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‘We’re all on the path ourselves’: The ‘reflective practitioner’ in participatory arts with older people

ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of the ‘reflective practitioner’ in participatory arts projects with older people, as articulated by creative practitioners themselves. Research into participatory arts activity with older people, which focuses on the process rather than the outcome of such activity remains sparse, as does scholarship that engages closely with artist-practitioners themselves as a rich source of knowledge and insight in this field. Supported by theory concerning the development and utility of reflective praxis, the article foregrounds the perspectives of a range of experienced artist-practitioners, as obtained through interviews and the findings of a ‘reflective learning group’ practitioner CPD programme. Research found that the creative practitioners consulted had developed a range of diverse reflective practices in order to engage and nurture the older participants they worked with, including: highly flexible and dialogic approaches; seeking ‘kinaesthetic empathy’ with participants; applying a form of ‘micro-responsiveness’ to participants; and fostering strong reflective practices among participants themselves. These findings hold important implications as to how we understand the processes by which practitioners enhance participant experience in the participatory arts, how creative practitioners are best supported in their work, and for the design, management and evaluation of participatory arts projects.

KEYWORDS

older people
participatory arts
creative practitioners
reflective practice
facilitation
training

In this article I explore the role of the 'reflective practitioner' in facilitating participatory arts activity with older people. Foregrounding the perceptions and experiences of creative practitioners themselves, and presenting these accounts in practitioners' own words, I explore the valuable contribution that practitioners can make to the research community, in terms of how we understand processes of creative facilitation with older people and in other participatory arts settings, and what these findings might contribute to our understanding of 'reflective practice' more broadly.

In Neelands' discussion of reflective practice in drama education settings, the author suggests that 'the reflective practitioner position describes a particular self-orientation towards understanding and improving one's own practice rather than towards a research of practice by external researchers' (2006: 16). The comparison is a valid one and is set out by Neelands in order to ascribe fresh and distinct value to the insights of the reflective practitioner. However, despite the doubtless 'self-orientation' of such reflective practice, I suggest many creative practitioners hold knowledge and understanding that has rich potential for practical and theoretical application, but is rarely afforded sufficient audience to fulfil this potential.

Furthermore, in the field of participatory arts, research interest continues to lie with the outcomes of project activity, as opposed to the rich possibilities of process and experience. As neatly summarised by Thompson (2009), there remains a profound need to move from away from 'effect' and towards 'affect' in the participatory arts. I suggest the call for such a shift is particularly strident in the field of older people's arts activity. Research into the participatory arts among older people continues to be dominated by impact studies investigating the twin fields of 'health and well-being' (Cohen 2006; Cutler 2009; Castora-Binkley et al. 2010; Skingley and Vella-Burrows 2010; McLean 2011; Noice et al. 2014). This widespread interest in outcomes suggests a continued need for 'advocacy research' (Gilbert 1997) able to justify the value of such arts activity through a quantitative evidence base, in turn reflecting an ongoing instrumentalist bent in the funding of community arts projects and programmes (Belfiore 2004; Clements 2007). However, such approaches have tended to neglect the rich and complex processes at the heart of such participatory work and also to delimit the research contribution of two of its key agents: participants and artist-facilitators. As bluntly stated by Jennings and Baldwin (2010), 'practitioners' and participants' experiences and backgrounds have been either ignored or reduced to quantitative indicators for the fulfilment of socio-political objectives. There has been little space for the development of ongoing critical and reflective practice' (2010: 73). Recent studies on arts activity among older people have sought to engage with participants more closely in the research process, championing the value of qualitative data and calling for greater concentration on the processes by which creative interaction unfolds in participatory settings, as opposed to outcomes alone (Lally 2009; Allison 2010). However, the contributions of the artist-facilitator to this process and the insight and knowledge such individuals hold (beyond assisting with 'practical handbooks') is rarely brought to the fore in scholarly contexts.

This article seeks to redress these imbalances. Based on extensive exchanges with artist-facilitators and material drawn from observing a CPD programme for experienced practitioners, I seek to outline some of the core principles and approaches judged to be critical in this field of older people's arts participation, as articulated by practitioners themselves. Central to my findings was

facilitators' emphasis on reflective practice in order to engage most effectively, ethically and creatively with participants. This article aims to ascribe a concerted scholarly value to these reflections, promoting their practical application and placing these findings in the broader context of 'reflective practice' theory. Returning to Neelands' distinction between the 'self-orientation' of the reflective practitioner and the research of practice by the 'external researcher', this article attempts to bridge the gap between these two positions. As one such 'external researcher' engaged by an arts institution, I am acutely aware of my distance from the processes at the heart of participatory arts work, despite my frequent inroads into participant observation. However, in eliciting, collating and framing practitioner responses to the idea of reflective practice in work with older people, I hope to give a much overdue platform to the knowledge and understanding of the creative practitioners consulted.

This article first outlines the practical context of the research and activity before examining some of the theory surrounding the development and utility of 'reflective practice'. It then considers the types of reflection identified by a range of practitioners working with older people, and explores the nuances of 'reflective practice' as generated by this particular setting. From here the article explores ways institutions and commissioners may be able to better support 'the reflective practitioner' in this field, before considering how practitioners' discussions of working with older people may enhance our broader understanding of the processes and interactions that underpin the participatory arts.

THE PROGRAMMES: 'RETIRED NOT TIRED' AND 'SHARING PRACTICE'

This research explores two programmes, both located at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music & Dance. The first is the institution's 'Retired not Tired' programme of creative music and dance for older people, funded by Lewisham Council. The programme offers weekly singing, creative dance, and combined creative dance and singing sessions for local participants aged 60+. Four practitioners (dance artists Maria Ghoumrassi and Stella Howard, and music practitioners Zoe Gilmour and Natasha Lohan), who lead groups within the programme, were interviewed on their experiences and perceptions of working with older people. Alongside this, I have undertaken extensive participant-observation across sixteen months, attending two of the programme's sessions weekly while also conducting regular semi-structured interview and informal discussions with participants.

The second source of research data is the CPD programme 'Sharing Practice', a facilitated 'reflective learning group' for experienced older people's arts practitioners. The programme was co-hosted with the Older People's Arts Network (OPAN), a network of older people's arts providers within the London borough of Lewisham, which includes Age Exchange, Entelechy Arts, Greenwich Dance, Montage Theatre Arts, The Albany, and Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance. The 'Sharing Practice' reflective learning group was created in response to a need for CPD for experienced artists who had been working in the field of older people's arts for at least three years. It was supported as part of a funding award from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation's special initiative 'ArtWorks: Developing Practice in Participatory Settings'. Eight artists from across the OPAN network and working within a range of disciplines including music, dance, theatre and the visual arts met for an initial day's session facilitated by Clair Chapwell, an artist experienced in working with older people, who led a series of self- and co-reflective activities with

the participants. During the two-month interim between sessions, the participants then met separately to observe each other's practice *in situ*. The group re-convened early in 2014 to reflect back on these observations and to engage in some co-mentoring activities. Research data was gathered from my observing the CPD group sessions and from participant feedback surveys completed at the close of the programme.

THEORIES OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Contemporary definitions of 'reflective practice' abound and the phrase is understood in different ways across a range of different academic and practical disciplines. As Smyth ruefully suggests,

reflection can mean all things to all people ... everybody has his or her own (usually undisclosed) interpretation of what reflection means, and this interpretation is used as the basis for trumpeting the virtues of reflection in a way that makes it sound as virtuous as motherhood.

(1992: 285)

Notwithstanding the term's often hazy invocations, the roots of 'reflective practice' can be clearly traced back to the work of psychologist and philosopher John Dewey. Dewey was one of the first scholars to suggest reflection is a specialized form of thinking, defining it as 'active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends' (1933: 9). Critically, Dewey also framed his coinage of 'reflective thinking' as a kind of problem-solving, where such thought was understood 'to stem from doubt, hesitation or perplexity related to a directly experienced situation' (Finlay 2008: 3). Boud et al. (1985) extended Dewey's approach by adding a more subjective and emotional dimension to the process. Here, reflection is defined as when people 'recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it' (1985: 19). However, this conceptualization of 'reflection' is primarily retroactive, taking place only after the event. Donald Schön's seminal *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (1983) was to animate the notion of critical reflection by dividing the term into 'reflection-on-action' and 'reflection-in-action'. The latter, rather like the notion of 'thinking on one's feet', suggested that reflection can also unfold alongside the 'event' itself, where the practitioner is engaged in a continuous process of learning, modifying their practice moment-by-moment in response to the social environment around them:

the practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation.

(Schön 1983: 68)

In a neat synthesis of these two forms, Killion and Todnem (1991) have subsequently coined the term 'reflection-for-action'. Defined as the 'desired outcome of both previous types of reflection', 'reflection-for-action' describes the process whereby a practitioner draws on the findings from their

accomplished reflective practices to review future plans and identify new goals and approaches (1991: 15).

As discussed above, Neelands (2006) reimagines the role of the reflective practitioner in a drama education context, and highlights the contracts between conventional research enquiry and the fruits of 'practitioner reflexivity'. Drawing on Taylor (2000), Neelands suggests reflexive practice to be 'a way of life; it is not bounded in the same way as outsider models of research. It refers to the nurturing and development of life-long dispositions and the ongoing and continuous self-inquiry into one's own professional practice' (2006: 17). Neelands also cites the critical theory of Habermas (1971) as central to more radical approaches to reflexive practice. For Habermas, reflection is a tool that can be used to develop particular forms of knowledge that support individuals to question and challenge the forces and patterns that might control them (be it social, economic, religious) and thus work towards emancipation (1971: 310–11). In terms of the practice's meaning and utility, Freire (1998) notes how this notion of reflexivity-in-practice has a strong ethical dimension, particularly in pedagogical contexts. Here reflexive approaches to practice are seen as forging a dialogic relationship between learner and teacher, allowing both parties agency in shaping the learning experience.

The idea of reflective practice as the keystone to creativity has also been widely discussed (Dawson 2003; Walker 2004; Byers and Forinash 2004). Csikszentmihalyi highlights the dual roles of 'involvement and detachment' as crucial to the autotelic structure of the creative process, where the creator deploys periods of reflection within the 'detached' phases of the creative cycle (1996: 123, 248). The idea of the artist as 'reflective self-learner' is highlighted by Grushka, who suggests that the very epistemological basis of the arts, primarily their subjectivity, prompts the 'effective artist ... to position himself/herself as both creator and audience and through critical reflection validate self-knowledge and allow audiences to engage with a multiplicity of interpretive positions they present' (2005: 354).

This emphasis on reflection as integral to the creative process is similarly strong within discussion of arts education (Craft 2005; Thornton 2005; Burnard and Hennessey 2006; Hilton 2006). In advocating the role of reflection in arts education Burnard highlights the precise value of 'the artist's approach', stressing how 'reflective time engages us intrinsically in a sharply-focused attentive mode of function. Artists in particular give themselves over to a virtually continuous reflective time, placing reflection at the heart of the creative process' (2006: 3). As such, Burnard urges a healthy cross-pollination between arts and education bodies, suggesting that the arts community should 'consider the impact of reflective arts practices and what we need to do to connect reflective cultures and communities of practice at the arts-education interface' (2006: 3). However, in terms of the participatory arts, as opposed to the arts in education, while the term 'reflective practice' is, in the words of one practitioner consulted, 'bandied about a lot in relation to projects', it is rarely the subject of scholarly attention and often absent from the evaluative investigation of community projects and programmes. Taylor (2003) has stridently called for evaluation processes that better explore the experiences of the 'reflective practitioner' and engage directly with participant perspectives. However, as Jennings and Baldwin note, while projects frequently generate extensive and informative 'reflective discussions', all too often none of this 'rich data' is suitably captured to inform other practitioners and future projects (2010: 82). This article seeks to draw out just such 'rich data' in the context of

work with older people and to re-‘humanize’ our discussion of the creative processes at the centre of the participatory arts (Chappell 2011).

THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER IN ACTION

The sections below explore the various ways in which the practitioners consulted define, discuss and enact notions of ‘reflective practice’. Each section is structured around commentary provided by artist-facilitators concerning their approaches to and perceptions of their own reflective practice, with a particular focus on these practitioners’ work with older people. These commentaries are drawn from interviews and e-mail exchanges with Trinity Laban practitioners working on the ‘Retired not Tired’ programme and from discussions that took place between practitioners at the ‘Sharing Practice’ CPD sessions. It should be noted that all the practitioners consulted were keen to stress that many of their approaches would be the same working with any age group, placing particular emphasis on such core values as integrity and inclusivity. However, the practitioners also highlighted particular dimensions to their work with older people that demanded different emphases, especially that associated with more reflective approaches, as are laid out below.

FROM THE DIDACTIC TO DIALOGIC

At the centre of many practitioners’ approaches when working with older people was a shift towards strongly dialogic models of interaction. Several practitioners stated that they felt drawn away from more structured, didactic models in their work with older people. Stella Howard (dance practitioner at Trinity Laban) noted:

I don’t teach [when working with older people]. I learnt that quickly: that I’m not there to teach. I make a space where people feel confident to move how they want to move. You can facilitate with this age group. You can open up the discussion in creating a collaborative environment, but you can’t be so directorial in the way you might be with a group of young people.

Other practitioners went on to describe how this kind of approach meant that sessions needed to remain flexible and responsive, as opposed to drawing on more fixed plans:

I find work with younger people is often highly structured. Whereas with this work [with older people], you never know what you’re going to find – there can be no map to guide you.

I think it’s something that some new practitioners struggle with – or practitioners who only work with younger people – because they maybe can’t be quite so flexible on the spot, they still stick to their lesson plans and their schemes of work. Mine are quite fluffy! They are trees with many branches.

A lot of it is about supporting autonomy: [the older participants’] choices, responses, artistic decisions.

Practitioners suggested that this kind of collaborative endeavour, where each participant may have a particularly clear voice, engendered a particularly reflective mode of operating:

I think you have to be reflective with this age group because they can be far more vocal than any other group I've worked with – they want to know where the stimulus is coming from; where the project's going; why you're working in this way. So you have to be able to think about what you're doing and why you're doing it so you can articulate it to them ... you have to be reflective enough in your practice to be able to explain your processes at all times – and to acknowledge if it's working or not working.

Natasha Lohan (music practitioner at Trinity Laban) also noted a clear shift away from the demand for more structured, didactic approaches among a group of older people she works with. Natasha discussed how this development grew in tandem with the group establishing a new identity as an egalitarian, co-creating group:

I'd say we're actually an art group, a devising music and theatre group that got together. They've come for all sorts of reasons, looking for leadership, but they're in a position where they're ready to take ownership ... so we're now in a facilitated, peer-led situation rather than a top-down approach.

For Natasha, this sense of co-creation has in turn engendered a strong culture of reflection in this group's proceedings, both for her as one of its artist-facilitators and also among its participants: 'it's about reflective thinking across the board, because the more we become a democratic arts group, the more we need to do that'.

JUDGING THE MOMENT

Several practitioners went on to talk about how this more flexible approach might function in practice, discussing a particular form of 'micro-responsiveness' or indeed an ongoing 'reflection-in-action' (Schön 1983) that they felt was demanded when interacting with groups of older people. As a practitioner on the CPD programme stated, 'it's all about judging the moment, reading the signs'. Zoe Gilmour notes how central to her work is the need to be

carefully watching and listening to the tiny details and responses that emerge ... It's an instinctive method, based on the accumulation of skills and experience, responding to and bouncing off ideas and feelings that come from the people I work with.

Zoe also stressed the implications this nuanced approach has for approaching training and programme development for arts activity with older people: 'I do provide training for people but I have realised that I am not interested in developing and "rolling out" a prescriptive model of working, rather in kindling people's ability to listen, watch, respond and create together'.

Practitioners noted how such flexibility and spontaneity can be the source of particularly creative work. Zoe Gilmour highlights how this sense of 'anything can happen' fuels her work as an artist-facilitator:

I have no sense of repetition in my work – every individual or group is different and I always start right at the beginning, try to clear away any preconceptions before I start afresh. This way of working is very

time-consuming, however it energizes me and keeps me interested, creative and focused.

Natasha Lohan notes how a responsive approach and some well-handled happenstance enabled a music and dance group to find an enriching new voice and artistic direction:

There are these little accidents that happen along the way. I was working with a Ginsberg poem in my own [composition] practice and when I was halfway through working on it I thought: we should use this with the group. I only choose words for their plosives and vowel sounds – for how they feel – so I really wasn't thinking about what those words mean semantically ... but then I found that the group *were* doing that. I was getting that fed back to me in a different ways – what they did, what they said – and I was thinking 'gosh' – I could see then what this could mean to individuals.

(original emphasis)

Sensing this response from the group, new opportunities were created for participants to engage with the text in more direct ways. Through collaboration with a dance practitioner, the group began to explore the text line-by-line, adding movement and then props: 'Maria [Ghoumrassi, dance practitioner at Trinity Laban] brought in these blue cloths and we found it liberated people vocally, because they were suddenly working so consciously with this other external device that they were just letting go'.

This flexible collaboration, where the practitioners shifted their aims and plans in response to the group's dynamic, resulted in a series of exploratory improvisations across a number of weeks that became a highlight of the group's work that year: 'The improvisations that emerged were for me a high point of a slow moving line that took a sudden curve up – and I think it's changed the group forever'.

The importance of such thinking on the spot, described by this same practitioner as 'reading the group ... reading the room', was demonstrated in an exercise at the first CPD 'Sharing Practice' session. The participating practitioners were asked to present an 'experience sculpture': a frozen tableaux that enacted a notable recent experience when working with older people. The sculptures created each shared moments of such 'reflection-in action', where practitioners were faced with challenging situations that demanded swift engagement and resolution.

One such 'sculpture' featured a practitioner with hands anxiously clasped under her chin. The practitioner explained the gesture with an account of an incident concerning a play-making workshop with older people, when a new participant entered the room and suggested an entirely new direction for the stories and characters already agreed. The practitioner described how she had at first struggled to find a way to support the participant to contribute constructively, realizing that by giving this participant a platform, the participant was now obstructing the flow of the group. The practitioner discussed how she internally noted this disruption (and it was this moment of recognition and anxiety that the practitioner had enacted in the sculpture) and then worked towards a resolution by initiating a discussion with the whole group to yield responses to these new suggestions, thus giving the group permission and responsibility to respond directly to their new addition and together forge a way through.

However, as one practitioner noted, the complexity of certain situations means modifying one's approach can sometimes only occur after a particular event rather than simultaneously, akin to 'reflection-for-action' (Killion and Todnem 1991). As one practitioner summarized: 'It was good to discuss the difficulties and the limitations we might face i.e. what can be prevented and what can't. For some things we can only adapt afterwards'.

EMPATHY AND THE VALUE OF THE 'DISCOMFORT ZONE'

The importance of empathy generated through reflection, was highlighted by a number of the practitioners consulted as crucial to their work with older people. Invoking what might be termed a quest for 'kinaesthetic empathy' with her participants (Reynolds and Reason 2012), Zoe Gilmour described one of foundations of her practice as follows:

I always hang out and communicate with participants before I try to come up with any creative plans. When they are non-verbal, I try to get a sense of what their world is like and to feel my way from there.

Working across art forms was found to have strong impact on how facilitators might locate this kind of embodied empathy. One practitioner who was working alongside a colleague trained in a different discipline noted the unique insight into the experience of a participant that the more 'alien' art form gave the practitioners:

Both of us had to admit to our vulnerabilities when improvising in the other art form and, well, if we're challenged, then everyone else in the room is going to be feeling the same. We're all on the path ourselves ... I think that's key.

The idea that 'we're all on the path ourselves' is a powerful summary of the sense of openness to experience and vulnerability that many of the practitioners described as key to their practice with this age group. Stella Howard described one such experience where she decided to use a Kandinsky image as a stimulus for a dance activities: 'I was quite scared to bring in such a popular painting. I wondered: is this enough for such a cultured group? There's so much knowledge in each individual'.

Stella opened-up herself to a certain vulnerability by introducing a painting, which she sensed group members may have particularly strong opinions about. However, by being willing to enter such a 'discomfort zone' and allowing the group's response to guide the session, the practitioner yielded particularly rich results:

It was really interesting how much the participants enjoyed working with colour, as that was something I wouldn't have used as much. I'd been thinking about its straight and curved lines, and the directionality of the painting ... so we did an improvisation where we took a shape but then we thought about its colour and the group loved the colour ... it was absolutely manifest in their movement! So then we did a big mass improvisation that was just about colours ... The reaction it got was phenomenal.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AMONG PARTICIPANTS

Zoe Gilmour suggested one catalyst to her responsive approach derives from a particular sensibility she gauges among the older participants with whom she works. Zoe explained how she senses an intense form of personal reflection to be active among some of the older participants she works with, which in turn directs her own practice:

I learn from everyone I work with – I learn from toddlers or teenagers with complex disabilities, too. However it's true that older people are sometimes in a place where they have found what is truly of value for them; and this essence is what I've tried to learn from and respond to when working with people who are terminally ill or nearing end of life through old age or advanced dementia – what genuinely makes them 'tick', what brings energy and life to the individual who is losing their physical or mental faculties.

Maria Ghourrassi (dance practitioner at Trinity Laban) highlighted the respect she feels for older participants' physiological self-awareness, and how she has developed her practice to respond to this strong sense of self-perception:

I know [the participants'] bodies in so many ways, but only they *really* know their bodies ... So I am always asking: How does this feel? How does that feel? It's about constant feedback. What people say, how they respond.
(original emphasis)

The particular complexity of many older participants' lives was also raised as an area that meant finding extra space to reflect together on a group's activities and progress was judged to be important:

When we're finished [with a session] and there are things unsaid, people might be unhappy about something or a little off kilter. I think with this age group of people there are so many aspects of their lives that we know nothing about, so a discussion can really help allow all those voices to come out.

SUPPORTING 'THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER' IN WORK WITH OLDER PEOPLE

The 'Sharing Practice' reflective learning group sessions highlighted the tremendous value that the participating practitioners placed on peer-to-peer support, while also demonstrating the relative sparsity of such opportunities elsewhere. Practitioners noted how the current structures of arts provision for older people did not necessarily allow for extended engagement between practitioners, despite the particularly complex demands of this work:

One can end up working in a sort of vacuum. This work can be quite intense and focused down one route and way of thinking or approach – and you forget there are all these other people doing things in very different ways.

Despite comprising highly experienced practitioners with strong and consistent reflective practices, the group expressed a clear need for opportunities to

share experiences with peers in order to affirm their own perceptions and practices in this domain:

[It gave me] lots and lots of confirmation of my learning ... that you're not on your own!

It was nice to be confirmed as not-crazy ... and to be accepting about one's own practice; that you are your own worst critic.

... a sense of other people's practice with older adults, and also to either confirm my own practice or point it in the right direction if needed.

Three of the group's participants noted how the CPD programme had changed their methods of reflection in terms of depth and structure. One practitioner described how the sessions had brought them to the 'next step' in terms of how they planned to develop how they shared reflections with peers:

I am looking at different ways to discuss and explain experiences with and to colleagues. I have a clearer idea of how to structure reflection so that it can be of benefit to colleagues and fellow practitioners as well as to myself.

These benefits were gained not only through the active discussions and role-play exercises conducted during the group's gatherings, but also in peer observations carried out between sessions, where each practitioner attended and observed at least one other group member's work elsewhere. The practical value of watching another's practice and reflecting on it was judged to be insightful for the observing practitioner but also for the 'observed': 'it was great when being observed to feel that recognition – to hear some really great feedback from your peers about things you may also not be aware of. It's like the best kind of 'noticing' and cherishing'.

One of the most successful elements of the group's sessions was a series of 'co-mentoring' conversations. Here the practitioners worked in pairs, taking turns to bring up an issue, concern or question that their partner then responded to with open questions to help the person in the 'hotseat' find a resolution or develop new avenues to explore. The dialogic quality of strong reflective practice, as stressed by Freire (1998), was particularly valued by the practitioners in using this model; by assuming both roles in turn, participants' engagement assumed an acute quality of empathy: 'It was like having a mirror. When you're listening to someone you need to take in every bit of it and you have to ask about anything that's missing – in turn, it helped me see the bigger picture'.

The group discussed the kind of support that practitioners who work with older people receive from the institutions they work for and alongside. The practitioners noted that the sometimes piecemeal nature of arts provision for older people was reflected in the support practitioners (particularly freelancers) received. One practitioner noted that they sometimes felt like they were alone in driving their work's progress and legacy, particularly when working in care-home settings:

We're the ones that believe in the work – and the home or organisation ... they often aren't asking us to work – it's us pitching it to them – so *we* have to think strategically. *We* have to find the CPD

[needed] and *we* have to find the person in that environment who has a inkling of what [the work's] value is.

(original emphasis)

In turn, some practitioners highlighted the importance of having a sense of trust and space from the institutions they worked for and alongside, particularly given the flexibility embedded in these practitioners' approaches: '[This work] all requires that the institution trusts us: that they say "we give over to you"'.

Thus, while many of the findings from these CPD encounters are readily applicable across a range of other facilitated settings, they also highlight the particular challenges faced by practitioners working with older people in the participatory arts. They demonstrate the particular emotional demands of such intense but often isolated work and the impact of the field's scattered provision on those working at its coalface.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

While research exploring notions of 'reflective practice' in education and social-care settings abound (and continue to proliferate), accounts that focus on the role of the 'reflective practitioner' in the participatory arts, notably in work with older people, remain relatively sparse. The dialogic exchange at the heart of the participatory arts and the central role of practitioner in setting this exchange in motion, suggests a rich seam of research material ready to contribute to the notion of 'reflective practice'. Writing of reflective practice in education settings and the idea of 'teacher as artist', Jeffery (2004) invokes the value of 'community arts' as a valuable model for establishing new relations in the classroom. Here, the community arts are defined as where 'creative engagement is taken into a public and shared realm, facilitating relationships between learners or apprentices, and professionals ... occurring in a mental, social and physical space that is negotiated rather than prescribed' (Jeffery 2004 cited in Craft 2005: 144). As discussed by practitioners themselves, this sense of ongoing negotiation to forge a 'shared path', along which both practitioner and participant can progress together, closely binds together the practitioner commentaries presented. As highlighted by practitioners themselves, these qualities, while applicable across a broad spectrum of participatory arts, seem to find a particular concentration in work with older people. As such, the nuanced and highly reflective approach taken by these practitioners can be seen as a distillation or culmination of participatory arts ideology.

The accounts above are also presented to shed light on the real processes by which such participatory arts projects with older people unfold in practice. By focusing on the perceptions and experiences of creative practitioners, I hope to place new emphasis on the processes by which such projects and programmes enrich their participants. Practitioners here speak of the complex means by which they engage and nurture the participants with whom they work, be it through concerted discussion, 'reading the room' or the search for 'kinaesthetic empathy'. By foregrounding the creative practitioner as the central channel through which the participatory arts flow, we can re-humanize the outcomes-heavy persuasion of so much research on older people arts activity and reassert creative human interaction at the centre of the participatory arts endeavour.

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