The Black Dog Theatre Creation

Pilot study: Project Evaluation



**Overview**

Last year the Black Dog Theatre Creation Project was set up to support a group of adults who suffer from mental health issues and poor confidence and self-esteem. The project set out to use drama and performance skills to develop their confidence and to give them a sense of positive well-being and self believe.

Throughout the six-month project we worked closely in partnership with several local organisations including the “Together” organisation, Colchester Mind and The Colchester Arts Centre to make the project a success. The group of participants worked with a group of Artists’ to devise, rehearse and to perform their own theatrical piece in the round at the Colchester Arts Centre to a sell-out audience. For some of the participants taking part in the Black Dog Theatre Creation project was the first time they had ventured outside of their home and re-connected with society.

The Black Dog Theatre Creation project was a huge success in many ways and was commended upon by not just the participants themselves, but from their friends and families and other audience members.

The aims of the project

• To create a community project, that will develop a group of vulnerable peoples’ confidence, value and to offer a sense of purpose and independence.

• Explore some of the stigmas/problems attached with Mental Health in the wider community.

• Discuss positive ways in which these stigmas can be resolved.

1. In terms of evaluating whether we were successful in creating a community project, that developed a group of vulnerable peoples’ confidence and to offer a sense of purpose and independence we referred to the evaluations completed by the participants and the feedback from their friends and families. It was found that:

- When asked to compare how confident where they at the end of the project compared to at the beginning, there was a significant change. When asked to give a number 1-10 (1 being the lowest confident) all the participants had reported back with an average rise from 3 to 9. This was reflected by their comments in the group discussion after. Many of the participants remarked upon feeling stronger inside and like they had been given their voice back.

- Carol, whom was one of the participants’ told how before the project had started she had been too frightened to travel on the buses around Colchester. During the project, this confidence had returned, and she had been able to confront her fear and now uses the buses frequently.

- Peter, another participant told us how due to illness he had lost all confidence, but the project had given him the courage to get up and speak in church.

- All the participants felt that they had become far more independent and were socialising much more.

- All the participants felt that they were far happier and had a positive outlook on life.

- One of the participants husband remarked by saying “My wife is so much happier. You’ve given her back her glow. It’s easier to talk to her now.”

- Another family member remarked upon how much more confident their mother had become throughout the six months.

There was a lot of positive feedback from everyone and the project had been a huge success. However, it would be interesting to see if they can sustain that confidence in the longer term. Despite this, they all did believe that they felt stronger to cope with negative episodes.

2. There was a lot of discussion regarding the issue of mental health and the stigmas attached by both the ‘general public’ and the participants. Many of the participants felt that there was a general lack of understanding and support for people whom suffer from low confidence and mental health problems. Throughout the rehearsal period of the project, we observed how there was a general degree of fear – especially when it came to record their progress. They were over anxious and cautious about having their photos taken whilst rehearsing and being involved in the film documentary. When asked about it, they repeatedly said that they were worried at how that may impact upon their benefits and the support which they receive.

The general opinion from speaking to the public during our library presentations was that there wasn’t enough being done to understand and to support those who suffer from mental health problems. However, it is slowly improving.

In terms of relating this to our project and theatrical production I felt that although the key emotions and awareness was conveyed through the performance, it could have been made clearer visually. I felt that if we had done the performance again, I would have liked to have been a bit more bold and simple and explored over avenues such as movement and song to describe the effects of mental health.

3. I felt that we were successful in discussing the main stigmas associated with mental health and what could be done to support those who suffer. The production was successful in giving clear ideas of how people can help and opening the issues surrounding how people perceive these conditions. Many of the audience members commented upon leaving with a greater insight. One remarking: “It’s always tough knowing what to say to help, but now I realise that sometimes a simple hold of her hand will help.”

The project’s partnership with the other organisations has been a real strength throughout the project. We have displayed information upon our new webpage and we continue to add to this to help people in the local and wider community.

Upon reflection, I would have liked to have recorded or asked more of the participants and their families to keep blogs or diaries to chart their development throughout the project. This could have then been posted on the webpage to inspire others.

What aspects of the project worked?

I believe that the project was a success in many ways. Although there were things which I would have liked to have done differently regarding the production, the style and feedback for the play was very positive. Audience members liked the concept of performing in the round with a far more intimate setting. The size of the audience (maximum of 20) also made the play more personal and less intimidating for the participants. By placing some of the cast sitting with the audience helped to include the audience and made the participants feel that they weren’t just standing in front of a crowd, but were telling their story.

We recognised that many of the cast members were having problems with learning their lines earlier on and adapted the play using more storytelling techniques and chorus elements which took the strain away and made the overall performance more effective.

The use of music in the performance worked incredibly well and the sound effects created were realistic and added to the overall impact. As was the stage lighting and the props. We used images to help to set the scene and to re-tell personal stories written by the participants themselves.

Our Assistant Creative Practitioner came up with the idea of incorporating our documentary into the performance and this also worked extremely well despite my initial fear of it looking a bit abstract. The audience all commented about the documentary and how it opened the performance extremely well and helped to set the style and the environment.

The workshops and rehearsals were run smoothly, and it was useful to have a group of workshops building confidence and positivity before the actual drama based activities and devising began. It gave us the opportunity to get to know the participants and where their individual strengths and weaknesses lay. Looking back, I did feel that we could have included more drama skill based work as I underestimated how much they did know.

The project itself and the planning and organisation was effective. Running this project has reinforced and taught me about the importance of being an excellent communicator. I have learnt the need to be completely precise and giving lots of warning of dates to ensure success. I have learnt to trust my instincts more and to believe in myself. I felt that it was useful as always to have creative team meetings and to include the cast themselves too as they often have wonderful ideas. Financially, I think the project worked well and we were incredibly thankful for all the support which we received.

What elements could have worked better?

I felt that our biggest mistake was underestimating the degree of support which the participants were going to need. I found it misleading at times and had to learn not to take things as solid stone. There were times when I worked with participants and they got the hang of a scene well and then a week later they had taken ten steps back. The workshops were structured and planned well, but I felt that more time could have spent rehearsing for the performance although I’d be careful not to take too much time away from the devising of the performance as it would take away the sense of ownership, which worked well.

We found that we were faced with the problem of pace and timing. Many of the rehearsals took time to start as participants wanted to talk about their lives and their problems. We found that many of the participants felt safe and supported and wanted to use the group as a support network as well as a theatre project. Although this was great in theory, in practice it was rather time consuming and strategies would need to be considered in the future.

I also felt that the project needed more staff. I was lucky to have two volunteers help the project. Having the additional staff meant that we were able to give more support to the participants and to help them to prepare for the performance.

Working with our partners:

Working with The Colchester Arts Centre was invaluable. Their support was enormous help to the overall impact of the production. Their technicians were patient and supportive to the participants needs and worked well to maximum the experience for them. Having Anthony Roberts (Director of The Colchester Arts Centre) on hand to offer advice and strategies was also great as it was often useful to use him as a sounding board for new ideas and techniques.

Our partnership with the “Together” organisation worked well, and we used them to gain advice and guidance for supporting the participants in the earlier stages of the project. We also created a link with The Colchester Mind organisation during the project, which was wonderful to have them on board with the project. They also referred several of their clients on to our project and the feedback, which they received was extremely positive.

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| Feedback from the Audience:  “Excellent idea and more needed!”  Excellent! It’s not easy for people with mental health issues. But every one of the cast should be proud. What a wonderful achievement. It just shows how drama can break down any wall.”  “I loved it!”  “Extremely important. I think it is a fantastic group and I hope it continues.”  “The music was great, and I thought the confidence which had obviously been developed was amazing. I am very glad that I came.” |

Next Steps: How would we like to develop the project further?

Our aims for continuing the Black Dog Theatre Creation project further would include:

• To continue to run a community project, that will develop a group of vulnerable peoples’ confidence and to offer a sense of purpose and independence.

• Explore further some of the stigmas/problems attached with Mental Health in the wider community.

• Discuss positive ways in which these stigmas can be resolved.

• To further develop the groups acting and performance techniques.

• Explore ways of using different theatre techniques to enhance our overall production.

• To widen our public engagement and increasing the number of participants by 25%.

• Develop our audience by increasing our audience size by 50%.

We understand that the Black Dog Theatre Creation project was a success, but for it to continue it needs to continue to develop and to grow.