The trainers have also learnt how essential the planning sessions between

workshops are for facilitators to be able to keep the dynamism of the group alive, working responsively and offering flexibility.

### Contacts

The Art of Living Creatively can be contacted by email: [info@apexarts.org.uk](mailto:info@apexarts.org.uk) or by calling Jacqui on 07789 020948.



1. Robinson's Bay
2. Come Along With Me
3. Flamenco Feet
4. Orange Sky

 **mind**  
for better mental health  

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