

Groovin' Well: experiences of participants.

Report on group feedback conducted by members of Canterbury and District u3a

November 2024

Introduction

As members of Canterbury u3a, we have pleasure in responding to an invitation to provide evidence of feedback from Groovin' Well participants across East Kent. We held four group discussion sessions in Canterbury, Dover, Chatham and Margate, with a total of 25 individuals focusing on their experiences of the workshops in these areas. The discussions were recorded with consent and transcribed using Microsoft Transcribe software, followed by editing. Our analysis was informed by Braun & Clarke's (2006) guidance on conducting thematic analysis, which, in our case, comprised initial coding for each transcript, followed by the identification of overarching themes covering all four groups. We provide evidence to support the themes identified below by including supporting quotations from the group discussions.

Positivity

Positivity was a general sentiment expressed in various ways; for example the word 'fun' occurred across all four groups. Other words and phrases frequently used included 'I love it', 'happy' 'sociable', 'wellbeing', 'lots of laughter', 'keeps us fit'. These findings were, perhaps, not surprising, given the existing evidence to support the benefits of dance across various dimensions of health (physical, social, mental), particularly for older people (Sheppard & Broughton, 2020). But when invited to explain the ways in which these descriptors had meaning, we drew out four interrelated themes: **social connectivity, age sensitivity, cognitive integrity and owning creativity.**

Social connectivity

Members of the Chatham (Ch) group talked about 'making new friends' and 'meeting new people', while a Margate (M) respondent mentioned 'having a kind of connection' with others in the group. In Canterbury (C) the benefits of being in a group were discussed in terms of reducing social isolation and a Dover (D) participant drew out the importance of the time to chat during the mid-session break. These sentiments of cohesion may seem surprising, given that each series of workshops only ran for 6 sessions, with some dancers only joining after the sessions had begun. The format of the workshop sessions (warm-up activities, individual, small and whole group dance movements, followed by a cool-down) may help explain this. Group D members' discussion supported this interpretation when talking about 'the training [from the facilitators] to respond to each other':

'It's training us to respond to others...our eyes and ears are around everyone and you work as a team.'

'We practise every time we go there, looking at people, listening, reflecting and I think that's why it's so powerful ... feeling connected, learning quickly'

Group M participants appeared to agree:

'We did more kind of getting to know each other and those drama games of throwing our names about and moving into spaces and, you know, to begin with didn't we? And then we had to get down to business ... I've loved the way they've actually, you know, put us into groups and how we've interacted and then, in the end, it all worked I think'.

Finally, for those who had been involved in working together for a final group performance *'we've created something we can show to the public, which is special ...something worth looking at'* (Group D).

Age sensitivity

Many individuals mentioned the age factor (the workshops were targeted at people aged 50 plus):

'Quite often I end up doing activities with other people who are, I mean, my age or older and, yeah, it's nice that it's 50, they are all my age or older' (Group C).

'As retirees ...it's nice to have these things on your calendar, you know' (Group M).

There were a number of reasons why a sensitivity to the needs of the target age group on the part of facilitators, and the design of the workshops, was appreciated. There was much mention of the inclusive, non-competitive, progressive and welcoming nature of the workshops, the group size and the fact that the facilitators were non-judgemental, which is sometimes a feature of activities for younger age groups. One group (M) compared the sessions with non-targeted groups that members had experienced:

'I joined a keep fit class back in Norfolk and that was, you know, this young man at the front, you know, doing various movements and then loud music and stuff and, you know, in a big group. And following that was really difficult because you, you just got left behind and you don't know which direction you were going. Every time you did go, he was facing us, so he started on the other leg anyway ...'

And again:

' [the workshops] are different and, you know, it's not like going to keep fit or Pilates or, you know, even line dancing'.

For some, the sessions provided an opportunity either to make up for activities they had missed out on when younger, or to try out a new activity, even if that *'takes one out of one's comfort zone'*:

'I have done a little ballet as a mature [inaudible] but then I couldn't really carry on for financial reasons.' (Group Ch)

'Well I've never danced. So my career was behind a desk or out with people, but it was never any form of self-expression in public.... And if you'd asked me six months ago, I would have said I'd never come here... but it's the best thing I've done in a long time' (Group Ch).

'It's something I would never normally have done and I'm really enjoying it' (Group D).

One participant in group C also appreciated taking on a new challenge at their age:

'They're challenging you know, for older women in particular. And I think that's attracting me, as well as the unique, it's unique and it's encouraging to be at ease in the body they've got at the time of their life'.

A few reasons given for age appropriateness seemed to link to the fact that all the localities where the different groups were held included pockets of high deprivation according to ONS (Office for National Statistics) data for 2022:

'And, well do you know what, it's free. But honestly, it means a lot to those of us on a smaller income like myself' (group D)

'[for other activities] you've got to go on Eventbrite and, like you've got to, you know, say that you're gonna do the next four Thursday mornings or whatever and pay the, you know, on the internet, you know with your £16 or whatever it might be, which isn't a lot of money but you have to know you're going all these Thursdays or I'm just throwing away sort of £5 each, you know, when I can't get there. So I do prefer the things that you either pay at the door or are free.'

Cognitive integrity

Cognitive-related discussions were linked to the age factors discussed above, given the evidence for decline in memory and cognitive integrity at this stage of life (Small, 2001). Research also suggests that engaging in dance promotes cognitive function in older adults (Hewston et al, 2020) and participants picked up on this and appeared to have personally experienced improvements in memory themselves which they ascribed to the Groovin' Well programme:

'I've enjoyed the movement, I've enjoyed remembering things; I think it's made my memory better actually' (Group D)

'... and you know it helps your memory, you know, because you have to focus and it's good' (Group C)

'It's actually coming back into following instructions, but trying to get your brain to respond. I mean I'm terrible with left and right anyway... but then trying to coordinate, I realize how poor my coordination has got was obviously ... haven't done anything quite like this for quite a while really, and I found that helpful' (Group M).

The Margate group went further by suggesting what, in particular, promoted memory within this programme, suggesting it was the techniques used by the facilitators:

'I think the difference is, like, it's the memory aspect and I have to say I've never memorized people's names as well as I have [here] because of the repetition and then looking and then throwing it [the name] back. And I mean, sometimes you forget your own [name]!'

... yes because actually they started calling out the moves by, you know, things like ...giving it a name – you know “ we're doing the Anthony Gormley statue” and so that way it was easier to remember wasn't it?'

Owning the creativity

Participants in the workshops were all invited to take part individually and in groups, to contribute to the choreography of dance sequences and, for those who took part in a final performance, the finer details of the flow and dynamics of the eventual output. Further, this element linked to both the social connectivity through creatively working as a team and also helping memory, since the movements were meaningful to the individuals who offered them. The Margate group thought this was an important factor:

'It was our movement, you know, whether we were 'swimming' or 'walking' or, you know, 'painting', it was our interpretation of the movement. And then we put those together, so it was very, you know, it was ours, wasn't it? It was always ours!'

'..and it's nice to build it up over the weeks as well, because I think more or less we have been...because it's small and we're invited to be ourselves, as you said, not to follow a particular routine ... to make it up..' (Group M).

To the Dover group creativity was an important factor too:

'...and we've created something that we can show the public, which is special' (Group D).

'I have a need to be creative; it ticks so many boxes' (Group D).

The group went on to talk about a confidence boost resulting from the way the facilitators accepted and encouraged everyone's offerings:

'Sian says that was great, it was beautiful...when did we last hear that [at our age]?'' (Group D)

Chatham group also talked about confidence and one participant said:

'I don't really care what people think about me ... the perception of me. I know what I am, I know who I am. I'm a very positive person. So if it really makes you a fool dancing in public, I'm all for it! That's me and I think it's hard to build your confidence' (Group Ch).

Final comments

As the discussion groups drew to a close, participants were asked if they had any other comments and also whether there were any things about the programme that they would like to change. For the first of these the only other topic raised related to the facilitators, who guided the workshops, which 'we are very appreciative of' (Group M).

'Sian and her group are so caring, so sensitive to everyone ... they're so aware of everyone's physical aches and accommodating that, so you feel included' (Group D).

'I think they led it very well, so they could easily make it very frightening. We move quite quickly to performance, but they were very, you know, really allowing the mistakes and emphasizing fun..' (Group C).

There were very few responses to the question of what could change or be improved upon. The Canterbury group suggested that the sessions and overall course could be longer as 'five weeks is a bit short'. They also agreed that parking is an issue in Canterbury. On the other hand, the venue in Margate was described by one participant as a 'fantastic space ... and there's parking out here' while for another 'I can get a bus from door to door'.

Two other issues described by the Margate group were around the timing of sessions which had to incorporate other commitments of the company, and also to the publicity:

'They had, which was no fault of their own, they had a show in the middle, which meant we had a slight, sort of, shift of practitioner, which slightly changed things but I think that was, you know, just something that happened' (Group M).

And finally:

'I only knew about it [Groovin' Well] because my friend told me, otherwise I wouldn't have known anything about it. So ...maybe they're gonna get better and better at putting it [the publicity]in all those places anyway' (Group M).

Concluding thoughts

Our findings from 25 participant contributions to our group discussions were overwhelmingly positive of the Groovin' Well workshops. Participants quickly felt part of a team, comprising not just fellow participants, but also the facilitators with whom they became co-creators of choreographed performances. This appeared to emerge from the format of the workshops, which took into consideration the nature of group members, being of a certain age group, with accompanying

profiles in terms of physical and mental abilities. One group ended our discussion by looking to the future, anticipating that the groups would continue when 'we might have even more ideas about how we can sort of enlarge some of our movements ...'. Clearly some participants at least, were hoping that Groovin' Well would continue.

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References

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