



Unlocking Insights: Evaluating Creativity in Community Cultural Projects for Older Adults

Based on a NICHE Funded Creative Evaluation of Community Culture Club led by Holly Sandiford in partnership with Norfolk Museums Service

Community Culture Club is a creative heritage project for older adults living with dementia, those who are carers, those with other long-term health conditions, and those who are lonely¹ or socially isolated. Based at the Museum of Norwich at the Bridewell ('MoN').

This report explores a transformative approach to project evaluation, shifting from traditional surveys to creative activities that align with each session's theme. Alongside this, we have experimented with making more traditional methods more accessible, visual, and useful for participants to track change. Traditional survey methods have long been the norm of project evaluation, providing valuable but often limited insights into participant experiences. As shown in the report, these differing methods have been reflected upon and will be used to design next year's evaluation. We also kept in a traditional survey that has been used in previous years as a way to compare and contrast the usefulness and success of the different approaches.

As diverse as the abilities and needs of participants are, the adaptability of these creative evaluations is essential. Simplicity, balanced with avoiding condescension, emerges as a key consideration. The report also emphasises alternative data-gathering methods for inclusivity. It highlights the potential for scalability, encouraging future adaptations of successful activities.

The limitations of creative evaluations are also acknowledged. The importance of introducing alternative data-gathering methods, such as bodily expression, drawing, or recording discussions, is emphasised, suggesting a more inclusive approach to feedback collection.

We have discovered that, as the sessions unfold, we are creating a richer and more detailed picture of what participants go through. In contrast to conventional survey-based methodologies, it invites evaluators to be creative, flexible, and exploratory.

The Methods

Creative, embedded creative exercise at the end of each session, which relates to the theme of each session led by the creative evaluator.

¹ **Loneliness** is a subjective feeling which relates to the difference between a person's desired levels of social contact and their actual level of social contact and is linked to the perceived quality of the person's relationships. Loneliness is never desired and lessening these feelings can take a long time

These creative reflections enabled a deeper understanding of participant emotions, connections, and overall well-being. Key takeaways were the importance of simplicity in design, adaptability to diverse abilities, sensory engagement, and recognising individual needs, particularly for participants living with dementia.

Session 1 - The Museum of Us

Description of Evaluation: Large-scale cardboard template of Sampson (the session includes a discussion of the local statue of Sampson in the Museum of Norwich). Creating a template means it can be drawn around and used again.

Question it was asking people to respond to? *How did today make you feel?*

What Went Well:

- Using a large-scale cardboard template for evaluation and keeping it simple with heart post-it notes was effective.
- Streamlining the process was crucial because of time constraints, and importantly, it still yielded important feedback.
- The approach seamlessly aligned with the session's themes.

Key Takeaways for Future Sessions:

- Recognising the significance of simplicity in design for this specific group is imperative. Given the diverse range of abilities and needs, balancing simplicity, and avoiding condescension is crucial.
- Because of time limitations, the activity was changed from a more sensory, textured collaging exercise to solely utilising post-it notes. This change highlighted the effectiveness of simpler, quicker exercises within this context.
- As a creative facilitator, the inclination to devise elaborate, large-scale evaluation techniques is understandable. However, emphasis should be on relevance and complementarity with session activities, rather than creating competition.

Session 2 - The History of Norwich's Textile Industry

Description of Evaluation: Strips of coloured paper woven together as the session focused on the weaving industry.

Question it was asking people to respond to? *What was your favourite thing about today?*

What Went Well:

- The weaving activity with coloured paper was visually impactful and well-received, whilst at the same time simple and easily replicable.

Key Takeaways for Future Sessions:

- This could be adapted in terms of scale, either going much bigger or smaller.

Session 3 - The History of Medicine

Description of Evaluation: Message in a bottle. Participants wrote their message and rolled it up into old bottles. This relates to the medicine theme and the bottles we visited in the museum pharmacy.

Question it was asking people to respond to? *What did you enjoy today and what would you like more of?* (wishes, manifestations)

What Went Well:

- The message in a bottle activity, combining simplicity with sensory engagement, was very successful.
- One participant had a childhood memory of putting a message in a bottle with their father. They found the experience very moving, and it brought them to tears. Others remembered the bottles from their childhood, which sparked further connections and communication.

Key Takeaways for Future Sessions:

- Continue incorporating sensory elements into evaluations.
- Consider participant preferences and generations when choosing evaluation methods.

Session 4 - Christmas Traditions through the Ages

Description of Evaluation: In response to looking at the museum's cracker collection, they filled a giant cracker with evaluation slips instead of paper jokes for the evaluation.

Question it was asking people to respond to? *Give an example about how someone else in the group has brought you joy?* (as it was Christmas, it seemed appropriate to have a question about giving to others).

What Went Well:

- The Christmas cracker slips activity successfully integrated the festive theme and elicited meaningful responses which furthered connections between participants. It shows that evaluation has the potential to increase well-being and measure it.

Key Takeaways for Future Sessions:

- Maintain a balance between light-touch activities and meaningful feedback collection.
- The connections created between participants could be furthered by adding notes to single crackers and then pulling with the person you have written about/to.

Session 5 - The History of Chocolate

Description of Evaluation: Wrapped up responses in chocolate wrappers to create a chocolate 'Box of Joy'

Question it was asking people to respond to? *What brings joy to you?*

What Went Well:

- The 'Box of Joy' activity worked well, aligning with the theme of chocolate.
- The activity provided an enjoyable, sensory experience and received positive feedback from participants.
- The notes were also wrapped up with no names, so enabled more anonymity in response to the question.
- It also enabled us to respond to a key aim which is to create joyous moments.

Key Takeaways for Future Sessions:

- There are limits to the amount of feedback this type of exercise can gather, because of the size of the paper and because it relies on writing.
- We wrote feedback for those who found writing hard, but this is still potentially embarrassing as it highlights people's challenges.
- Next time it would be good to introduce other ways to gather data, e.g. bodily expression, drawing, recording discussions.

Session 6 - Printing & Manuscripts

Description of Evaluation: Creating the front page of an A1 newspaper to gather feedback. Options to use collage, drawing and writing as well as writing down people's reflections for them where appropriate.

Question it was asking people to respond to? *How would you explain this project to other people through a newspaper front cover?* Can include things you have learnt, enjoyed etc.

What Went Well:

- The A1 newspaper front page activity was engaging, with positive feedback from participants.
- It enabled varied approaches for different individuals, particularly those living with dementia. One participant, living with dementia, happily joined in with this even though they struggled with filling in the evaluation cups that session.
- There is also space to be more in depth and answer more than just a simple question.

Key Takeaways for Future Sessions:

- Continue to acknowledge and adapt to individual preferences and conditions. Continue to embrace varied, inclusive approaches.

Session 7 - Tiny Tales & Life in Miniature

Description of Evaluation: In the evaluation, we had a tiny handmade post-box with tiny, sealed letters containing notes inside. We then used the miniature peg dolls created in the session to post them.

Question it was asking people to respond to? *How did you feel about today? Anything you would change?*

What Went Well:

- Using miniature peg dolls was both embedded and effective.
- Having feedback which was then posted and looked at later with no names enabled people to be more honest. For example, one participant fed back that she would like the group to finish on time, which is useful to know.
- I noticed that as the creative feedback activity became more elaborate; the participants gave more detailed responses. One woman also spontaneously suggested ideas for the next year's cohort. I wonder if gathering feedback throughout positively encourages people to feel more engaged in the process?

Key Takeaways for Future Sessions:

- Continue to adapt techniques for participants with specific needs.
- Explore ways to maintain embeddedness in evaluation.
- Provide more opportunity for an anonymised collection of data like this. A more open, visual collaborative approach can make it harder for people to share more difficult experiences.

Session 8 - The Shoe & Boot Trade

Description of Evaluation: A 'Slippers to Stilettos' chart.

Question it was asking people to respond to? *How much did you enjoy the session today?*

What Went Well:

- The 'Slippers to Stilettos' chart, while not entirely successful, elicited some valuable quantitative feedback.
- We also taped large paper all over the table, providing an additional avenue for feedback collection.

Key Takeaways for Future Sessions:

- It was too big a conceptual link to equate slippers with enjoying the session less and stilettos to enjoying it more. If using scales, simplify or provide explicit instructions.
- Future evaluations could adopt a more open-ended and exploratory nature, as exemplified by questions such as 'How do I feel about attending these sessions?'

Session 9 - The Art of Courtly Love

Description of Evaluation: Large scale 3D evaluation tree with paper hearts to hang on it. It was also a textured tree with an aim to engage the senses.

Question it was asking people to respond to? *What did you love about the Community Culture Club?*

What Went Well:

- The 'Evaluation Tree' with heart leaves elicited some lovely, positive responses and highlighted the impact of the project on participants' happiness.
- It looks visually attractive on the table and brightens up the space.
- There seems to be a correlation between the time put into preparation and the time people give to responding to it.
- This could also be used as a resource for gathering feedback for museum events, etc

Key Takeaways for Future Sessions:

- Continue to encourage positive reflections on wellbeing.
- Recognise the value of verbal communication for certain participants.
- Again, this is a method which is collaborative, and everyone can see the responses which doesn't allow for more difficult responses.
- The questions for the creative evaluation could be more varied and thus produce more useful results.

Session 10 - Portraiture

Description of Evaluation: Polaroid portrait to capture how you have felt about the project through body language. Participants could do this with others if this better reflected their experience of connection.

Question it was asking people to respond to? *How has this project made you feel?*

What Went Well:

- The Polaroid portrait activity effectively captured changes in participant confidence and body language, and everyone was able to take part.
- Participants seemed to enjoy the process and the opportunity to express themselves in this way, especially working with others to do so. One participant, who's wellbeing was shown to increase quite dramatically by the SWEMWBS wellbeing wheel embodied this beautifully through her chosen posture. Sometimes an image can speak a thousand words.

Key Takeaways for Future Sessions:

- Explore additional nonverbal techniques, such as dance and drama.
- Maintain an emphasis on embedding evaluations into the project and sharing feedback with participants.

Overall Learning:

Adaptability, simplicity, and recognising the unique needs of participants, especially those with dementia, are crucial elements for successful evaluation activities. Continuous reflection on feedback and an openness to learning and improvement characterise the project's approach.

Short Warwick and Edinburgh well-being scale in the first and last session. The evaluator has changed this in a wheel shape to be more appropriate and accessible for participants and so they can see their progress.

What Went Well:

The Feedback from the SWEMWBS was useful and gave evidence that there was a strong positive improvement in well-being in those who started with low scores. It was visually engaging and printed onto A3 paper to make it more user friendly. Participants could also see the improvement to their well-being themselves. It is noticeable that the more people reflect on the sessions and their own well-being the more confident they become in doing so. More groundwork may need to be put in place to make it feel comfortable, especially when working with a generation for whom this sort of reflection is not commonplace. Talking about well-being in this context may also increase group cohesion and depth of connection. This especially relates to feedback about personal well-being.

The method also permits comparison with average national statistics and has gained wide recognition as an evaluation method. The questions are challenging but, with some support, all participants could engage with it.

Key Takeaways for Future Sessions:

As with any system of measuring well-being there will always be other external influencing factors, so this needs to be looked at with some caution. Participants may want to please facilitators by showing an improvement in well-being. The questions can be challenging for participants, and it is not possible to fully comprehend individual needs at that point. Having a visual representation of

the table may make someone more inclined to give a positive response, as they can see the change visually.

This approach enabled participants to see the change and be actively aware of it. Next time I may print two separate copies with the last one being printed on transparent paper. This way they can then see this change without it interfering with the outcome.

The use of 'Evaluation Teacups' a system designed by external evaluator to capture well-being data at the beginning and end of each session

What Went Well: I noticed that the teacup method encouraged discussion and reflections on well-being. Working with older adults, it is more likely that well-being isn't part of their vocabulary. One participant said, *'Don't take this the wrong way but women are more able to understand their feelings than men'*, he also speaks about school and having to have a 'stiff upper lip'. It was also interesting that he would relate his feelings to colours and the weather, e.g. sunshine and the colour yellow for happiness. It seemed to become easier for him to discuss well-being as the club progressed through the weeks.

Participants found this method easier to understand than the SWEMWBS, but the results are less useful because they cannot be compared with national averages, and it does not break down the components of well-being in the same way. A definite plus was that everyone understood the concept of 'how full is your cup?' in relation to well-being.

Key Takeaways for Future Sessions: Working with participants living with dementia and other conditions that may affect cognitive processing means they may find visual tasks difficult. One participant, who was extremely eloquent, found colouring very difficult and stressful. Instead of asking them to colour it in, we had a conversation about where they were on the scale and then did the colouring for them.

Community Culture Club paper questionnaires given to participants on the penultimate week where appropriate.

We gathered some useful feedback from the questionnaire. It was only given to three participants as it wasn't appropriate to all, and we did not want to give unpaid carers extra work to do at home. We are currently discussing alternative ways to collect this data without impacting on the sessions for next year. Two participants that filled it were living with Parkinsons and noted that writing by hand is a challenge so a digital version would be preferable (with an option to handwrite). This enables anonymous collection of feedback which may enable people to be more honest.

Observations of the sessions by the external evaluator (carried out in a way that doesn't feel extractive or othering). It is important to be sensitive in the sharing of this data so that participants don't feel that they are part of an experiment.

What Went Well: My participation in the group meant they did not perceive me as a traditional external evaluator. Therefore, the atmosphere was more relaxed, and I could also offer my time and experience to the club, thus further enriching the experience.

Key Takeaways for Future Sessions: A more embedded approach means that you are more involved and invested in the group, but it would feel inappropriate to be outside of the activity in this context. Participants could easily be made to feel that they are part of an experiment as opposed to a community culture group.

Feedback sessions with delivery staff led by the external evaluator at the end of each session. Recorded and written up.

This was an extremely useful practice. I would record our discussions and write up afterwards to enable a freer flowing conversation. It enables the gathering of data whilst it is still fresh and to make any changes for the next session based on the discussion.

Feedback from group visitors (e.g. health professionals, student nurses, museum trainees)

What Went Well: Useful data gathered about the club from people seeing the project from a more detached perspective and from professionals with invaluable experience.

Key Takeaways for Future Sessions: For next year, the responses from visitors would be better as an online survey and thus able to be anonymised.

The Centre for Cultural Value principles

In 2021, the Centre for Cultural Value responded to growing demand within the arts, culture, and heritage sector for support with evaluation. The result was their co-created Evaluation Principles. These principles were used to guide the planning, delivery, and reflections of the evaluation.

How beneficial was it?

The plan prioritised learning and change, and the facilitators adapted the sessions after reflecting upon them. The after-session feedback chats meant facilitators were constantly fine-tuning sessions to adapt to the needs of participants. With groups like this, there is never one right way, every individual and thus the group dynamics are different. The capacity of the facilitators to adapt

in real time to the group's needs was a real asset. Needs can also change weekly because of various factors. We found that the post-Christmas period was hard for participants and the facilitators reduced the amount of activity and allowed more time for discussion during the session. Evaluation reflections will be used to design next year's session and will also be a continuously developing process.

Consideration of the ethical implications for the activities in the plan was extremely important. One example is that we had thought of creating a case study for the evaluation, but this feels inappropriate in these circumstances. We would discuss participants' cognitive and functional decline, and although we would anonymise it, it would be easy to identify someone with such a small group. Mental capacity is also an important factor, as some participants may not understand what it means to give consent. It may also make potential future participants feel uneasy about participating.

The plan produced evidence that is practically useful and applicable. It was used to adapt sessions as we went on and will be used to plan the next cohort. It will also be useful to show stakeholders and funders, both current and future, how the club achieves its aims.

How robust was it?

The methods chosen provided us with relevant and useful evidence and we would hope that there was rigour in data collection and analysis (we are very open to outside feedback and reflection on this).

As a creative facilitator, I do have preconceptions about the potential for culture for well-being projects to improve the well-being of participants. My experience has shown that well designed and led projects increase well-being which means I am not totally neutral in my positionality. The methods, especially the creative ones, provide an opportunity to capture the unexpected. We were open-minded about discovering uncomfortable information, but more thought needs to be put into more anonymised ways to collect this.

The evaluation activities are possibly a little disproportionate to the scale of the project. There may be too much evidence gathering. This is partly because we are trying out different ideas and approaches to find which work best in terms of accessibility, appropriateness, and the data that they collect. We can now work together to review the data and design next year's evaluation plan accordingly.

Was it people-centred?

Participants were not involved in the creation of the evaluation plan, but their feedback and our observations will now be used to design next year's plan. We constantly altered evaluation in response to need throughout. For example, we changed to the teacups method after session three as opposed to using the SWEMWBS every week (we then used it only in the last session). This was because one participant fed back that they really were not enjoying doing it.

A huge amount of thought about the needs of the people we were collecting evidence from and the stakeholders we are sharing the results with.

Was your plan connected?

Are you fully informed about the context for your evaluation? Do you know what's going on for the people involved in your evaluation?

Using existing frameworks such as SWEMWBS and also a logic model for planning connects well to existing modes of evaluating and data can be cross referenced against national statistics. We were constantly checking in and altering the evaluation to ensure it was a positive and appropriate experience for participants. Sharing our findings is an important part of the evaluation process. This is done through reporting, in-person events and training days and discussions. We have also been talking to other local creative facilitators about best practice in the field.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this report illustrates the transformative power of creative evaluation in community projects. The sessions, each culminating in a unique, theme-related exercise, successfully align creativity with participant experiences. In designing future evaluations, we will focus on adaptability, simplicity, and the recognition of diverse needs within a group. Despite acknowledging limitations, such as potential embarrassment and challenges in data gathering, the report advocates for a shift towards open-ended, exploratory approaches in evaluation processes.

The creative facilitators' commitment to adaptability, continuous reflection, and openness to learning stands out as a key strength. This report not only signifies a departure from conventional methodologies but also cultivates deeper connections within Community Culture Club by capturing participant experiences in a more profound manner. Using mixed methods contributes to a robust and people-centred approach, showcasing the project's commitment to learning, improvement, and ethical considerations.

The connections forged between participants and facilitators lay the foundation for a project that prioritises well-being and mutual understanding, exemplifying the potential impact of creative evaluation methods.