Ageing, Drama and Creativity: Inter-professional Training Course Evaluation Report

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Ages and Stages

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Introduction

'Ageing, Drama and Creativity' was a pilot six session inter-professional training course focusing on the use of intergenerational drama in professional practice and delivered collaboratively by Keele University and the New Vic Theatre as part of the AHRC funded *Ages and Stages* follow-on project. The course developed practice capabilities and age awareness amongst professionals working in arts organisations, the voluntary sector, local government, health and social services and housing.

The six three-hour sessions took place at the New Vic Theatre between February and April 2013. They were facilitated by Head of Education, Jill Rezzano with support from Dr Miriam Bernard, Prof of Social Gerontology at Keele University, and Dr Michelle Rickett, Research Associate on *Ages and Stages*. Themes included; ageing, drama and creativity; stereotyping; intergenerational relationships; and intergenerational drama in practice. Three sessions involved invited speakers/performers, including members of the intergenerational *Ages and Stages Theatre Company,* based at the New Vic. Course participants also attended a performance by the Company, entitled *Happy Returns*, at one of a number of regional venues*.*

Aims of the Course

The intended aims were:

- To bring together professionals from a range of settings to learn and share expertise and experiences in relation to intergenerational drama.
- To increase the practice capabilities of learners by providing them with tools and techniques from drama, education and Social Gerontology.
- To increase the age awareness of learners through practical exercises, discussion and reflection on their own experiences and professional settings.
- To create a network of learners who would be able to continue to support each other and share their experiences after the training ends.

In selecting participants, the main priorities were to bring together professionals from diverse settings, and to select people who had specifically indicated how they might use the training within their own practice.

The 18 participants were drawn from: arts organisations, the voluntary sector, local government, health and social services, and housing. Freelancers and volunteers were included as well as paid professionals from organisations. The group included a wide range of ages (from 20-72) and career levels. They also came from across a wide geographical area, including Stoke-on-Trent, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire Moorlands, Manchester, Chester, Poynton, Wolverhampton and Herefordshire. Though a number of the participants were experienced in working with young people, older people, or drama, they were all inexperienced in using intergenerational drama within their practice.

Evaluation

A 45 minute feedback session was included in the final session. This incorporated: a practical exercise focused on feelings and thoughts about the course; a semi-structured discussion about participants' expectations and experiences, what worked well/less well, and how they would use the learning within their own settings. The feedback exercise was facilitated by Research Associate, Dr Jackie Reynolds; the discussion was facilitated by Jill Rezzano. Follow-up emails were sent out following the evaluation session, with the aim of including the views of those who were absent, and also to capture any further reflections from those who had attended the session.

The findings of the evaluation are structured around the key questions that were asked:

1. **What drew you to this course originally?**

    Evidence relating to this question was mainly to be found in the individual email responses that were received, and each person gave different reasons. One participant noted that the three topics of ageing, drama and creativity, were all of individual interest to him:

    "I was curious to see how they might be linked and I thought there might well be something relevant for me in a new post, delivering services to older people".

    A creative writer, who ran workshops with children and adults, was seeking to further develop her practice through working in residential care settings. She therefore wanted to better understand issues around ageing and older people's participation in creative activities. Another had attended in the hope of developing collaborations with other organisations, and another had no experience of drama work before and thus was seeking to develop her experience.

2. **What did you learn from the course (skills, experience, contacts etc. – both personally and professionally)? Did you learn anything unexpected?**

    An active learning approach, through which participants took part in a wide range of practical icebreakers, exercises and games, gave people many ideas for activities that they could use with groups that they work with. One comment from the group feedback session suggested that the participant had 'loved the mix of exercises and use of

different stimuli', and another that this had led to 'creative thinking' as they had been 'encouraged to think outside the box'.

For the minority of participants who were actually involved in running drama projects, the activities that were included in the workshops had a clear and direct relevance to their practice. As one participant at the group feedback session noted:

> *"Loved all workshop type activities – have written them all down and now using them with my drama group".*

One person felt that some of the exercises were 'too rooted in theatre for me to use', and another felt that the drama-based role-playing activities were very much 'out of her comfort zone'; she had preferred the discussion-based activities, though her confidence had developed somewhat during the course. Despite these examples of slight misgivings about the focus on drama-based activities, there was also ample evidence that many of the activities that were included in the workshops could be transferred to other types of projects: for example, another participant's comment was that:

> *"I will take away the practical ideas. I have never facilitated drama sessions before; however, I am currently co-ordinating an intergenerational quilting project and lots of these exercises would complement this project".*

Another participant discussed the ways in which she had used many of the activities in her creative writing workshops with children, and of how her overall approach to developing workshops had been influenced by her realisation of the links between different creative art forms:

> *"I've come to appreciate even more quite how closely arts activities relate to one another – art, drama, music and writing are all interlinked and impact upon each other in intriguing ways. This is something that's been a useful realisation and I have found that I'm incorporating music, movement, improvisation and art into my workshops much more than I previously had."*

For a number of other participants, attending the course had prompted them to plan new intergenerational projects – for example:

> *"[I] Will look at setting up intergenerational projects for dyslexic students and mums".*

For others, the course prompted them to think more widely about the experience of ageing. One participant commented that she had learnt more about ageism and that she now understood its prevalence; another noted that it 'was wonderful to reflect on my own experience of ageing'. Taking part in the course had led one participant to independently read more about ageing and different people's experiences of it. Another participant reflected in her email feedback on the personal and professional impact of her increased understanding of age-related issues:

> *"The benefits are hard to quantify in a specific way but in general terms my awareness of what it is to age, the impact of prejudice towards the elderly, institutionalised ageism and the portrayal of stereotypes have all been highlighted and these are points which will definitely influence the work I do. On a personal level, I am far more aware of not making ageist assumptions or remarks; elderly people have become more visible to me in my day-to-day life and I make a conscious effort not to make assumptions based on age-related stereotypes."*

Furthermore, not all participants were experienced in working with older people, and for one, the course had prompted them to reject the notion that they could only work with young people.
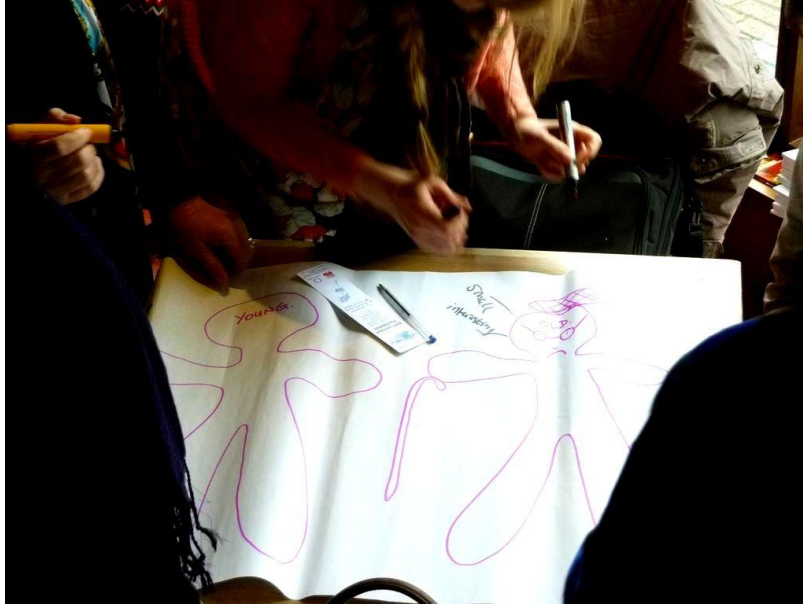
3. What worked well/not so well from your perspective?

We discussed in the previous section the evidence that participants had learned new skills and activities, which they could use with the groups that they worked with. There were numerous positive comments about the mix of activities and the delivery style. For example:

> "There was a good mix of active participation and the delivery of information. It encouraged us to be reflective learners, examining both our own practice and our beliefs about ageing."

The new ideas that were generated were found by some participants to be refreshing and inspirational:

> "I just found doing this course so refreshing...And it's lovely to have that kind of energy back into my own practise and what I do".

There were also several positive comments relating to people valuing the opportunity to see the 'Happy Returns' intergenerational theatre piece as part of the course. One person described it as a 'particular highlight'. Another noted in email feedback that:

"The opportunity to see a piece of drama that had been put together on the course themes – 'one we made earlier' – was also very informative".

In the final session of the course, participants worked in groups to develop and lead a short exercise that could be used with intergenerational groups. This was found to be a valuable experience, both in terms of the experience of leading the session, and as a result of the opportunity to learn from others. This was highlighted at the group feedback session, when comments included:

"I loved facilitating the sessions at the end. Really allowed me to think of ways to put things into practice".

"Everyone's different take on final workshop exercises was fabulous and has given me loads of ideas".

One participant felt that the experience of leading the activity had been such a boost to her confidence that she felt that it would have been good to have had more opportunities to lead activities earlier in the course:

"...it was really great for me, 'cos I am kind of a behind the scenes person, I co-ordinate a large project and employ all the people who facilitate it, but as and when the project money runs out, potentially I might have to deliver things myself, and...even though I have an understanding of everything I need to do, I don't necessarily have the confidence to do it, so for me, personally, I really would love to be able to do more of the last session actually facilitating a whole session and each week doing that..."

This finding was echoed by another participant in email feedback, who commented that:

"It occurred to me that given the background of some of the participants, we could have been involved in leading the warm-up or ice-breaking activities".

Overall, there were few negative comments about the course. One participant felt that the group was rather large, initially, for the space available. Another also commented on the size of the group and she felt that at times, some people were more actively

engaged than others, and that it could be difficult to contribute to discussions due to the numbers.

There were also some comments relating to fluctuating attendance, including that it had been difficult to get to know people's names and backgrounds, which led to a suggestion that name badges would have been helpful. The same person felt that the presence of a researcher 'in the background', observing and taking notes and not participating was 'a slightly unsettling sensation', creating a sense of 'us and them'. Another participant noted that he would like to have seen greater engagement in theory and research on the topic of ageing, and more discussion of the ethical implications of working with older people with cognitive impairment. He commented that it would have been good to have heard more about how the practical work related to academic research findings.

4. **How did you find training with people from different professional backgrounds? And meeting people from similar backgrounds to yourself? Do you plan to stay in contact with people you've met on the course?**

There were many positive comments indicating that people valued the range of backgrounds and experiences of people on the course. The wide age range of participants was also seen as a positive factor, as this also offered a range of perspectives. There were several comments in the group feedback session suggesting that people had valued the opportunity to 'share' with the group – including the sharing of ideas, philosophy, values, discussion, learning, ideas, stories and experiences. Even though the group was diverse, the feedback suggested that overall the group had 'gelled really well', and as one participant commented, this had boosted people's confidence in terms of contributing to discussions.

Email feedback from one participant summed up the sense of positive interactions in the group:

"...it was interesting to be working alongside people of all ages, many of whom came from different backgrounds. It was pleasant to talk to participants who were much younger and to feel that we were all part of a homogenous group, with nobody

feeling threatened by anyone else's experience. Whilst there was a range of opinion, there didn't appear to be any serious quarrelling, which is always a sign of a positive atmosphere – although I did notice a number of people dropped out, before I had much of a chance to get to know them"

Whilst one participant commented that it would have been good to have had more time for networking, some stayed for lunch after the sessions and had got to know each other then. Another participant also expressed some disappointment about fluctuating numbers, especially in the final session, which resulted in some people not having had the opportunity to get to know each other. The gap in the middle of the course, which was timed to enable attendance at the 'Happy Returns' performances, was perceived as a further barrier to getting to know everyone.

Nevertheless, whilst in one or two cases the geographical distance between participants, or the uncertainty about future working roles, were potential barriers to working together in the future, there was generally an interest in doing so. At the group evaluation session, several people discussed possible ways of working together, and there was overall agreement that if anyone was setting anything up in the future then they would contact other members of the group to share details and/or to seek ideas and advice. The feedback suggested that it was too early to assess the impact of people's new networks, but that the possibilities were clear.

5. **How do you think you will use what you've learnt in your own practice? How might you share your learning with colleagues in your workplace?**

Most of the evidence about how the learning would be incorporated into people's own practice related to the use of the practical activities, as discussed earlier. One participant referred to the uncertainty about funding and also the future of his post, and how this made it difficult to plan for developing the work. However, he did perceive some potential in terms of his employers being able to commission work and to work with housing providers or a local theatre.

Several participants discussed ways in which they were seeking to share their learning with colleagues. For example, in the group evaluation session, one participant

commented that she had started using some of the exercises from the workshops in team meetings with colleagues, thus cascading the knowledge to people who have direct contact with service users. Furthermore, she also noted that she had begun to think and talk about sharing the learning with senior members of the organisation, with a view to exploring ways in which they may be able to work more closely with other organisations. Another participant also noted that she may give a short verbal presentation to her organisation's trustees about the course.

Someone else commented that her employers were currently recruiting for an Adult Health and Wellbeing Coordinator. She discussed the fact that she wanted to support her future colleague in the role by sharing her new knowledge of intergenerational work, and asked whether other participants would be willing to be contacted as well.

6. **What would you look for in a course to develop your learning in this area further? What might the next steps be?**

One participant had applied for a place on Staffordshire University's 'Developing Arts for Health' course.

Summary of Outcomes

In conclusion, the outcomes for participants of the Ageing, Drama and Creativity course included:

- Learners were provided with a range of practical tools/exercises to enable them to use intergenerational drama within their own practice.
- Some participants reported increased confidence in facilitating activities.
- Some participants gave specific examples of how they had adapted their own practice to include approaches/ techniques learnt on the course.
- Participants' age awareness was improved through examples/insights from Social Gerontology and drama, and through reflecting on and sharing their own experiences.
- Participants were given the opportunity to network with other professionals interested in using intergenerational drama in a range of settings and to draw from each other's experiences, ideas and expertise.
- Learners were able to draw from the techniques of an established intergenerational drama company (the *Ages and Stages Theatre Company)* and to view a live performance of their most recent production.
- There was some interest in further study, including a learner who was applying to study on a Developing Arts for Health course.
- There was also some initial evidence that some learning was being cascaded to work colleagues. This would require longer-term evaluation to fully assess.

Summary of Lessons Learned

The evaluation of the course has provided various insights into what worked well and what could be done differently in the future. These include:

What worked well?

- The diverse ages and backgrounds of participants, which provided a range of different experiences and perspectives, as well as establishing networks to help develop future projects.
- The range of practical activities that could be applied in a range of contexts.
- The mix of active participation and the delivery of information.

- The awareness of, and reflection on, ageing-related issues.

What could be done differently?

- One of the effects of fluctuating numbers was that it was more difficult for the group to get to know each other. Setting aside time for networking at each session could help to address this, although some people did stay on to have lunch together after some sessions.
- Whilst the practical nature of the course seemed to be very successful, one participant expressed further interest in the theoretical basis of the work, and in related research. A future course could potentially include more academic content, depending on levels of interest.
- A more wide-ranging and challenging reading list could also help to cater for participants who wish to engage more deeply with theory.
- Participants valued the opportunity to lead a session in the final workshop, and there was a suggestion that they could also have contributed to leading warm-up or ice-breaking activities. This participatory approach might also further contribute to the cohesion of the group.
- Allowing more time in the sessions for evaluation, especially given the fluctuating attendance. A short participatory evaluation exercise at the end of each session could have made sure that everyone's perspectives were included.