



Improvisation & Mental Health

I've got an idea! Can I run with it?

A Soundcastle Toolkit
for Cross-Arts Projects
in Mental Health Settings

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Introduction

When was the last time you improvised a brand new process or activity in an arts workshop and felt safe to run with it? Did you have the support of the group? Or were you concerned about the consequences of making mistakes as a facilitator? When facilitating in mental health settings, do you feel able to show your own vulnerability?

Since September 2017, Soundcastle have been working in partnership with theatre and movement practitioner Simon Magnus to combine our respective music and movement practices. Working as co-facilitators on Soundcastle's Sound and Movement course based at Sussex Recovery College, we have been researching how improvised sound and movement can be combined to promote wellbeing, resilience and confidence building in a mental health setting. The questions raised above have been raised on an almost weekly basis. This Improvisation and Mental Health toolkit invites you to ask a series of questions of yourself as a facilitator and examine your own unique approach. It serves as an introduction to facilitating cross-arts activities for projects in mental health settings.

We have co-produced the Sound and Movement course in partnership with Belinda Channer and Julie Barnett, Peer Trainers from the Sussex Recovery College. They have given us an insight into cross-sector co-production and the importance of working with people with lived experience of mental ill health when delivering in this setting. Whilst their involvement was crucial to the success of the course, this particular toolkit will focus on the cross-art aspect of the work rather than cross-sector. Please see Soundcastle's Improvisation and Mental Health Project Report for more information on cross-sector work.



The Soundcastle Practice

Music is for everyone. It is a fundamental part of being human. It is the first thing that we respond to when still in the womb, and it is the last thing preserved in our memory. In modern society, social isolation, cultural differences and a lack of community connectedness are ever present issues. It is within this context that we seek to make change. The Soundcastle practice seeks to genuinely empower communities in collective musicking, exploring how meaningful facilitation can lead to community connectedness through music. For more information on this, please see our [Soundcastle Theory of Practice](#). On the Sussex Recovery College Sound and Movement course we explored this approach on a deeper level by bringing in a second art form - movement. Working in partnership with Simon, together we explored the fundamental flow between art forms, practitioners and community members and learnt how we as facilitators need to embody the very essence of the workshop in order to inspire creativity in the community members.

Community

In keeping with this spirit, you will find that this toolkit does not serve as an instruction manual with prescribed workshop formulas. This is because every mental health setting is different. Every group has a different energy and therefore, different needs. In this toolkit, we seek to ask you as a practicing facilitator, the relevant questions to help you set up a safe space and feel responsive to the flow of **your** group.

Responsive Starting Points

During our time facilitating the Sound and Movement course, we arrived at four fundamental starting points for consideration in order to help cross-arts facilitators plan and facilitate their sessions in mental health settings. We will start with a summary of each before going into more detail.

Myself	The Co-facilitator	The Group	The Space
<p>You are working in a mental health context. It is important to remember that your mental health is just as important as everyone else's in the room.</p> <p>Start by considering your emotional and practical needs in order to help yourself to run a good session.</p> <p>Are you in a position to embody what you are asking of the rest of the group?</p>	<p>You will notice that we assume you have a co-facilitator when working in a mental health setting. When working so responsively, it is essential that you have a partner with whom you can spark ideas in the moment.</p> <p>Your co-facilitator is your ally and creative inspiration, therefore the health of your relationship is fundamental for the wellbeing in the room.</p> <p>Start by considering your relationship needs and how to build trust, support and honesty.</p>	<p>Every group is different. And even the same group of people can be completely different from one session to the next. Think about how you can be ready to adapt your own ideas in order to meet the group at their energy.</p> <p>The community members forming your group are your allies! They are a source of creative inspiration, therefore the health of your relationship is fundamental for the wellbeing in the room.</p> <p>Start by considering how to build trust, support and honest dialogue in order to work towards a truly responsive relationship.</p>	<p>The practicalities of the space you are working in, create a safe framework in which creativity can flow. It too is your ally!</p> <p>Importantly, it is your space as well as the group's. The health of both your and the group's relationship with the space is fundamental for the wellbeing in the room.</p> <p>So start by considering your practical needs from the space as well as the ritual of activities and how these might help to frame the session.</p>

MYSELF

Example questions to ask *Myself* before the start of a session

- Where am I at today (emotionally and physically)?
- What are my needs for this session? (Not in terms of content, but in terms of atmosphere and flow).
- Do I need to do anything for myself right now in order to help myself to run a good session?
- Am I prepared to make mistakes today?
- Am I prepared to accept the group not noticing things that I want them to/had planned for them to notice?
- Am I prepared to model deeper emotional work on myself? Am I prepared to embody what I am asking of others?
- Can I trust both my own and my fellow co-facilitator's instinct and are we prepared to follow each other's creative facilitation flow?
- How will I respond today if my co-facilitator wants to follow their responsive instinct on something and divert from our original plan?



Choosing activities to warm yourself up into the group

Choose a warm up/starter activity that will help you as facilitator to centre yourself and feel responsive to the group. Only once you are settled and feeling aware will you truly be able to respond to the group's needs. We found the following simple activities to be helpful:

- Standing still in the circle and encouraging everyone to make a little eye contact with everyone else in the group. This is our company today. These are the people who make up our group. This is our team.
- Unified breathing exercises to promote a sense of calm and togetherness at the start of a session.
- Stretching and shaking out the bodies. Giving elements of choice so that the group can respond to their own physical needs in the moment.
- Exploring the different sounds our bodies can make; tapping, brushing, stamping, different types of clapping etc.

THE CO-FACILITATOR

Example questions to ask myself regarding my Co-facilitator

- What is our relationship and how do we work together?
- Have we established trust?
- Am I prepared to share my vulnerability with my co-facilitator today?
- Can we support each other to take risks and be truly creative together in the workshop?
- Can I trust both my own and my fellow co-facilitator's responsive instincts and are we prepared to follow each other's creative facilitation flow?
- Am I prepared to accept any mistakes my co-facilitator might make today? If not, how can I share this with my co-facilitator?
- How will I respond today if my co-facilitator wants to follow their responsive instinct on something and divert from our original plan?

“I've got an idea! Can I run with it?”

Trust, Embody, Respond

Working in a cross-arts partnership requires deep levels of trust. You will need to build a strong foundation with your co-facilitator and learn about the different ways in which their art form functions in contrast to your own. To deepen the cross-arts relationship, you will need to trust each

other to take risks as you explore how the two art forms respond, merge and flow together.

Alongside risk taking comes the challenge of allowing yourself to become vulnerable enough to make mistakes. It is perfectly feasible to make creative mistakes as a facilitator and still hold a safe space for the group. However you will need a dedicated co-facilitator at your side to support you and the group as you develop and grow your practice.

In our case, our workshops' content was based on improvisation through sound and movement. By embodying spontaneous, creative and improvisatory energy into our facilitation relationship, we in turn enabled that energy to embody itself in the group. We challenged ourselves to bring just one starter activity and a vision for what we hoped the group would achieve in each 2 hour session. Then, taking care to respond to the group's energy during this first activity, one of the artist facilitators would say **“I've got an idea! Can I run with it?”** As facilitators, this was the equivalent of playing the well know drama game ‘Yes and...’ From that moment on we would improvise how the workshop would develop. This enabled us to respond completely in the moment to the group, rather than impose a set plan that may not have been appropriate for their energy that day. Whilst this may sound daunting, the point is that you are never alone. You have your co-facilitator and the group themselves at your side to help guide the flow of the session.

One of the wonderful things about working in a cross-arts facilitation partnership is the sense of challenge, discovery and most importantly fun! You never know when your co-facilitator's art form might spark a new idea in you.



THE GROUP

Example questions to ask myself regarding *The Group*

- What do I sense about the group today? Am I prepared to be right or wrong about that as the session continues?
- Are my planned activities suitable for this particular group today? Can I adjust my session plan to respond to the energy/needs of the group?
- How creative/spontaneous are the group today? What can I do to create a greater sense of flow and/or freedom to the session?
- What do I notice? Both in myself and in the group? (This question can be asked repeatedly throughout your session. You can also ask it directly to the group. *Having just completed this activity, what do you notice in yourself?*)
- Have I asked the group how/if they would like to be artistically challenged? (Both as a group and as individuals)

Asking Permission to Challenge

As artistic facilitator of a project in a mental health setting, there is a limitless range of creative activities that can be adapted for different groups. The most important thing is to use your imagination and shape whatever you do to the personalities and needs of the community members themselves. The group is your starting point. They are also your allies and creative inspiration.

When working in mental health settings which can involve carers, medication and high levels of anxiety, it can be easy to overlook the creative potential of the group. Working with vulnerable people, the temptation can be to protect, to comfort and to focus on respite.

As important as respite is, we ask you not to underestimate the creative potential of the community members in your group. We have found that simply by having honest conversations with people, it is possible to establish the right level of challenge for each individual. We can literally ask their permission to challenge.

Would you like to be challenged in this group?

How would you like to be challenged?

Would you like us to challenge you further?

Community members with severe mental ill health have asked to be challenged to play more technically difficult music, to improvise scenes and even to perform in front of large audiences. We may not as facilitators have had the confidence to impose these challenges upon vulnerable people had they not been asked for. The result of *permissioned* challenge on the Sound and Movement course was increased levels of resilience beyond the course, in the everyday lives of all the community members.

“Sometimes I’ve been apprehensive to do things and it has been good to be pushed”.

THE SPACE

Example questions to ask myself regarding *The Space*

- Does the space make me feel safe? Why?/Why not?
- Does the space hold me as facilitator as well as the group?
- Have I set boundaries for my own personal space and preparation as facilitator?
- Have I created sufficient personal space to centre myself in the room before the group arrives?
- Is the room organised and tidy?
- Is any paperwork accessible, tidy and in order?
- Are things set up in the same place each week?
- What is the first thing people see as they walk through the door?
- What types of ritual could be useful for this group?

Ritual

The practicalities of the space you are working in, create a safe framework within which creativity can flow. It too is your ally! Importantly, it is your space as well as the group's. The health of both your and the group's relationship with the space is fundamental for the wellbeing in the room. By creating a sense of ritual, both for you and the group, you can frame the more improvisatory processes in safe, familiar activities.

Start by considering your personal needs from the space. For example, consider the room temperature, the airflow and the background noise. Consider any paperwork, resources and/or clutter that might make the room seem busy. Is there a way that you can set up the room before the session in order to make it as little of a distraction as possible during the session? In addition to practicalities, you should also be ensuring that your own personal boundaries are considered. If you need planning time with your co-facilitator before a session, make sure that you put a sign on the door clearly telling the community members what time they can enter. This gives you the personal space to make sure that you and the room are completely ready before greeting the group.

Consider the idea of ritual. Does your set up of the space need to be the same every week in order to give the group consistency? We found that the simple provision of tea, coffee and biscuits and some background music on arrival was enough of a weekly arrival ritual to get the Sound and Movement group feeling comfortable, talkative and as relaxed as possible before starting the creative activities. You can use ritual throughout your whole session, framing the more improvisatory processes in familiar activities. For example, we always had a snack break half way through and finished the session with a group reflection circle to share our unique experiences of the day's events.

What kind of ritual could be right for your group on a weekly basis?

Summary

Over the past year, throughout the Sound and Movement course, we have repeatedly asked ourselves the questions in this toolkit and engaged in honest dialogue to establish a supportive environment which encourages personal growth (in both facilitators and community members). Fundamentally, we have found that the ability to trust, embody and respond infiltrates all parts of the cross-art facilitation process in a mental health setting.

Therefore, when answering the questions set out in this toolkit, we ask you to consider your position in the community of your project. We ask you to embody the very nature of community within your session. Communities don't have flawless, neutral enablers. Facilitators are imperfect humans too and in order to grow we need to try new things and risk making mistakes. Your own wellbeing and resilience as a facilitator is important - just as important as the community members you work with.



So to conclude, we ask permission to challenge you to ask yourself:

Am I prepared to take responsibility for myself, as well as for the group?

And we ask permission to challenge you to ask your co-facilitator:

“I’ve got an idea! Can I run with it?”