

photo by C. Fortune, artwork by Afuwa



artwork for the Held exhibition

Arts and opportunity

Mental Health Today first looked at Startmc in March 2007. Its founder, Wendy Teal, continues the story

The degree to which we cope with difficult situations and emotions, in ourselves and others, is strongly linked to our wellbeing (Carter & Frith, 1998; Sorenson, 2002; Spiegel, 1999). Emotional resilience, resourcefulness and literacy are important areas to develop for all of us, and especially for service users at Startmc.

Startmc – or Start Manchester – is part of the Manchester Health and Social Care Trust, working with people who have severe and enduring mental health needs. For some years the Startmc creative activity team have been interested in trying to build survival skills for people with a mental illness through specialist arts interventions, which we run in partnership with galleries.

Our gallery-based courses, begun in 2003, involve practical art and art appreciation, and aim to build expertise that research (Creek, 2001) shows impacts on coping skills – for example, lateral and analytical thinking, formation of opinion, self-expression, emotional literacy and managing change. In addition comes the development of a deeper knowledge base around art and the empowerment of feeling at home in a public art gallery.

Studies (White, 2003; Matarasso, 1997) have shown that art, with its many challenges to the self and the world around us, can be a particularly effective medium for stimulating coping and life skills, because it routinely provides the means for ‘confronting difficulties and meeting challenges’ (Parr, 2005). A recent national research study revealed significant evidence that art can be used by arts group participants ‘as a multi-purpose tool, which they could deploy in different circumstances to alleviate mental distress and cope better with mental health difficulties’ (Secker *et al*, 2007).

Running part of our service in galleries presents many advantages. Galleries are inclusive, free, and keen to welcome new visitors. For users of Startmc, galleries are ideal because they can continue to provide access to art after leaving the service – a vital point for people who have learned to use art as part of their illness management strategy.

Based on feedback from previous courses, we have changed and improved the new course, held at the city centre Manchester Art Gallery, in a number of ways. Instead of just a few users, we offered the special intervention to every Startmc user. About 50 people tried the course although not all attended every week. We also added further choice to the learning experience. This included professionally-run live music and creative writing workshops to help explore emotion and practical exercises and curators’ gallery tours about understanding body language, which

and the music workshop at the gallery



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users found helpful for confidence-building and anxiety management. Additional changes included asking users to set their own personal goals specific to the gallery course, the goals encouraged users to link increased understanding of feelings and behaviour patterns with coping strategies and problem-solving, to underscore the learning we wanted them to experience. We used a validated outcome measure and the Startmc occupational therapist (OT) worked alongside the artist team to prepare and deliver the course.

By offering users a chance to explore emotions through the study of art, we aimed to put some space between feelings and the learner, thus making a potentially tricky subject feel safer.

These are some comments from users about how the exercises helped them:

‘Art has been made more accessible, more interesting ... it helped me to feel more at home in a gallery.... I took my kids there recently and showed them some of the art exhibits.

‘The emotion exercise will be very useful [in the future].... It was powerful writing about an emotion.... It’s therapeutic to write about things that are raw....

‘I’ve noticed my body language more, I’ve been aware of nervous habits through loss of confidence – you notice it, then you can stop doing it.’

For some users, the course came at just the right time. Startmc occupational therapist Juliette Angus explains: ‘Peter* made great progress whilst on the course, gaining real insight into how projects like this can benefit him. The exercises in articulating emotion seemed to be of especial benefit, and helped him to become more confident, more able to articulate goals, hopes and worries. He is now doing a photographic course at college and will shortly leave the service, an outcome which he feels is both positive and exciting.’

Personal goals

Introducing personal goals for each user, specific to the gallery course, rather than working with users’ longer-term goals at Startmc was an important change.

We asked our occupational therapist to support users in setting arts-based or wider life goals, which must include means of judging success. Goals were scored out of 10 by users at the end of the course.

The personal goals included:

- accomplishing learning in an area I am interested in, achieved through focusing and keeping alert, scoring 8/10
- learning more about art history, achieved by looking around the gallery, scoring 7/10
- improving my concentration, achieved through chewing gum to avoid having a break, rated 7/10
- gaining more confidence in speaking, achieved through doing things with others in the gallery which will help to overcome fear of talking with people, scoring 9/10.

In addition to the personal goals, we piloted a validated outcome measure. Titled Measure Yourself Medical Outcome Profile (MYMOP), this is filled in before and after a set of interventions. Though not perfect for our needs, MYMOP proved successful in two ways – it

laid the foundations for trialling a recently created and more appropriate outcome measure, the Warwick and Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS), and it provided evidence of progress that motivated some users to move on from the service.

Startmc occupational therapist Juliette illustrates how this worked: ‘Mattie*, whose first attendance was on the gallery course, showed positive scores in her MYMOP and personal goals, demonstrating very fast progression during the course. She was able to move on successfully from the service to voluntary work after only six months, and felt that the course had been instrumental in fast tracking her out of mental health services. This intervention was the ideal structure for her.’

Getting the message across

After the course, users took their new knowledge back to their art sessions at Startmc, and began working towards an exhibition, inspired by this, currently on display at Manchester Art Gallery (see below for details).

Each person spent weeks refining their message about wellbeing, coping, or self-care advice. Months of work in the studios then followed, to produce artworks that are both beautiful and moving, and that articulate users’ messages powerfully.

Public exhibitions, though a challenge, are a significant part of Startmc’s work because they allow users to engage with the public and give wellbeing information in accessible ways. Importantly, this also gives a voice to a uniquely expert group of people, who too often are a hidden resource.

A brief tour of our gallery-based work wouldn’t be complete without adding that this scheme has been officially listed as one of the 10 most innovative services in the NHS, by the NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement. Users at Startmc agree with this judgement, and I’d like to leave you with a final word from former service user, Anthony Lomax, who also took part in the first gallery course: ‘I think it’s wonderful news. Everyone at Start deserves this, I felt so proud to be part of the exhibition and it was a privilege to be working in the gallery; it gave me more confidence and took me out of my comfort zone. I’m chuffed to bits – there should be more services like Start.’ ■

*Not service user’s real name

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The exhibition ‘Held’ takes place at Manchester Art Gallery until 6 July 2009. It features animation, photography and sculpture and explores creative ways to maintain healthy bodies and minds in a busy world. For more details see www.startmc.org.uk