

HELIX ARTS: PARTICIPATORY ART AND YOUNG OFFENDERS

Case study of a Clinks member in the North East

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Case Study - Helix Arts

Participatory art and young offenders

Helix Arts is a participatory arts organisation based in Newcastle upon Tyne that works with a range of socially excluded groups, including (ex) offenders. They work across a range of art forms including visual arts, film making, creative writing, graphic design, street dance, music and MC-ing, photography, drama and kite making.

This case study focuses on two of their programmes: The Choices Project that worked with young offenders who are subject to Intensive Surveillance and Supervision Programme (ISSP), and The Restorative Justice Project that worked with young offenders who had restorative justice elements to their sentences.

Issues covered within this case study include:

- Art and desistance
- Working with young offenders
- Restorative justice

Introduction

We are starting to understand how arts activities can have a positive effect on offending behaviour and attitudes, as well as helping to redress the negative effects that crime has on local communities. Helix Arts and the work they do on Tyneside¹ with young offenders on community sentences and those on Restorative Justice programmes, is demonstrating how to do this to great effect. Through ten years of practical experience, they have seen how participation in the arts has changed the behaviour and outlook of offenders and is leading to desistance from crime.

Desistance and art

Desistance from crime and participation in artistic activity and expression can be closely linked.

Desistance is understood to be made up of a primary and secondary element: the first being to stop offending, and the second to choose a non-offending lifestyle. Achieving desistance is associated with the pursuit of a positive life and is said to consist of four stages:

- openness to change;
- exposure to reasons to change;
- imagining and believing in a 'replacement self'; and
- a change in the way that offending and deviant behaviour is viewed.

You can imagine how participation in art can help the offender in all of these four areas, from being open, exposed, imagining and changing. Indeed, as more initiatives are being implemented, we are now seeing a clear link between taking part in arts-based activities and the movement towards secondary desistance.

*See for example, Bilby, C., Caulfield, L. and Ridley, L. (2013) Re-imagining futures: Exploring arts interventions and the process of desistance, Northumbria University and Bath Spa University

¹ Tyneside is made up of Gateshead, Newcastle, North Tyneside, South Tyneside and Sunderland.

About Helix Arts

Helix Arts is a participatory arts organisation based in Newcastle upon Tyne that works with a range of socially excluded groups, including (ex) offenders. They were set up as a charity in 1983 with the belief that participation in creative activity is fundamental to the well being of individuals and communities and should be accessible to all. They work across a range of art forms including visual arts, film making, creative writing, graphic design, street dance, music and MCing, photography, drama and kite making. Annually, they deliver around ten projects across the North East and engage approximately 40 artists benefitting around 200 participants.

“Helix helped me get through my troubled childhood ... I've always liked photography, but Helix help me get right into it ... I got into a course at college and I'm still there now, three years later.”

The term participatory arts refers to an artistic process that is centered around the participant. Helix Arts identifies an artist to work with participants and then provides the management framework. Using this approach the artist and the participants can go on an artistic journey unfettered by practical or management issues. They believe that the artistic process the organisation creates has three major sequential outcomes: increasing people's confidence; building motivation; and developing new skills. Amongst their clients, they have seen people move from low confidence and low expectation to an increased sense of what is possible and greater desire to achieve their potential.

The organisation has a staff team of eight people, four of whom manage projects and direct the artistic process. They work with a selection of artists across all artistic platforms. Their projects are funded by a range of sources, including local authorities, probation services and charitable trusts. In the last three years, due to local austerity measures, commissioning for these programmes has faded. Helix's current focus is on rebuilding the relationship with these key services and providing creative solutions to help them tackle their biggest challenges.

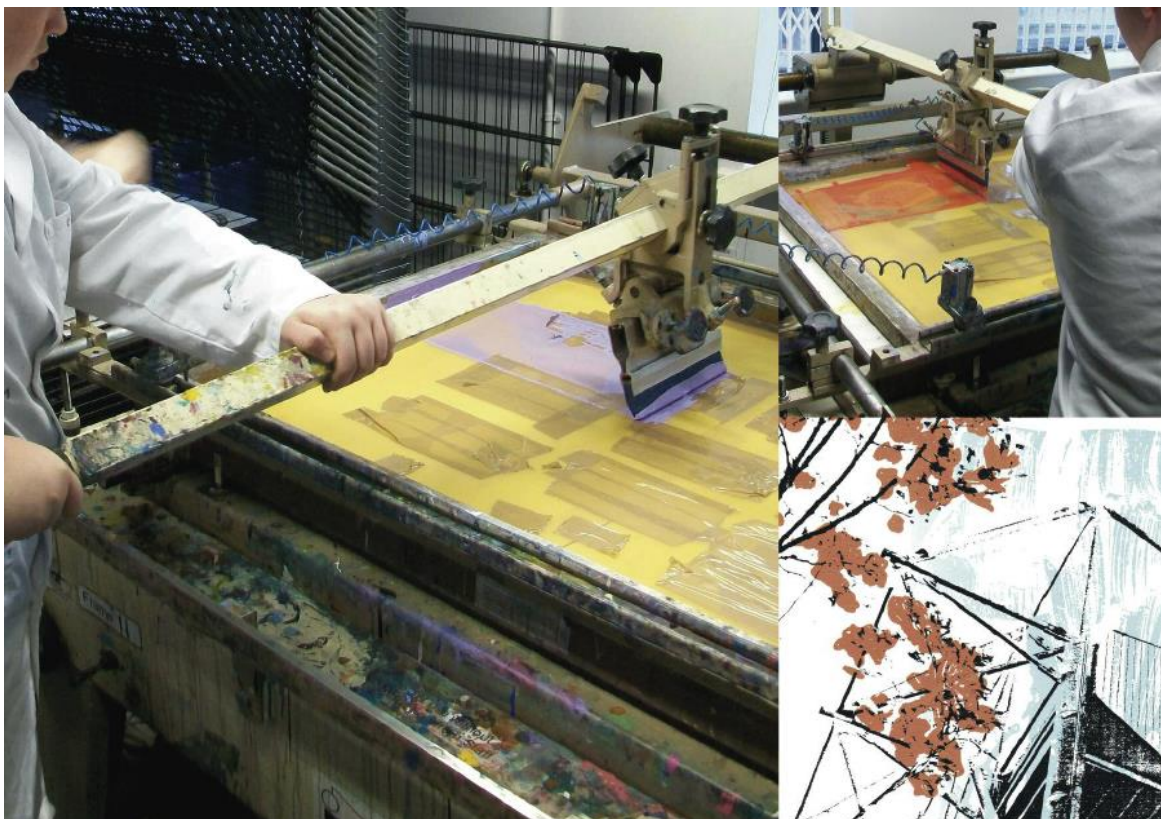
This case study focuses on two different programmes: The Choices Project that worked with young offenders who are subject to Intensive Surveillance and Supervision Programme (ISSP); and The Restorative Justice Project that worked with young offenders who had Restorative Justice elements to their sentences.



The Choices project

The Choices project began as a partnership project with Live Theatre in 2003, with funding from Northumbria Probation Service and Newcastle City Council, and ended in 2013 due to austerity measures in local government. The objective was to engage those who were subject to an ISSP, using creative drama workshops to look at different aspects related to their offending behaviour. In the early stages of the project, participation was mandatory and the young person had to engage with the project as a condition of their sentence, although later this changed to voluntary involvement. An artist was chosen who had experience of working with challenging and complex young people. Unlike the young offenders' supervisors at the Youth Offending Team (YOT), artists are not figures of authority and instead rely on facilitation skills and a tacit understanding of mutual respect to create a positive environment. Initially Choices was a drama-based project but this changed and they now use cross-art form activities, which meant they brought in different artists who were specialists in the particular art form.

The programme delivered a range of arts activities in Newcastle upon Tyne and provided over 90 two-hour participatory arts workshops per year. Between 2010 and 2013, over 60 young people accessed the project, and, over the lifetime of the programme, participation levels have ranged between 175 and 300 attendances a year.



The Restorative Justice project

Helix Arts worked with the Gateshead and Sunderland Restorative Justice Programmes between 2010 and 2013 to deliver a programme of high quality community based participatory arts activities for young people aged 10 to 18 years who have been given restorative justice indirect reparation as part of their order by the courts.

The programme was designed to enable young people to give something back to their communities by using their creativity and to provide weekly positive activities for young people on Friday and Saturdays to help reduce reoffending rates in local neighbourhoods.

As a condition of their sentence, young people carried out a minimum of 24 hours participation in activities but could also continue voluntarily should they choose. As this was a restorative justice initiative, the individual projects that the young offenders were involved with were chosen in a different way to the Choices project. Instead of being chosen through a decision between participants and artist, projects were chosen by the local community; either organisations or members of the public. Examples of the projects undertaken include: artwork in a sensory garden for the Royal Society for the Blind; graffiti art with the subject of knife crime for Nexus (the local transport provider); and design of artwork for an underpass for Gateshead City Council.



In three years, the project has delivered six distinct projects, taking place over 50 sessions, with a total of 200 attendances by young offenders.

The work of Helix Arts has been subjected to a number of external and independent evaluations carried out by universities and consultants. They have demonstrated a number of impacts of the participatory arts activities, which include:

Creative skills development

Creative skills development is a major outcome of the arts programmes. Even though the primary function of the programmes was not to develop “fantastic artists”, there have been many artistic expressions of high quality print, sculpture and film. Young offenders have been reported to have developed many skills in production, both technical (such as the ability to work with photography and film) and expressionist (for example, explaining the meaning behind a piece of modern art) and willingness to take the initiative, especially if participation is sustained over time. One ISSP worker commented that “by a few weeks time they’re all in there and making their own stuff”. In many of the activities, young offenders have been able to develop artistic portfolios.

A Present from Sunderland (2013)

Using principles of Restorative Justice, A Present from Sunderland was designed to enable young offenders from the local area to give something back to their community by using their creativity.

As part of the regeneration of the Roker seafront, young offenders from Sunderland Youth Offending Service designed and made mugs, tea towels, ceramic tags and beach explorer kits as part of a 10 week arts project. Handmade by the young offenders and in consultation with local residents, each design was specially created to celebrate the Roker seafront area. Each item was professionally handcrafted by young offenders in collaboration with local artists and companies. The series comes in limited editions of 100 units per product.

The young people involved gave these products as a gift to Sunderland City Council. The young offenders said about their art “We would like you to use them to promote and celebrate Sunderland. We would like visitors to take a little piece of Sunderland away with them.”

See www.helixarts.com/pages/present.html

Reduction in reoffending

The evaluations of Helix Arts have provided evidence that indicates the projects contribute to reducing reoffending. This is a key objective of the work and is achieved through being both involved in an activity and through the changes in behaviour that involvement leads to. For example, arts workshops as constructive activities occupy the time of prolific offenders at key ‘crime times’ such as weekends and evenings. As one participant said: “Keeps you out of trouble basically”. Participation in artistic activities improves and transfers skills and can lead to qualifications which have the ability to divert lives to more positive patterns of behaviour.

Participants spoke of specific arts activities that subtly dealt with how offending had shaped their identity. For example, one young film maker presented themselves in one

film sequence, as two people, saying: “I was the angel and the devil. Because there’s always two sides to people.” However, there was little sense among participants that reduction in reoffending is a primary purpose of the artistic interventions, although there was an understanding that creative activity could change their ways of thinking.

Case study: Ryan

Ryan* was subject to an ISSP, and as part of his community sentence he had to engage with the Helix Arts project.

Ryan was a reluctant participant at the beginning of the activity. He had difficulty managing his behaviour, frequently fluctuating between positive and disruptive behaviour during a single activity and over the course of the project. He also had low self-esteem with little expectation of himself and what he could achieve.

As the relationship between Ryan and the artist grew and as he became more familiar with the subject and what was expected of him, he started to become more involved with the art. Working with an artist to create original screen prints, origami boats and handmade books, Ryan went on to demonstrate real enthusiasm for the work, started to manage his behaviour and took on increasing levels of responsibility within sessions with ease and commitment.

Towards the end of the project period, Ryan demonstrated considerable initiative and talent, often having a go at activities that others are reluctant to try. Through participation in the artistic activity Ryan changed, from being reluctant and resistant to being a committed and creative artist.

*Not his real name.

Personal and social development through improving confidence, self-esteem and motivation

Being involved in artistic activity has been shown to have considerable effects in changing participants perceptions of themselves, how they behave and, in some cases, improving aspirations.

Stakeholders saw confidence growing among participants as they developed skills in gradual, incremental steps, so that someone who began by simply holding a camera might end the project by presenting their work at a film festival. One case was cited of a very reserved former participant who had gone on to take up a college course.

The development of artistic or physical skills - together with sensitive, positive reinforcement from artists - increases articulacy and motivation. Stakeholders reported that the arts programmes replaced bravado and arrogant, inappropriate behaviour with more genuine confidence. YOT workers emphasised improvements among participants in interpersonal skills and manners, as well as channeling potential aggression into other constructive emotions, such as the ability to laugh at themselves. Young offenders evaluated one programme by responding to flash-card prompts relating to emotional responses and desired personal development outcomes. The emotion that generated most positive responses was “Confident”, followed by “Calm” and “Interested”. No participants selected cards relating to negative emotions such as “Tired” or “Frustrated”.

“You get yourself out of bed for it; it makes you feel happy about yourself after you’ve done it.”

Progression into education, employment and training

There have been a number of participants who have used their involvement in the Helix Arts projects as a springboard into further education and training.

For example, one participant who stated an artistic ambition to be a DJ found regular opportunities to perform within the ISSP environment. Other participants have progressed in other artistic areas such as pottery, glass-blowing and performing arts in college. There have been several of the young people on the programmes of Helix Arts who have taken up courses at Newcastle College in the arts. One former ISSP client progressed to complete a photography degree at Northumbria University and is now involved in delivering work as an artist with Helix Arts. Even those who started but did not complete further education were considered by those involved with their lives (for example, their YOT supervisors) to have made a considerable conceptual leap with regard to the opportunities available to them.

For those participants who did not pursue art in further education, their involvement in the artistic activities provided them with many transferable skills, such as the ability to work in a team, collectively problem solve and work without supervision. Group working skills, such as appropriate behaviour among others and mutual support, were particularly highlighted and it was reported that participants showed improved eye contact and ability to hold meaningful conversations with those in authority.

Participants and other stakeholders felt that the improvements in confidence, motivation and well being brought about by their involvement were key motivators of change needed to enter education or training or to find employment.



Sustainability and continuation of involvement in artistic activity

Helix Arts see encouraging continuation with arts activities beyond the end of a project as a key outcome of their work. Some former participants have returned to volunteer within the ISSP programme in order to sustain their artistic involvement. Whether it is returning to Helix Arts, progressing to further education, or pursuing artistic expression in their lives, sustainability is a central component of the artistic process that is started by the organisation.

Conclusion

The projects of Helix Arts have been judged to be highly appropriate arts interventions within the youth justice environment and integrate well into both mandatory and non-mandatory programmes. The reactions from the young people have been extremely positive, even in the programs that were mandatory, demonstrating that the methodology used by Helix Arts is effective at engagement.

The young people benefit greatly from working with professional artists, who are a central reason why the initiatives are so successful; they provide a credibility which is of major importance to the young people. The impacts of participation in the arts for these young offenders have been many. For some, it has been profound; changing perceptions and outlooks. For others it has improved the way they work cooperatively together, whilst for some the creation of a portfolio of work has led to a career in the arts. It would seem that desistance from crime and participation in the arts can indeed be strongly linked.

“You see some people come in in a right mood and gan back out canny happy. I’ve been in a little mood before and as soon as we get cracking, aye, it just takes your mind off things. Gets you going.”



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To find out more about Helix Arts, visit the website at www.helixarts.com

This case study has been prepared by Barefoot Research and Evaluation. For more information see www.barefootresearch.org.uk

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CLINKS

59 Carter Lane, London EC4V 5AQ
020 7248 3538 | info@clinks.org
www.clinks.org

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