

common knowledge invites local and national arts-in-health communities to Newcastle to take a 6-hour coffee break and talk about the things on their mind



Coffee and cello music, informal welcoming

The 6-hour coffee break hosted by Common Knowledge – the arts-in-health initiative of the Tyne and Wear Health Action Zone – on February 12th 2001 brought approximately 150 people working in arts and health from around the country to take some time to talk. Not in a formal way, to hear presentations and make observations and contributions, but to chat as people do in coffee breaks, in an open and informal way. The philosophy of the day was to have a 6-hour coffee break.

The venue was The Old Assembly Rooms, a grand Georgian building in the city centre. Coffee, juice, water and fruit were available all day to fuel conversation. Participants were welcomed by cello music played by Tabitha Tuckett. The people who came together are connected by their efforts to use the arts to improve and promote health, tackle health inequalities and promote social inclusion. Those who work in this area can at times feel at the margins of health and it is an enormous boost to this community that Alan Milburn, Secretary of State for Health, chose to attend the coffee break and voice his support for the work.

This report aims to give a description of the day, the things people chatted about, and the issues they raised. Its content also aims to illustrate that chatting is not idle activity, but can lead to useful insights and plot progress.

For those who attended, we hope it provides a useful record of the day. For those who did not, we hope it gives some insight into the creative ways which social exclusion, community and individual health is being explored by people working with arts in health. Unfortunately, it is not possible to capture the full flavor of the day, and report the rich content of discussions. It is only possible to give a helicopter view of the day's issues. This report pulls together some of the main themes discussed.

In the morning people were getting to know each other, listening to and talking about their involvement in arts and health - dozens of small conversations were taking place at any one time. The content of the report is concentrated more on the second half of the day and pulls together brainstormed notes from conversations.

To save space and to capture some of the complex interconnections between the issues people raised, quite a lot of this report relies on graphics to convey the depth in issues raised. The words guide the reader around the figures. Some of the graphics are reproductions of the notes made during conversations. Although in many cases people had not met before, discussions were at times quite intense, as people helped each other explore common issues and challenges. This report also raises issues that will be explored more fully in an interim evaluation on Common Knowledge which will be published later this year through CAHMM (whose address it at the end of this report).

Welcome: Project Manager of Common Knowledge, Lord Mayor of Newcastle, Secretary of State for Health

Mike White, Project Manager of Common Knowledge, began the day by introducing two special guests. The first, Pete Thompson, Lord Mayor of Newcastle, played a role in preparing the original bid for an arts in health project in the Tyne and Wear Health Action Zone.

The Lord Mayor was pleased to welcome people to Newcastle, and especially Alan Milburn, Secretary of State for Health, who said: "I hope people who have been here before – maybe not been here for a while – can see some of the very big changes that are going on in the city. I am very proud of Newcastle. I think it is the best city in the country. There is a renaissance going on in the city, which is partially culture led. "

"Our job... all of us who work in public services and who care about the National Health Service, is to make sure opportunities for renaissance are accessible to all who want it. Everyone should have this opportunity."

"Certainly in this part of the world, I think the Health Action Zones are performing a very important role indeed. They are the very best recognition, something perhaps the National Health Service has lacked in the past,[that] very many of the health problems in this region, and in other parts of the country too, are problems that are preventable: high levels of coronary heart disease, high levels of cancer – the result of poor living, poorer diet, high levels of smoking, and frankly, the lack of opportunities in our community."

"What the Health Action Zones provide is an opportunity to bring together new partnerships between local government, the NHS, the voluntary sector, the arts and local business to try and deal with some of these root causes of ill

health. There is a real job of work for us to do. A child born today to the poorest family in the land will live nine years less than a child born into the wealthiest family in the land, and that should give us all food for thought."

"Our ambition is to do frankly what has never been done before, whichever government has been in power; of course we want to improve the health of the population overall, but we also want...to improve the health of the poorest at a faster rate, in order to narrow that health gap, and the health inequalities that scar our country. The work that is being done here with the Health Action Zone is a very important means to that end."

"I believe this is about not just the NHS providing better services and better treatment for people, but the NHS more positively engaging with the communities that it serves."

"The reason I have come along today...is to say that I believe the arts can play a very, very important role in ensuring those messages about healthy lifestyle,[and] about engagement between the service and the communities that they serve, can be enhanced."

"We will look very closely as a government and as a Department of Health at the events today and what you get out of it. We will seek to ensure that some of the lessons that are being learned in this part of the world...are learned for other parts of the country"

Rt. Hon. Alan Milburn MP, Secretary of State for Health

What is Common Knowledge?

Mike White the Project Manager of Common Knowledge thanked the Secretary of State for attending the event and said it was a terrific start to have heard such a ringing endorsement.

"The concept of the day is to take a six-hour coffee break and this is exactly what is meant. Through informal conversations we can have very useful discussions; this approach is similar to the one we have taken in Tyne & Wear through Common Knowledge. We believe in serious chatting. Common Knowledge currently has 20 pilot projects. These are taking place in clinical settings, hospitals, surgery waiting rooms, community health teams and in the community at large. Across Tyne and Wear Common Knowledge has brought people together to think about some critical questions and what they mean for us locally within Tyne & Wear: what is art, what is health, what are our aspirations for our communities? It has been our aim to develop a vibrant network of artists, health professionals of all kinds, teachers and academics, local authority officers, voluntary sector entrepreneurs and community participants.

In events like this we do not believe in people acting passively as delegates. We see the people here today as key constituents and decision makers within the arts and health field. We have got a lot to talk about.

The idea of meeting together today was the idea of the Chief Executive of the Gateshead and South Tyneside Health Authority who thought it would be valuable to bring together those within Health Action Zones who are taking creative approaches to improving health. Today is an opportunity to share experiences, ideas, and the things we are struggling with."

What are you taking a coffee break from?

People were asked to pair up and talk about their work for about 10 minutes each. Lines of pebbles connected small fountains at either end of a rectangular room. At the end of their conversations, participants were invited to take a stone, return to their seats, and on one side of it write a short phrase to capture what they have heard about what their partner is taking a break from. The stones were placed around the two small fountains at either end of the room.

What are the things we need space for? Inscriptions included: 'a crisis of confidence', 'routines, rituals and dramas', the grind', 'bureaucracy of HAZs', 'working alone', 'toil and paper', 'fire-fighting'. Some people chose to write the things they were taking a break for, including: 'to learn', 'think without fear of judgment', 'where to from here', 'to meet other people', 'what is everyone else up to?'

Shortbread triangles

Facilitator Orit Aziz posed a question - 'how do we make extraordinary cocktails of people who work in bizarre situations' - that is a common starting point and challenge for many projects.

The idea of this first session is for people to think about something with which they could do with inspiration on; to take advantage of the wealth of experience and different perspectives in the room. People made groups of three to relate issues on which one would like the creative input of two others. While listening, people were asked to use their experience to ask questions and pursue a conversation about how to develop the situation.

Each person took turns to explain the work they are engaged in and spent 20-25 minutes talking about the issues they were facing.

Movement interlude

The early sessions up to this point had concentrated on verbal exchange. To shock people out of his or her head and out of using only words, everybody joined in a dance exercise. Participants were asked to pair up and to stand close together, facing each other. "Try to push your partner over". People wrestled and tried to stand their ground in response to the movement of their partner.

People had body conversations: one made a point and the other responded, using physical movement. This is to illustrate the different ways in which people can think, engage, and express ideas and manifest the way people tussle through conversation in everyday life.

Iced fancies

To end the morning, people joined a new group of three – part of the philosophy of the day is that people would continually revolve through conversations and creative engagement with different groups of people.

The groups were asked to reflect on content of their morning so far - on the challenges they are taking a break from, the insights given and gained in the triangulated conversations to explore some of these, on the notion of engaging with problems in new ways, in the context of the comments made by the Secretary of State and others. As a group they were asked to draw some collective conclusions. The challenge was to do this without using only words. Each group was given some materials to make something that would represent their thoughts and some time to think about how to do it. The resulting works were exhibited in the lunch hour.

It is very difficult to try and approach problems and issues using approaches we are unfamiliar with. One overheard conversation helps to explain why. Someone was explaining the morning had made them realize how "wordy" and "in their head" they were. They found it really difficult to not do this – it is instinctive. The person they told this to said they had the opposite problem. For them, it was instinctive to approach issues in quite abstract ways and very difficult to formulate this approach in words.

The conversation suggests a conclusion many would agree with. It is important to try and think in new ways and to find ways of allowing people who do not necessarily think along the same lines or understand each other to speak the same language, whether this be verbal or otherwise, and to find ways of translating between the different approaches.

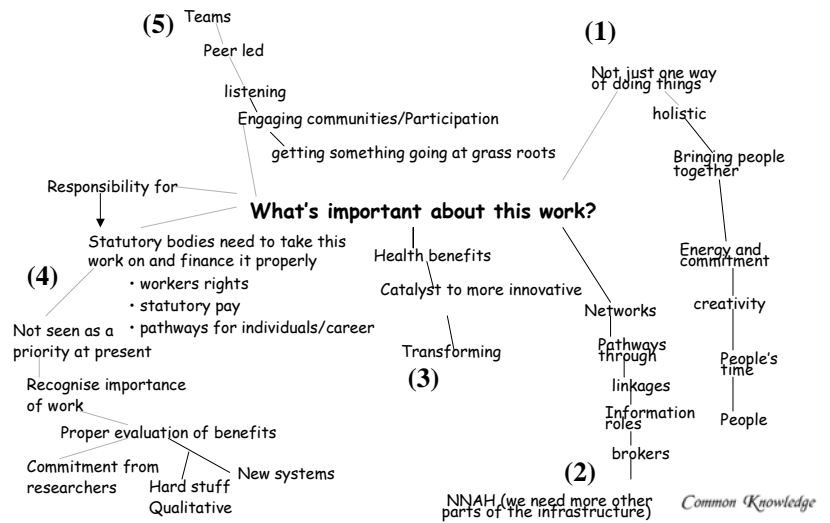
Lunch

During the lunch break, Margaret Frayne, a local singer who has worked with acute trusts, in wards, and community health settings, sang 'requests' as people ate and chatted.

What is important about this work?

At the beginning of the afternoon, Mike White said again how encouraged he was by the comments Alan Milburn had made. Alan Milburn said the Department of Health would look carefully at what comes out from our discussions. But what is it we have to say? What is it that we think is really important about this work?

What is important about this work?



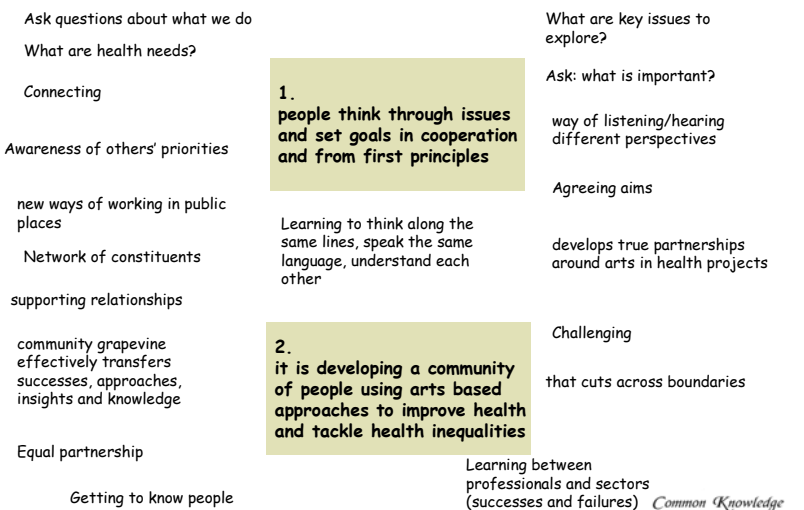
People were asked to form small discussion groups of 5 or 6 people and to brainstorm their ideas onto pieces of paper. The graphic shows an amended version of the notes produced by one group that captures the main strands of discussion.

The main strands have been numbered 1-5 and based on the notes of each group discussion each are explored in a little more detail in the following section. Most of this is done graphically. What is important about this work?

1. People think through issues and set goals in cooperation and from first principles

One of the abilities of arts in health is it can provide a new form of communication between the public and professionals. It allows them to ask questions together about why things are done the way they are, and to think about things from first principles.

What is the value of Arts in Health work?



2. It is developing a community of people using arts based approaches to improve health and tackle health inequalities.

One of the strengths of arts-in-health approaches is that it can establish an equal and respectful partnership between community representatives, artists, health and other workers. It is challenging and cuts across formal boundaries. It facilitates learning between different professionals, sectors, and perspectives. It is developing capacity in this area by forming communities of people using these creative approaches.

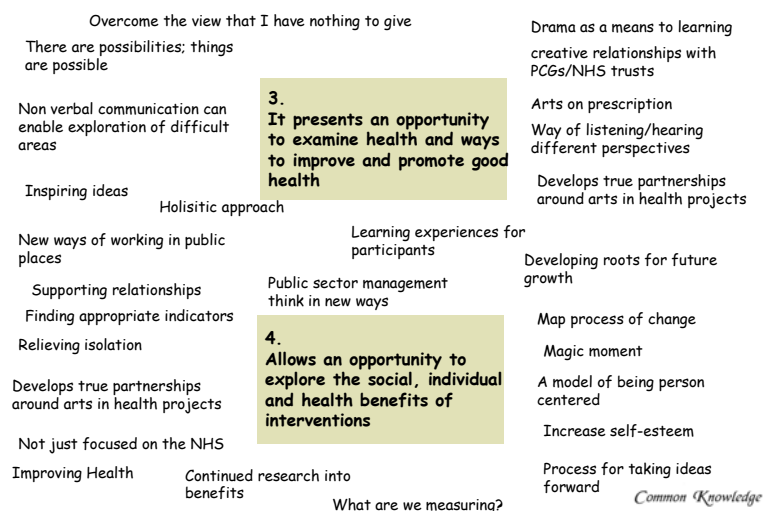
3. It presents an opportunity to examine health and ways to improve it and promote good health

The contributions of arts-in-health projects are wide ranging. They include establishing a creative environment for people to express themselves.

There are different approaches within arts-and-health. Some arts based techniques are direct interventions, whereas others seek to engage communities in new ways. These are helping people to understand health, what it means locally and personally, and ways to improve it.

4. Allows an opportunity to explore the interventions and results of these approaches

What is the value of Arts in Health work?

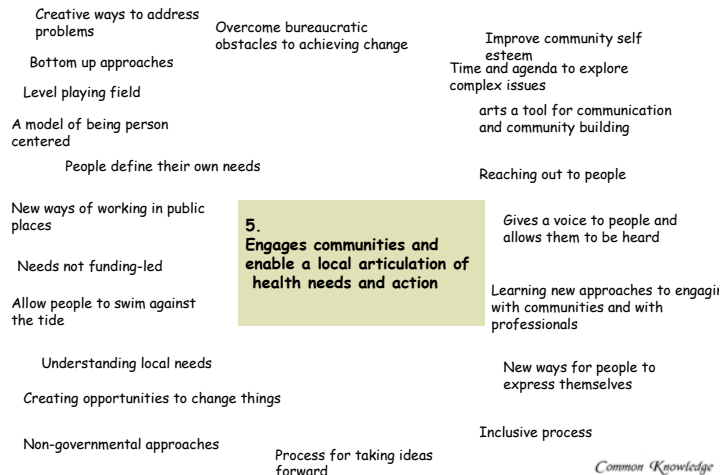


There is a need to begin to explore and understand these contributions. There is some frustration that research has so far failed to capture the insights of these projects - these may be difficult to record, or capture.

5. Engage communities and enable a local articulation of health needs and action

The arts provides a language for people to use to convey complex messages and a medium to engage people in a way that allows a local

What is the value of Arts in Health work?



articulation of health needs.

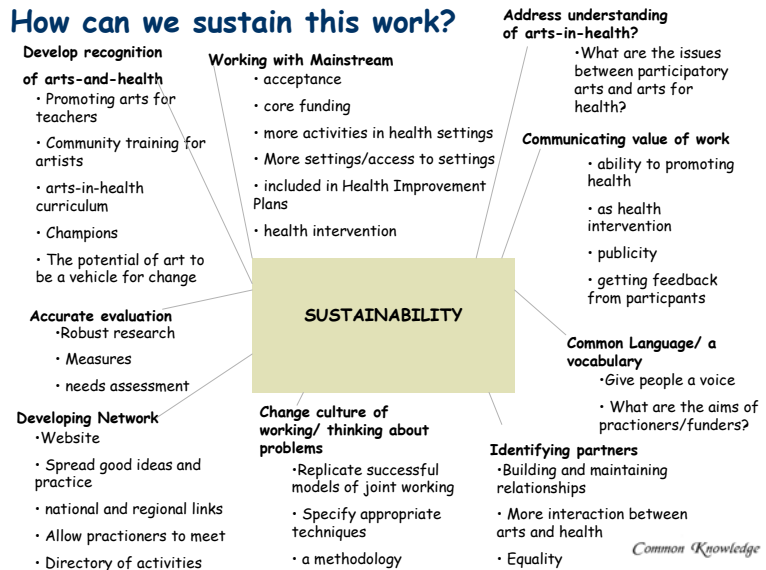
What's needed?

These issues lead directly into a discussion of how this work can be sustained.

Working with the mainstream is important. There are on-going debates to which the arts-in-health community should contribute. What is health? Is it purely physical? What is the potential of the arts? To what extent are arts and particularly community-based arts able to engage with communities of people to identify health needs, to meet these needs locally, and to help promote awareness of health issues and services?

Arts-in-health encompasses a variety of approaches; for the community to have a sustainable impact, joint working across sectors, between different professionals or different institutions needs to be developed. Existing projects are building bridges that should be sustained, and there is a need for new bridges to be built between these different approaches to health.

How can we sustain this work?

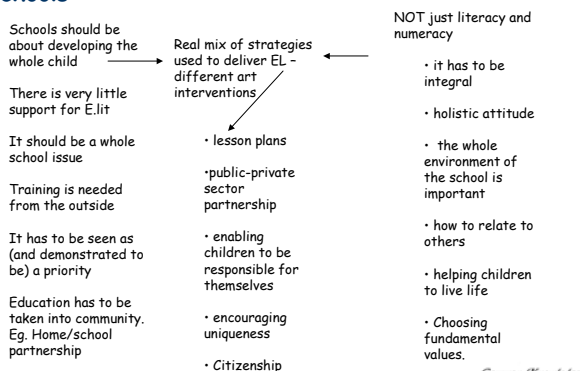


Although people approach arts and health in different ways, with projects that look very different, all involved in this work have shared challenges.

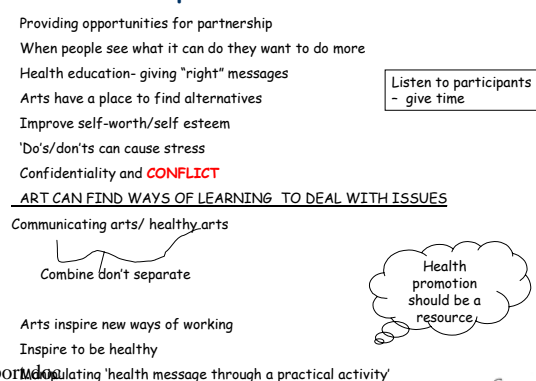
Open space

People were invited to think about key issues on which they would like to begin discussions. People suggested themes and others joined them to pursue discussion or suggested other issues. A number of 'conversation stalls' were established around the room for a discussion. The figures below summarise two examples.

Example: Rolling out emotional literacy in schools



Example: Should the arts be servicing the needs of health promotion?



Collect stones

At the end of the day, participants collected their stones from the fountains; the ones they had written on what they are taking a break from, and on the blank side wrote a second phrase to capture what they had taken away from the day. Participants took their stone as a memory of the day.

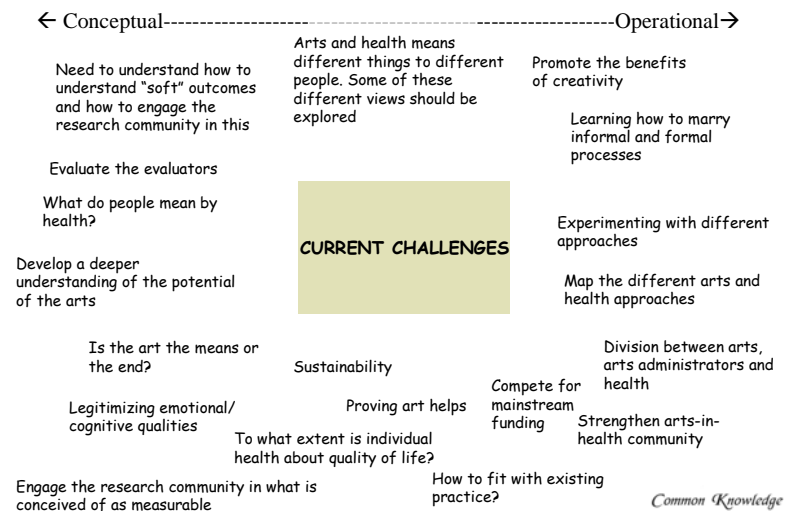
Conclusions

The final part of this report draws together some conclusions. It draws on the brainstormed notes of the day and notes of discussions and is divided into three very brief sections: (1) what are the challenges and important themes to explore in the future? (2) How do we explain what the arts-and-health field is? (3) Is there a common vocabulary for arts in health?

What are the current challenges and the important themes to explore in the future?

People who attended the conference see a number of future challenges. These are best placed on a spectrum of conceptual challenges (on the left) and operational challenges (on the right). There is some gray area between them. This is for a few reasons. One is the different conceptual starting points of arts and health - is arts-in-health about promoting health through participation in arts? Or is it a health intervention in its own right. Is it a means or an end? Is it about production or creation? Can it be both?

What are current challenges for Arts-in-Health?



is arts-in-health about promoting health through participation in arts? Or is it a health intervention in its own right. Is it a means or an end? Is it about production or creation? Can it be both?

There is a danger of arts-and-health becoming stuck in catch-22 situation. In an increasingly evidence-based world, interventions that compete for Government funding must have some support for their case. Some fear arts-in-health will be seen as a fad, but it takes time to develop a reliable evidence base.

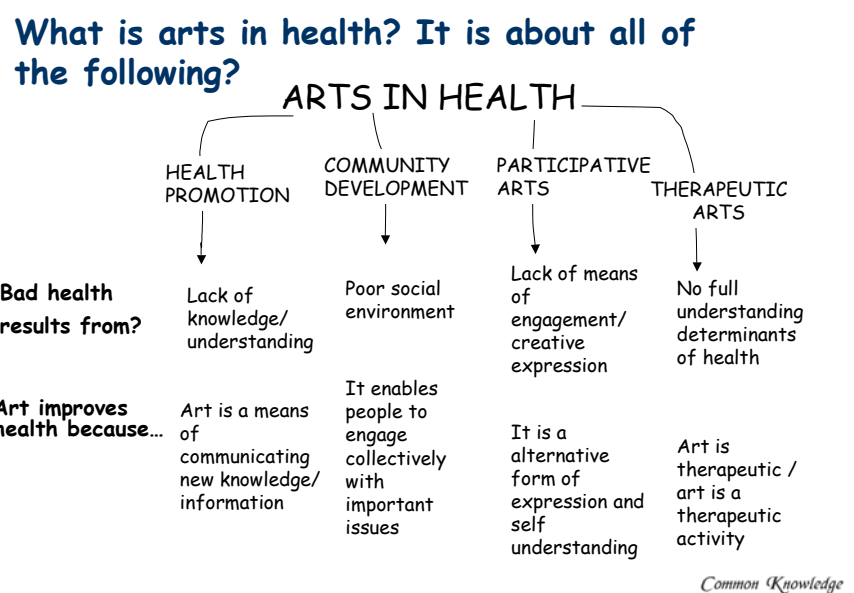
The discussion raises a number of ongoing issues among the arts in health community. For example, is engagement in the arts healthy in and of itself?. Is it a healthy activity? Or should the arts be more about promoting health, a health intervention? Are arts a useful vehicle to explore health? And what do we mean by an arts in health community?

Unless these big questions are approached, and arts-in-health engages with these policy and research issues, it will struggle to establish a credible case. The challenge is to engage with these questions, and to demonstrate the breadth and depth of arts-in-health as a range of approaches.

How do we explain what arts and health is?

A strong message emerging between the lines is the need to articulate arts-in-health as, by its very nature, a multidisciplinary and pluralistic movement. For the community to have any sustainable impact joint working across sectors, between different professions and different institutions needs to be developed and demonstrated. Art and community-art based approaches provide a spectrum of interventions and potential ways of working. To demonstrate this spectrum a good deal of effort by the research community and practitioners is required to think through, portray, and demonstrate the value of the variety of approaches that exist.

There is some danger in defining arts-in-health. Rather than celebrating the diversity within it, there might be a pointless battle as one part of it tries to dominate. The figure to the right tries to explain that there are a number of approaches that coexist in the field. They have different assumptions, which perhaps can be seen in the way they approach two questions. What is the cause of ill health? And why does art improve health?



The arts-in-health field must not fragment. There is a 'tug of love' over its defining features. Yet the definitions of art in health depend upon your perspective – as does your definition of health, or of art. Only if it encompasses a wide approach and understanding of health can it come together to add to the mainstream understanding of health and its

determinants. People can be located in one or more of the perspectives – rarely all. But this does not weaken arts-in-health. Rather it increases our understanding of health as a complex phenomenon with multiple influences.

A vocabulary for arts-in-health

Another key message to emerge from the day, and not unconnected to the need to demonstrate the breadth of this emerging field, is that people would like to develop a recognisable vocabulary for arts-in-health. This is not about developing a jargon that will exclude people, but about developing a common language that bridges several communities.

There are a couple of key themes to emerge from discussions around ‘building bridges’ to which this and the previous discussion relate. Arts-in-health is not well understood, and efforts should be made to make people more familiar with the work. Many of the constituents (for want of a better term) of this work are people who are not always seen as



naturally in alliance. One of the advantages of the arts-in-health approaches is that it offers new forms for people to explore issues together, learn to understand each other, think along the same lines, and speak the same language. The diagram to the right has been adapted from the notes of one discussion that ventured into this area. The words capture much of the scale and contour of the field.

Participants' Comments

Comments books were available to write or sketch thoughts or feelings throughout the day. All comments are reproduced below and grouped by theme.

This kind of event can be liberating

'I feel affirmed in the sort of work I am doing. Breaking new ground, swimming against the tide – towards a new creative culture. Thanks.'

'The day attempted something very generous and brave to come at things differently.'

This kind of event can help break down barriers

'Thank you – this has helped me to break some barriers that I thought would never go away.'

'An excellent day about transformation.'

A different way of coming together – that is so much more real and useful than the ordinary conference framework. Would also have liked a way of letting off steam in a free form way – say by dancing all together – Salsa – Freeform – together with the music, of course!

'Thank you very much, it was great to have an opportunity to practice what we preach.'

It provides a space to talk

'Thank you very much for providing the space to talk.'

'Wonderful to be allowed the time to just talk. Feel invigorated and enthused.'

This kind of event can stimulate creative thinking

'I'm seeking a forum that implies trust and enquiry – they don't always go together. To be able, to give oneself permission to listen – to oneself, within; and to the stories of others. Fantastic; and good voyage.'

'My brain feels like it is overflowing. More time with fewer people could have been good but...Thank you.'

'Excellent – great facilitation has led to great ideas.'

'A wonderfully creative day, gave me some extra energy for the week ahead.'

'It's been invaluable for my project and a ray of light. It's good to see Common Knowledge evolving. The process over the past year has been fun. Today has given a sense of purposefulness and aim.'

'I sensed that people in this event were beginning to get used to this model for how Common Knowledge works – very valuable day. Many people were saying how valuable they found it and refreshing after traditional meetings. This way of working needs to be shared with others.'

It has made me want to pursue some issues in more depth

'Well organised and fun. I would have liked to establish some definitions at the beginning – some of the time I felt we were all talking about different things and lacked common ground! It resolved itself in the end but a bit of discussion about arts and health at the beginning would have helped.'

It helps to share information

'A fantastic day of networking and information sharing.'

'Knowledge galore! So glad it has rubbed off on me!'

'Great way of learning, but the most exhausting coffee break I've ever had.'

It helps to legitimize our work

'Lots of good talk – with familiar and unfamiliar people – hope it can change some policy, and make our work visible. It is so important.'

I enjoyed it

'An enjoyable experience.'

'Fantastically well organised – lots of thinking and care went into this – and it showed. I felt very safe all day and cared for. Some of the starting points for networking/discussion may have been a little old ground? Perhaps discussion could have gone a bit further. But I wish all discussions and conferences were so well planned and beautiful.'

Good to meet other people who have similar aims but who ordinarily we might not meet

'Felt the way the day was structured helped the networking process. As usual with conferences etc the benefit should be in people following things up.'

'Seamlessly implemented. I liked being forced into different groups, mixes of conversations, insights and experience. I was sometimes frustrated at those still at first base and those entrenched in arguments'.

'Wonderful way of meeting people with similar aspirations from all over the country. We've established some really helpful links. An inspirational day.'

Not all comments are positive feeling. Some people find it difficult to participate in these kind of events. This has been the experience of Common Knowledge throughout. Others reflect wider issues about the relationship between arts and health. For example, that some artists feel their contribution can be devalued, and not understood.

But I couldn't finish all the conversations

'Lots of half finished conversations hanging in the air waiting to be taken up again. Maybe cards for each participant to pass on with contact details there and then. But otherwise it was fab.'

'I'm afraid I found the day disjointed – a structure which prevented full discussion – I felt we re-trod old ground and came to same conclusions.'

'Good to network but found it a bit aimless and unchallenging. Needed more argument! Lovely venue, well organised.'

Which arts are healthy?

'Came here wanting to have clarification on the definition of 'Arts' as this has a bearing on funding – and I believe cost to be one of the greatest barriers for people in accessing the arts –which I take to include the ancient arts of yoga, tai chi, acupuncture, massage etc. etc. etc.'

This kind of event trivializes art

'The rather 'Hippy Like' approach to the arts is very damaging and is one reason why artists are so underpaid and under-valued. I did benefit greatly from the networking but found the format irritating and trivializing.'

I felt excluded from the dance activity

'I am feeling angry. I am disabled and cannot participate in the exercise everyone else is involved in now. If a HAZ conference operate in exclusive ways, what hope is there?' The activity was done in pairs. The persons' partner added: 'I too want to comment on the exclusion experienced through the movement exercise – no accommodation was made. This is a pity. The event overall feels good.'

The 6- Hour Coffee Break

was facilitated by:

Mary Robson
Orit Azaz
Kathryn Edwards
Dawn Williams
Mike White
Hanna Murray-Leslie
Tom Smith

Special thanks to:

Tyne and Wear HAZ, Alan Milburn MP, Pauline McAvoy, Tabitha Tucket, Mr T, Miranda Tufnell, Tim Rubidge, Margaret Frayne, Staff of the Assembly Rooms, the Lord Mayor of Newcastle

Contact

Common Knowledge wants to share experience and lessons learned with other community based arts in health projects nationwide, especially I Health Action Zones. For further information and connection, contact

Mike White
CAHMM (Centre for Arts and Humanities in Health and Medicine)
The Business School

University of Durham
Mill Hill Lane
Durham
DH1 3 LB

Tel: 0191 374 7169

e-mail: mike.white@durham.ac.uk