
PORTFOLIO



DESIGNING AND FACILITATING STRESS & ANXIETY REDUCING WORKSHOPS

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1 Introduction

During the autumn term of the 2021/2022 academic year, the Applied Drama course of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David were to work with participants from a specific community, and deliver a work of participatory theatre. In our case, this community was the years 12 and 13 of Queen Elizabeth High School, Johnstown, Carmarthen, where the aim was to lower stress and anxiety. This portfolio will sum up the research gathered before and during the workshops, and the application of this theory to practice with its ethical considerations, followed by a reflective evaluation of the project.

2 Before going into the school

As previously mentioned, we had to gather research before going into the school November 10th. The gathered information was on the health and wellbeing of residents in Wales, the participant group, ecotherapy and mindfulness.

2.1 Wellbeing act

The “wellbeing of future generations (Wales) act 2015” has the primary function of setting long term goals to improve the social, environmental, economic and cultural aspects of Wales (Welsh Government, 2015, p. 3). The background for the act is that Wales presently faces a number of challenges that might impact its future, such as climate change, poverty, health inequalities (Welsh Government, 2015, p. 4).

Out of a number of goals, one stood out as more relevant to the participatory performance project: “A healthier Wales” described as: “A society in which people’s physical and mental well-being is maximised and in which choices and behaviours that benefit future health are understood.” (Welsh Government, 2015, p. 6). This is one of the documents that helped refine our aim for the workshops.

2.2 The pupils

We already knew that many pupils were struggling with stress and/or anxiety. A series of lockdowns had isolated the pupils, not only from each other, but also preventing them from having a natural progression in their education. This, in turn, made the leap from year 9 & 10 to 12 & 13 a large one with infrequent normal schooling. These factors combined were, to our knowledge, some of the factors leading to the participant groups' source of stress and anxiety.

On October 22nd we had the opportunity to meet two of the pupils' teachers. They provided us a raw insight into the participant group. The factors previously mentioned were confirmed to be true, in addition to other challenges such as identity concerns and vaccination pressure. Another factor was that some of the students had experienced domestic abuse during lockdown. However, the teachers also shared that the pupils are very including, and that some enjoy arts and performance. These were all aspects we had to consider whilst designing the workshops. It also led us to think broader regarding efforts of including elements of drama and theatre in the project.

2.3 The relation between health & wellbeing and art

The early research for this project, even before meeting the teachers, was based on the link between people's health & wellbeing, and art, culture and creativity. Here we studied a factsheet from ANA (A New Approach) regarding their research on "Transformative impacts of arts, culture and creativity". It states, amongst other factors, that engagements with arts and culture leads to strengthening of social connections (...) (A New Approach, 2020, p. 1). As the participation group have experienced multiple lockdowns and been isolated from each other, the aspect of using art to strengthen social connections was one that caught my attention, especially since this has "(...) a direct and positive impact on both physical and mental health." (A New Approach, 2020, p. 2).

2.3 Participation

When it comes to building trust within a group, it is necessary to take the correct steps in order to encourage the participants to, in fact, participate. Prendergast and Saxton (2013, p. 46) state that it is important to start the session with a 'check-in'. This can be done by making the participants say a number between 1 and 10 to indicate how they are feeling. It is a way for the facilitator to get an overview of the participants state of mind, and also be more aware of those who have given the number 5 or below. Furthermore, Prendergast and Saxton (2013, p. 46) also express the importance of having a 'check-out' to monitor how the group sees the project's progression. The check-ins and check-out are a simple way of creating a routine, marking the beginning and end of a session.

Another element of grave importance when building trust with a group of people, is starting the sessions with a light-hearted drama game. This might get the blood pumping and perhaps some shared laughs to build connections between them (Prendergast & Saxton, 2013, p. 46).

2.4 Ecotherapy

This was the topic most thoroughly researched prior to the workshops held at Queen Elizabeth High School. Andrew McGeeney describes Ecotherapy as being: "... about creating a deeper connection to nature and feeling better for it." (McGeeney, 2016, p. 31). Thus, the primary function of ecotherapy is to use nature as a way of healing oneself both physically and mentally. The combination of being outdoors in fresh air and connecting with other people whilst being mindful are some of the benefits to using ecotherapy as a means to mitigate stress and anxiety (McGeeney, 2016, p. 63).

The ways in which we explored ecotherapy was to do a so called 'body scan' before and after a walk in nature where there was a general agreement in class that everyone felt more relaxed in their own way afterwards. We also went on a walk together where we practised McGeeney's 'Monologue in a Pair'-exercise where one person talks uninterrupted for a certain amount of time. The aim is to have the opportunity to be completely listened to and to express spontaneous thoughts (McGeeney, 2016, p. 168). The class agreed that it was a

strange experience to have such a one-sided conversation, but that it was nice to finish a though without the 'threat' of having it interrupted. Lastly the class went on an excursion (I myself was not present) where the students did an exercise focusing on a view they had to draw, then zoom in on the view and draw something more specific, and lastly zooming in again to draw it. The purpose of these exercises is to focus on something external, as this takes one out of one's own head. As McGeeney says: "Nothing else matters at that moment except to be engaged with nature" (McGeeney, 2016, p. 76).

2.5 Mindfulness

The most basic definition of mindfulness is to be completely present in the moment. This is similar to ecotherapy, except that the intention there is to be present in nature.

Mindfulness, as defined by McGeeney is "a psychological state of increased awareness and attention in the present moment" (McGeeney, 2016, p. 62). It is derived from Buddhism and Hinduism, and is intended to lower stress and anxiety. Mindfulness has today been brought into many areas of mainstream clinical practice (Psychology Today, n.d.). The way in which the class got to explore mindfulness was through a simple exercise, led by a guest facilitator, that involved rubbing our hands together in a circular motion, only focusing on the tactile sensation. This enables us to 'get out of our own head' and removing all worries that are currently out of our control.

3.0 Going into the school

After gathering enough research on the previously mentioned topics, it was time to actually design and facilitate the workshops. We were to go into the school every Wednesday and Friday for three weeks in November. On Wednesdays we had year 12, on Fridays, year 13; both years were split into two groups. The original intention was also to leave something behind for the students after the workshop period was over.

3.1 The first week

This week we cooperatively planned a workshop that we would do with each our group for both days. Inspired by Prendergast and Saxton, we focused on building trust and allowing the pupils to get to know each other and our way of working. This is where we introduced 'check-ins' and simple get-to-know-each-other-games such as 'Throwing Names' (Geese Theatre Company, 2002, p. 55), and 'Anyone Who' (Geese Theatre Company, 2002, p. 61). This part of the workshop worked well for both the Wednesday- and Friday group proving Prendergast and Saxton's theory right; the pupils seemed to enjoy the games. There were some games that did not go as well, such as 'Zip Zap Bop' (Geese Theatre Company, 2002, p. 73), which in hindsight might have been too childish, especially for year 13. Another exercise we did with the pupils this week was 'Continuum' (Geese Theatre Company, 2002, p. 62), which we used as a way to map out the proportion of pupils who feel stressed at school. Despite both groups being rowdy, it seemed like the pupils in both year groups enjoyed expressing their opinions and being listened to.

We got to have a conversation with the other group where we asked the pupils more thoroughly about their school-lives. To start off we played 'Walk Means Run' (Geese Theatre Company, 2002, p. 85) and immediately saw the implications of the game seeing as there was someone in a wheelchair in the Friday-group. After fearing that the pupil might feel left out as it is a physical game, I asked them quickly during the exercise if they could find an equivalent, and they were already on the case.

During the conversation we found out that the pupils do not in fact know each other too well, and that some pupils do not talk too much at all. We had received positive feedback from the school, stating that the pupils noticed that the quieter people were actually talking, and that greetings in the hallway became easier.

3.2 The second week

This week we worked more independently and chose exercises we wanted to try out and then structuring the order afterward. I myself was not present on Friday, so I can only speak for what happened on Wednesday.

I wanted to show the pupils a mindfulness exercise involving laying on the floor, closing their eyes and focusing on one body part at a time. In other words, a body-scan. The pupils were noticeably shy and did laugh a bit, as expected, but when asking the pupils how they felt, they confirmed feeling slightly uncomfortable yet relaxed. My aim here was to show them this exercise if they have any trouble sleeping caused by stress, for example. I later led the Pulse Train (Geese Theatre Company, 2002, p. 83) to get the pupils to focus on being in the moment. My intention was not as clear as the body-scan was, yet it still seemed like the pupils enjoyed the game.

After the break, the class participated in a few ecotherapy exercises together with the pupils. We were to focus visually on one thing at a time and later take a picture of that thing. We later got into groups where we, the students, were spread out evenly amongst pupils and talked about what we took a picture of.

3.3 The third week

Here we had the same group on Wednesday, and we combined the Friday-group making them double in size. For the Wednesday group, I facilitated a writing exercise that I had learned in another module. I asked them to close their eyes and draw themselves. The implications here could be that some of the pupils might find closing their eyes uncomfortable, the way I avoided this problem was to let the pupils know that I would be keeping my eyes open at all times. Later I asked them to write freely using a few prompts such as: I am, I dislike, I love. I was unsure whether to make the pupils share what they had written with the group, as it could put pressure on those who may have written more personal material. To not put this pressure on them, I told them to keep the pieces of paper for themselves. However, I did notice some pupils sharing what they had written amongst themselves, so they did in fact get to share. Later I did the same Continuum exercise, that we had done two weeks prior. This time, the prompts were more serious as it involved statements such as "School is a safe space", "Lockdown was hard" and "I don't feel seen/heard at school". In both groups this led to the pupils opening up about some issues they have faced both at school and during lockdown. To make sure all the pupils were

heard, we ended up being two students going round and listening to their thoughts and opinions.

3.4 What we left behind

The plan was to leave either a practice or a physical object behind for the pupils after the project. The other group had decided to collect the drawings from one of their exercises. The drawings depicted how the pupils saw school. A suggestion arose to make a collage of these drawings and give it back to them. We had to consider whether this was appropriate, as we did not have the pupils' approval for this. Consequently, we decided to have one of our students draw an interpretive collage, recognising the drawings we had received, yet not using the raw material without the pupil's consent.

Considering how well the 'Continuum' worked and how much the pupils enjoyed feeling heard, we left the 'Monologue in a Pair'-exercise to encourage the teachers to walk together with one or more pupils while they uninterruptedly voice their opinions on what they find challenging about the school.

4.0 A reflective evaluation

One aspect that sticks out to me is the idea that "engagements with arts and culture leads to strengthening of social connections" (A New Approach, 2020, p. 1). After learning that the pupils did not know each other as well as first predicted, it was astonishing to see how well they responded to each other in the drama games. They also provided us with an opinion that it was nice to learn about one another. This proved to me that applied drama is a good tool to improve social connections. I would also argue that simple drama games such as 'Captains Coming' (Geese Theatre Company, 2002, p. 77) had a greater success rate of lowering stress levels than perhaps ecotherapy.

However, mindfulness seemed to work better in this area, especially if the pupils were able to calm down sufficiently. The reason why I believe mindfulness worked better than ecotherapy comes down to how unavailable the outdoors was to us. We were not allowed to

take the pupils on excursions and show them the benefits of ecotherapy in the same way we had experienced ourselves. This probably made the outdoors seem underwhelming as they only stepped outside the school, leading them to not take the exercises as seriously. Mindfulness however, does not require a specific location, but rather enough peace and quiet to run the exercises.

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