Creating a moment for someone else
Reflections from the Artists' focus group on 'Our Day Out' sessions

Background:
A focus group with a number of the key artists from CAE's 'Our Day Out' sessions took place in July 2017. This was loosely structured as a non-hierarchical, dialogic and conversational process in which all members were able to learn from one another's observations. Focus groups are a data collection method in which there is a semi-structured interview process, they are moderated by a group leader and tend to focus on a specific topic. They are usually fairly small in size: between 6-10 members in total. The focus group with ODO artists comprised 6 artists: Paul W, Les, Joe, Carl (musicians) Laura, Sarah (dancers) and a moderator (H Zeilig). Focus groups are used for generating information on collective views, and the meanings that lie behind those views. They are also useful in generating a rich understanding of participants' experiences and beliefs – these may then be used to inform the development of further sessions and also as a means of evaluating the successes and challenges of the overall project.

The aim of the focus group was primarily to ascertain the artists' attitudes to and perceptions about using the arts within the setting of a community project for older people both with and without disabilities. These responses will guide CAE practice and help inform the future of the project, both in terms of development and delivery. In addition, the objective of the group was to illuminate the variety of perspectives that artists may have about the role of the arts for enhancing the wellbeing and social connectedness of older people with (and without) disability and specifically a dementia. The artists who took part are all experienced community arts practitioners, albeit with diverse expertise and practice. They work across a range of different groups, contexts and ages, including in prisons, mental health settings and schools. Several artists have specific past experience of working with people with a dementia (Joe and Les for instance) but none explicitly focused on this particular cohort.

The focus group was loosely structured around several general areas: inclusivity, the influence of environment (locality, space and place), the role of the professional artist, social connectedness, challenges and successes of the groups (including the role of the CAE facilitators). The focus group was transcribed verbatim and this was subsequently analysed using an inductive, thematic approach to the data that emerged from the questions that were asked and the insights that were subsequently prompted. For instance: although the role of mood and atmosphere was not an overt question, it emerged as a significant theme in our discussions, and is therefore outlined.
This and other emergent themes are all reflected on below, however in some cases one area overlaps with and impacts upon another and this is noted where appropriate.

Above all, the artists stressed the importance of fun, the need to create community and ability of arts activities to do this, the importance of the setting / space in which sessions happen and the need to be flexible and use intuition in order to ensure inclusivity. In addition, the role of improvisation, performance and aesthetic quality were also considered.

The focus group was consciously and carefully structured so that it would be a beneficial, reflective process for the artists as well as informing the evaluative framework of the project. It was therefore validating that the artists all agreed that the group had offered an opportunity to share insights with one another and with artists from other disciplines:

> *'…one thing that I think is important. I think it's been really good sitting around the table with each other, and in terms of our professional development, it would be lovely to have an opportunity to work across the group in some way.* '(Paul).

This comment met with general accord and the artists also emphasised how valuable it would be to attend one another's sessions.

This account has primarily drawn on the focus group data, however where appropriate, insights from other artists' reflection logs (a series of structured questions that each artist is asked to complete at the end of their session) are also integrated.

Friendliness, fun and play: The role of mood and atmosphere

The artists in the focus group (and also in their reflection logs) all emphasised the relevance of creating a positive mood and atmosphere both within the sessions (in terms of a friendly, warm and joyful atmosphere) and between participants – as a means of encouraging engagement. A positive atmosphere was observed to influence the participants, encourage friendship between people and therefore the sense of community and to positively affect the flow of the session. The aptitude of the artists, both interpersonally and in terms of their artistic skills was also reflected upon as factors affecting the mood and atmosphere of the sessions.

The importance of a welcoming, happy environment was stressed by all the artists both during the focus group and in their reflection logs. The role of a convivial atmosphere was discussed in terms of how the artists strive to create this in their sessions and also in relation to the importance of creating community with the sessions. As mentioned in Xenoula and Abby's reflection log, a warm and friendly atmosphere also ensures that participants are 'welcoming of each other' (notes on 30th July, 2017 Attleborough session). Similarly, Mary noted in one of her logs that the warm and welcoming atmosphere ensured that some people engaged with new members (28th February 2017). Indeed, the impression that the general atmosphere of the sessions was joyful was one of the first observations made by Laura in the focus group:

> Anecdotally we've just found them really joyful.

This was generally agreed with by the other artists, who noted that even when, on occasion, a session had been 'tricky' the overall impression was that it had nonetheless been uplifting. The artists reflected that this sense of a warm and cheering environment within a group allowed participants to share experiences (including those not directly associated with the activity itself), thus leading to a sense of group cohesion and community:

> Because often they'll lead to quite deep conversations, way past surface level conversations. People really sharing their experience, their home life experience, but even so, it's always in such a warm environment, regardless of those conversations. There is still a feeling of warmth and joyfulness of community and being together for that couple of hours.

In practical terms, Paul noted that being friendly and smiling is particularly important when working with people with a dementia as they may not recognise him even from the beginning of one session to its end:

> 'so every time you go to them, it's like the first time, so I try to be friendly …'

Carl simply observed: '*We joke'*. Thus, friendliness is a central and conscious means by which the artists create a sense of community amongst the group during an arts session and is recognised as crucial for ensuring the engagement of participants – particularly those with a dementia.

The role of laughter as a social emollient and a means of relaxing people, increasing their confidence and generating a sense of connectedness was clearly something that the artists were all acutely conscious of and concerned to promote. This is also noted on several occasions within the artists' reflection logs:

> *Lots of laughter. T…. said she felt relaxed* (Mary and Kim, 12th Sept 2017 Wells)
> *lots of laughter* (Mary, 6th April 2017 Watton)
> *Using the beach ball – helped to relax the group, induced laughter and have fun together.*
> (Xenoula and Abby, 30th July 2017, Attleborough)

As has been commented on elsewhere (Swinnen & de Medeiros, 2017) participative arts groups are able to generate a failure free environment and the role of laughter is central to this. Swinnen & de Medeiros (2017) further comment that as a result participants are able to express themselves more freely and also therefore foster a sense of connection and belonging. The dance artists in particular noted that this was not a characteristic of every group that they lead but seemed to be a distinctive feature of the Our Day Out sessions. It was generally agreed that the way in which the ODO groups were 'brokered' helped to contribute to the success of the sessions (this is discussed in more detail in relation to 'space' and the role of CAE facilitators below).

In connection with the emphasis on laughter and a happy atmosphere, the role of fun was noted by everyone present. Les mentioned that sessions should always be 'fun' –
> …if it is not fun then you shouldn't be there

'Fun' in this context, seems closely connected with the sense that all the artists expressed about the importance of 'play' and also the lack of any particular end goal. This is reflected on in some detail by Carl

> It's that sense of play, and that sense of wonder about being part of something. There's all sorts of strands to it. You can talk about the shared experience of what these people are experiencing together. And that sense of discovery when it's like wow … the sense of discovery that I can do this, that I have the power to be able to create something or be part of something with other people. Or sometimes it's just exploring …

Here, Carl is linking play with discovery, exploration and the opportunity to create – which is a defining characteristic of the artists' practice and similarly one of the distinctive features of an arts group (in contrast to other group activities such as bingo sessions for instance). The concept of 'play' and its particular relevance for people with a dementia has been examined in connection with both inclusivity and the effectiveness of art programs which provide unique opportunities for collaborative 'play' and also position 'players' on an equal footing (Swinnen & de Medeiros, 2017). As these scholars note:

> '….play …can function as an equalizer by drawing attention to the humanness that all people involved share.'

The important ability that arts projects led by professional artists have for encouraging creative play and thus prompting people's imaginative engagement has also been noted in a recent Wellcome based project 'With All' (Zeilig, West, van der Byl Williams, 2018).

In addition, it was evident that the artists used their skills (with dance or music) to encourage fun and laughter – that this was stimulated by the participants actively joining in with the music making or dancing. As Les goes on to outline:
> Yes, the excitement, the fun, comes from them. You can't generate fun

The idea that the sessions gave older people permission to be silly was mentioned by one artist.
> If you give people permission to be silly with their instrument they'll start being creative.

There is a sense then, that the 'silliness' is liberating and can prompt creative interactions –but that this arises from the artists being able to both generate and then direct the playfulness into musical (or movement based) engagement.

'Running it subtly': The role of structure and plan

In relation to the ODO sessions (and indeed participative arts projects in general), structure refers to the overall organisation of the session, the way in which it is arranged in terms of timing, refreshments, seating. Structure was also a term used by the musicians to refer to the shape of a piece of music (as observed in Les and Paul's reflection log, 14th October, 2017, Thetford session). The plan refers to the artists' objectives for and expected content of the sessions. Clearly, these plans varied according to the art-form and artist and above all the participants. However, the role of improvisation was a common feature of all the artists' plans. Undoubtedly, structure and plan

intertwine and influence one another and in several cases these terms are used interchangeably by the artists.

The need for a clearly defined and yet flexible structure within each session was a common theme for artists and is echoed by other work exploring the role and value of the participative arts (Zeilig et al, 2015). The ODO sessions are two hours in length and each is carefully structured with a focus on refreshments and time to socialize. The presence of one or both facilitators at the sessions is also part of the overall structure. The need for sessions to follow a clear pattern each week was emphasised by CAE coordinators as a way of helping participants feel secure within the group. As noted elsewhere (in the reflections on ODO sessions, 2017) the refreshments provide an important segueway for both participants and artists 'into' the arts session and as a means of concluding the time spent together. However, although structure is important so too is the ability to be impulsive and to take risks. The special nature of arts projects that are live and in the moment and therefore responsive to the unexpected is an inherent part of their creativity and their unique offering (as opposed to a group that meets to play dominoes each week, for example). Thus, although the sessions share a recognisable 'meta' structure or framework, the artists also emphasised that they did not follow a restrictive, predefined plan.

Joe, in the focus group noted that '*our expectation is to not have expectations'* and other artists agreed with this observation that echoes Les' comment that you can't go into sessions with a list. However, the importance of structure and the consideration that this is given by the artists is outlined in some reflection logs. For instance, in one account the ways in which structure might be subtly tweaked so that sessions are most effective is noted:

> *…. but the structure of these needs some further consideration. More participants than expected engaged with the craft activities, so we will allow more time for this in future*
> (Adele, Splitmilk, 15th September 2017, Thetford)

This comment highlights the reflexivity of the artists, their engagement with how a session can be most effectively organised to ensure full participation and the need to alter this from week to week. Carl talked about how and when music might be introduced – for instance a piece might be played at the beginning of a session and then re-introduced later. This helps to familiarise participants with the music and also creates a pattern within the session. Carl also mentioned the relevance of the time of day and how this influenced the sessions:

> *… there was a marked difference between whether you were running the session in the morning or the afternoon, as to their energy levels and how willing they were. With the mornings, they were much more subdued. It was a lot harder to get people in and up for it in a morning session. It just took longer, whereas in an afternoon, we could pretty much go in and get stuff started*

Indeed, all the artists agreed that morning sessions were harder to run. This is perhaps counter-intuitive, as we may expect people to be livelier in the morning but as noted by the artists, it is often difficult for older people (particularly those with a dementia) to leave the house and attend a session by 10 o'clock in the morning.

Although all of the artists agreed that they planned the sessions, the sense that this was both loose and flexible was important – the notion that you could have a plan but that this was one that needed to be disposable. As Les reflected: '*we don't know where we're going, that's the fun*!'. The ability to embrace a lack of certainty (and thus a relative lack of planning) allows the artists to be responsive to the different needs that participants may have, which vary from session to session. This is expressed by the dance artist Laura as the need to ensure that participants are presented with a wide variety of '*options'* – different and perhaps unconventional ways of joining the dance session. The artists were all acutely aware that a delicate (and sometimes difficult) balance must be struck between having some structure and yet not being constrained by this:

if it's too open and no one knows what's going on, or there's no structure at all, that would also create a nightmare. So we always go in with a plan, but knowing that we might just chuck certain things out or throw something in. (Laura).

The role of improvisation within sessions was commented on by all the artists in the focus group. Improvisation can be broadly understood as a means of using bodies, space, imagination, objects and instruments in response to the immediate stimuli of one's environment, without preconceptions (Frost and Yarrow, 2016: xv). Improvisation and the absence of a predetermined plan is also associated with the lack of certainty, noted above. This is closely linked with the importance of having a plan that is malleable, that can be molded to the needs and abilities of the group that day. A plan based on improvisation was discussed by the artists as comprising a series of possible ideas:

'It's always nice to approach anything like that with the kind of prefix, 'we'd like to try this', and see how it goes, and it's fine if it doesn't always …' (Carl)

This can facilitate the ability to connect with others and requires a degree of intuitive responsiveness from the artists

You've got to be quite intuitive and you've got to be interested in just rolling with it and improvising and being on the fly. (Sarah)

This way of working further enables artists to 'meet' people where they are that day (as observed by Laura) and to find ways to cohere the group that are appropriate for that session and even within a particular moment. Improvisation also ensures that the artists are able to create a flexible sense of community – one that may even subtly alter during the course of a session.

The significance of being able to create in the moment – something that is a result of improvisational skill and the way that this prompts connection with people with a dementia, was stressed by Les as one of the pleasures of the sessions:

'… we are actually creating something quite unique in that moment. I think for me, that's what it's all about. How much dementia they've got, what condition they're in, it's just that moment where I can completely relate to them, they're completely on my level, and it's wonderful.'

The effectiveness of improvisation for engaging with people living with a dementia was also commented on in a reflection log:

One participant, who suffers from dementia became very engaged and focused during the improvisation. His partner commented that he hasn't been so focused on anything in a long while. (Tessa, 7th September 2017, Watton)

Interestingly, these comments resonate with the wider context of contemporary research and practice. There has been increasing appreciation (in both the UK and US) of the relevance of 'in the moment' understandings concerning the use of the arts with people with a dementia (see work by Camic and Zeilig at Wellcome Hub, 2018, Camic et al, 2017, Macpherson, 2009). The non-verbal more ephemeral arts such as music and dance facilitate a unique engagement with both improvisation and in the moment experiences perhaps above all because they don't necessarily result in a tangible product (unlike the visual or written arts).

The way in which musical improvisation can help shape a session creatively, with a diverse group of participants of widely varying ability, was eloquently outlined by Paul:

So when you get an action from someone and you choose how to creatively respond to that, and that's where it starts, and you build it from there. So you don't go in with a plan, you see what happens, someone hits the drum, you hit it back, and off you go. And then you do run the session, but you run it really subtly ….

Here the sense of a session being 'built' cooperatively through creative response is emphasised. This cannot be precisely planned, although the musicians can encourage responsivity and engagement. Indeed, an ease and confidence with improvisational techniques as a means of creating music or

dance, characterised the practice of all the artists in the focus group and also ensured that there was a sense of discovery and exploration in their sessions:

> *'And that sense of discovery when it's like wow … the sense of discovery that I can do this, that I have the power to be able to create something or be part of something with other people. Or sometimes it's just exploring.'* (Carl)

'This isn't your coffee room': **Claiming the space**

The interlinked nature of space, place and setting (or locality) was a recurring preoccupation in the interviews and the observational data gathered about the ODO sessions. The extent to which the space defined a session was interesting – for instance whether the space was in a room dedicated to the activity or was shared and the extent to which it was comfortable and practical. The space then, can either facilitate or inhibit the session. The complex nature of space and place for all those involved with a participative arts project has been explored elsewhere in relation to people living with a dementia (Camic et al, 2017, Windle et al, 2017, Zeilig et al, 2015). This has also been discussed in earlier evaluative work for CAE (Zeilig, 2017 preliminary reflections on ODO). However, the influence of these factors in isolated, rural, community settings has been relatively neglected. In addition, the possibility that space in a project can be internal or psychic as well as a physical property of a room or building was apparent in the interviews with both participants and artists. Arts projects can, on occasion, open up new spaces or ways of seeing, for all involved. Thus, Laura in the ODO focus group mentioned an incident in which a man who was quite severely disabled unexpectedly led a dance session:

> *And he surprised himself, and then the rest of the group clapped him as well, and cheered him on, because for the whole session he'd been saying what he couldn't do.*

The dance session opened up new possibilities for this man and gave him a sense of what he could achieve. Space and place are key characteristics of an arts project that contribute to feelings of comfort, safety and confidence for participants. The possibility that space in a project can be internal or psychic and the extent to which this is related to individual and group 'wellbeing', deserves further attention.

The importance of the space was highlighted by Paul, knowing that there will be a 'bespoke' or dedicated space for the workshop is important for the artists and helps them engage with the group

> *'…..in a couple of places we moved into a space where other people were still doing the other things they were doing, and that tension didn't work. But where we've gone in and the space is ours and it's been declared as ours, and come and take part in this, there's been a bit more engagement.'*

The artists agreed that from the start of the session they needed to 'take ownership' (in Paul's words) of the space but that this can be heavily affected by who else is in the room and their needs. The artists agreed that having a specific room, which was uncluttered and was 'theirs' for the duration of the session helped them transform the space imaginatively. Thus, there is a sense in which taking ownership of the space (as Paul discussed) also helps the artists focus on and create the sessions:

> *'Firstly, it's about claiming the space and saying, this isn't your coffee room, this is a space where we're going to be creative. So, there's something happening'* (Paul)

The idea that the room is redefined by the artists so that everyone begins to feel that 'something is happening' is an important way of signalling the movement from the everyday to a 'special' activity and creating a sense of occasion. The role of the CAE facilitators in helping to make the space was also acknowledged and is discussed in more detail below.

Practical concerns connected with the space were also mentioned. For the dancers, this involved there being enough clear space and a clean and warm environment (not having a sticky floor for instance) with sufficient air circulation so that it doesn't become stuffy. Similarly, Les and Paul in one

entry (reflection log, 23rd November, Dereham group) comment on the effect of the room and tables:

> *Room set up is important. Try 2x separate tables with Ipads at each end.*

Issues of access were briefly touched on, although this was predominantly in relation to the space within the room (rather than accessibility which was touched on in interviews with participants) and thus the extent to which participants were able to move or reach instruments. The musicians mentioned that it took some time to ascertain how best to organise the space to ensure optimum involvement from the participants:

> *'….for us ideally, it's a big circle with tables on the outside for them to put their tea on, but they're still facing us. And that's taken a little while to just establish that, just to find that optimum … '* (Paul).

For all of the artists, the use of a circle was an integral part of the session – as noted elsewhere (reflections on the groups) this aids inclusivity, demarcates a creative space and facilitates interactions.

The relevance of space in terms of locality or setting was also discussed. For instance, the difference made by the setting of the Wells group (with its light, airy room and views across fields) was acknowledged by all the artists. Uncertainty was expressed about the influence of the different demographic catchment in each area – for instance whether different sorts of people tend to attend Attleborough or Thetford sessions, in comparison with the effect of the room and wider setting. The Attleborough group were described as more 'staid' (by Paul) and as having a 'different energy' (by Laura) but the artists wondered whether this was also associated with a number of other factors: the gender mix – there were more men in that group and the timing of the session. One of the musicians did reflect on his own personal relationship with Thetford and how this enhanced his sense of connection with the sessions

> *'…it was really interesting, because we went to the estate that I grew up on and we ran a session there, and so I had that way in with people straightaway, because I'd grown up on that estate and I knew a lot of the feeling behind living there.'* (Carl)

The relevance of geographical locality for both artists and participants is generally overlooked in research about the role and value of arts groups, although the scholar Francois Matarasso has discussed the importance of projects being rooted in place and community and the influence of these factors (see for instance: https://arestlessart.com/case-studies/amber-collective-uk/).

'Meeting their frequency' **Thoughts on Inclusivity**

Inclusivity involves actively embracing diverse participants within a group and ensuring that individuals' various capabilities and potential for involvement are fully met. The need to meet participants where they are in order to create moments of engagement was noted by all of the artists. This requires an openness or receptivity to diverse participants, as well as artistic expertise, knowing when to play a certain tune or offer a particular gesture. Giving people 'permission' was a phrase used by the artists to describe the process of inclusion and how this might result in creative interactions:

> *'If you give people permission to be silly with their instrument they'll start being creative.'* (Joe)

In some cases, this involved allowing people to be part of the group by NOT joining in, as noted by the dance artist Laura this might also necessitate managing the participant's carer:

> *'but the other thing is giving people permission not to join in .. … And often that's about managing someone that might be with that person, because often a carer or someone that's with them feels that they have to … initially at least, and normally on a first session, will feel that they have to make this person do something.'*

The expectations of carers or partners (who may interpret involvement and inclusion as a participant actively 'doing' something) is rarely explored in academic or evaluative literature and yet is often anecdotally observed by artists. Indeed, challenging the expectations of carers was also noted by Joe:

> '… we try to break down the expectations of what someone might have of their partner or their cared for person, and making them comfortable with mistakes.'

A recent systemized literature review (Morrell and Camic, 2018) highlighted the influence of carers in assessing the cognitive function of their partners with a dementia, however the effect that carers may exert on participation and inclusion within an arts group (for both artists and participants) is mostly overlooked.

There are sometimes tensions for the artists who are leading a session about how best to include participants. As noted by Tessa in her reflection log (7th September, 2017, Watton)

> One new participant chose to leave the session part way through so more could have been done (on my part) to make the experience more accessible for her.

It may have been relevant that it was a 'new' participant who left the session. As discussed below, (in community/ social connectedness) entering an established group that already has a sense of cohesion and identity can be daunting for some individuals. This could perhaps be addressed in future ODO sessions. However, the concern displayed by artists about how to engage participants, above all those who are less able, was evident from both the focus group and throughout their reflection logs:

> There were a couple unable to join in with partner dance, but if we had extra support artists for a group this could have been avoided. Perhaps local artists we could brief. (Adele Wragg, 28th September 2017, North Walsham).

There was some discussion, in the focus group, about how to deal with a participant who might be totally resistant to the group or even disruptive, including the importance of 1 to 1 focused attention, sitting physically near someone and also offering time out. The vital importance of having two artists within a session for this purpose was highlighted.

The artists outlined the need to understand why an individual might be resistant that day, often this might be associated with their health, a lack of confidence and general feeling of discomfort. Joe reflected on how he might have managed an incident with one woman more effectively:

> 'So, I think looking back, it would have been better to say, I'm just going to take her out just for one minute into the corridor and say, if you're not comfortable it's alright … Because she was even scared to leave until there was a moment of silence.'

The artists all outlined the need to validate and recognize the participants' state of mind sometimes this might involve encouraging a participant to leave the session for a moment, however it might also be achieved through the music and dance session itself. Interestingly, Paul said that when someone isn't joining in, he thinks in terms of shape and frequency and presents them with an instrument that they might find they can engage with. This was echoed by Sarah:

> 'It's the same with the dance, so if someone's really brrrr, then you meet them with that energy and see if it can change, see if you can bring them down calmer, or whether if someone's quiet and then you gradually come up with them. You're meeting their frequency.'

Thus, an empathic sensitivity to the needs and energy of the group (on a particular day and even within a specific moment) is a pre-requisite for inclusivity. This allows the artists to determine how best to deploy their artistic skills both to respond to the energy of the group and also help create new energies, through the use of familiar musical motifs, repetition of tunes and gestures and frequent encouragement. In addition, inclusivity was connected with the way in which a room was set up, issues of access and using eye contact, smiling and reassurance. Gentle invitation in the form

of words such as 'we would like to try this' were used but equally important are non-verbal stimulus including gesture and music.

'Way past surface level': Community / Social connectedness

Social connectedness relates to the ways in which people interact with one another in particular settings, this may in turn help to produce a sense of community. In terms of an arts group (like the ODO sessions) social connectedness and community may be best understood as the interactions between a diverse group of people who might subsequently experience a sense of belonging and/or interdependency for the time that they are engaged in a mutual activity. There are a variety of processes and skills associated with ensuring that there is a sense of social connectedness and community within a group. Many of these have already been outlined in relation to how the artists create inclusion (above) such as empathy for the mood, abilities and energy of the participants and sensitive use of their art-forms. To some extent therefore, community and social connectedness is a direct result of the artists' inclusive methods. In addition, the role of the refreshment breaks (as discussed above and elsewhere) as helping to create connections was underlined. In this section, the particular quality of the community within the ODO sessions, as observed by the artists is outlined.

All of the artists agreed that connections and community was integral for ensuring that sessions were successful. Throughout the reflection logs there are notes made on the number of interactions between participants:

> *One participant spoke of his dementia, commenting that it was difficult to recall specific things. There was a great display of empathy from the other group members*.
> *There was lots of engagement between group members.* (Tessa log, 8th September, 2017, Dereham).

As noted by Carl, the participants in some groups already know one another and therefore from the outset, the group may be characterised by certain social connections. In this case, the artists' role is to 'fit in' with the group. However, in other groups the role of the artists is partly to actively foster and 'facilitate' these connections (and sense of community) so that the arts activity can take place to best effect. These distinctions and the significance of gaining participants' trust in this process were all outlined by Carl:

> *I think it depends on whether you're walking into an existing group who already have social connections together, or whether …it's a new group being formed around that activity. … In a way, you have to win them over, you have to win their trust. And they're two different processes, I think.*

Paul said that trust (and group cohesion) was achieved through nurturing non-directive relationships, by responding to a gesture or look and that in this sense although the sessions were definitely led by the artists, this was in subtle way.

The challenges sometimes associated with involving new members within an already established group are highlighted in Laura and Sarah (the dance artists) reflections logs:

> *A new couple came, but felt quite overwhelmed and left.* (20th July, Watton group)

It is plausible that the success of the artists and facilitators in creating a strong sense of group cohesion made it difficult for new participants to join in. Within community arts groups, there is a delicate balance to be struck between forming a group identity and also ensuring that this is flexible enough to include new members (as also noted above 'inclusivity').

The fundamental importance of social interaction (leading to the creation of community) was emphasised throughout the focus group. Indeed, this seemed to be the main aim of the sessions – perhaps beyond aesthetic or creative processes, although these clearly overlap. This is eloquently conveyed by Sarah:

> *'I think the social interaction at the core of everything we're doing is really key, .. We always start and end with social time, so the activity exists within that, but there's always opportunities to relate to another person. So, it's not about how much you're dancing or moving your body, it's about relating and acknowledging that this person is with you and you're making eye contact and you're moving with somebody else. I think at the heart of everything we're doing is building a community of people.'*

Here, Sarah explains that the amount of dancing, its frequency, is less relevant than the connections it generates. However, this is a fine distinction as it is through the dance (or music) that relationships are formed. The arts, when practiced collectively, are essentially communicative mediums that encourage people to imagine, play and create together. This process is one which is particularly effective at generating community.

Arts projects have a unique role in deepening and expanding participants' social connections and also creating and transforming communities (Basting, 2018, Whitehouse et al, 2018, Zeilig, 2016). This is something that each of the artists witnessed during their sessions and resulted in the shared sense that the sessions will often lead to:

> *'..quite deep conversations, way past surface level conversations. People really sharing their experience, their home life experience. There is still a feeling of warmth and joyfulness of community and being together for that couple of hours.'* (Laura).

The community that is referred to here, is one that is at one remove from everyday life, it provides a space a part in which participants are invited to engage imaginatively and have fun.

'A bank of knowledge': The role of the professional artist

The artists in the focus group were all invited to reflect upon their particular offering as professional artists, with experience of performing and also working in a variety of community settings. This is an area of specific interest for CAE who made conscious decisions about working with national and local artists. The wider context includes reports from several projects (Rose, 2008, Gilfoy and Knocker, 2009, Coaten and Newman-Bluestein, 2013), that detail the unique input of the arts professional in leading projects for people with a dementia, in particular. Coaten et al (2013) note the relevance of the dance artist who has few preconceptions about the abilities of the participants and was not constricted by the environment.

The professional artist can therefore open pathways to communication, via their expertise. In addition, professionals are likely to have aesthetic standards and technical proficiency that can be positively applied when working with older people with a dementia and with other groups. Thus, the evaluation of the 'Finding Penelope' project (2012) reports on the importance of ensuring that rigour and high standards (in ensemble work and theatrical craft) were integrated into the process of devising and performing a play with older people (with and without a dementia). The ODO artists all agreed that being able to provide high quality music or dance experiences had an impact on the participants:

> *'And you know it's good when you feel it's good. I think as artists you can feel the quality of what you're doing... you feel a real connection with other people in the room that what you're creating is … wow, people are feeding off this, there's a real energy to what people are doing. People are playing with passion.'* (Carl)

The virtuous circle created by good quality, live music which interests both the participants and the artists themselves is evident here. Similarly, moments of musical connection or 'flow' between the group members are highlighted. High aesthetic standards also serve to validate the whole group and raise the general level of expectation.

The benefits of having some experience of performing was noted by the ODO artists. For instance, one of the musicians recalled an occasion when he realised that he could also perform *for* the group:

> *'I realised that all the music I'd been making in the groups had been supportive. And about a couple of months ago, I was in a session and it just felt right to … and I had a loud drum, to just do some soloing and just letting rip a bit. And I realised I hadn't done that before, and the group really like it. They really like it.'* (Paul)

Therefore, the artists' familiarity with performance, their ability to work with diverse audiences was another way in which they felt able to share their skills. Indeed, the close links between performing and working as a community artist were detailed by Carl. He reflected on how, when he was younger, performance seemed sharply delineated from community work and yet that his personal experience has challenged this youthful perception

> *'I've realised that the ability to read a room, the ability to see people and react to people's reactions, are present in both, and they're a lot closer than you realise, even though you don't perform to the participants there are some real parallels between being a performer and running a workshop that's inclusive and encourages engagement'*

The dance artists underlined their confidence with working and creating through play, something that is equally central when making performance pieces:

> *'Actually, our practice doesn't wildly change whether we're working as professional dancers or whether we're even working in these settings. We make work through play, that's how we make work for performance as well.'*(Laura)

Purposeful 'play', the ability to extemporise and pursue tangential ideas is a specific skill that is part of most artists' training and repertoire. As mentioned, play helps to create a failure free environment and is therefore especially useful when working with people with a dementia.

Through their artistic playfulness, the artists are also able to 'slightly challenge' the group (in Laura's words) as well:

> *So, bingo is not challenging somebody necessarily, but we are asking them to step out perhaps from their comfort zone slightly.* (Laura)

 A professional artist has the ability to take creative risks due to the mastery and control of their art. This risk-taking can push participants' boundaries positively and also generate connections (Zeilig, 2016). These connections might also be intrapersonal:

> *'L**, in North Walsham, who just doesn't communicate, just can't … …, sat in a chair for most of the session and then got up and led me in a quickstep around the room, then sat back down again. It's just there in their bodies and they're ready to go'* (Laura)

One of the particular skills of the artists is being able to identify and access what is 'there' in somebody. In one report (Vella-Burrows & Wilson, 2016: 55) one of the dance practitioners observes that they aim to make participants regard themselves as 'dancers' and to choreograph from that point of view. Equally, the ODO dance artists gave the group 'permission' to be dancers, rather than interacting with them as people limited by either age or disability. The professional artist is thus able to encourage participants (both staff, carers and people with dementia) to don a new identity, or at least to acknowledge the possibility of new identities (dancer, artist, musician, actor) by connecting with an art-form. In addition, the possibilities offered to collaborate or communicate through the music, dance or other art-form offers important imaginative focus for the participants.

Finally, the ODO artists also mentioned their immersion in their art. The immersion involves a certain dedication and sacrifice:

> *'…you're passionate about what it is you do, to the level where you've been willing to forgo job security …, to do this stuff full time, or as much as you can possibly do it. And so you pick up skills and knowledge long the way that makes you interesting as an artist, or gives you something to say about it.'* (Carl).

This passion that Carl identifies and also the absorption in his art that has resulted in accumulating a particular knowledge, skill set and authority. These are all qualities that distinguish the professional artist from those who have recourse to the arts for particular objectives. It has been noted elsewhere that this immersion that an artist has can lead to embodied experiences for participants that allow them to express their unconscious selves (Coaten & Newman Bluestein, 2013). Whether or not this was the case in ODO sessions, the artists concurred that their preoccupation with their art form allows them a wider 'vocabulary', an ability for inventiveness (with song, the use of instruments or movement) and access to a unique 'bank of knowledge':

> *'It's a bank of knowledge that you just have, you embody, and you bring it into a space.'*(Laura)

Note on **Confidence** of the artists

In both the reflection logs and during the focus group interview, the artists were asked about their confidence levels – the extent to which this was affected by the ODO sessions. This is of interest to CAE in relation to 'outcomes' of the overall project, one of which focuses on whether arts practitioners gain increased skills, confidence and understanding of specialist delivery for older people.

Above all, the artists agreed that they were becoming increasingly confident in being able to let go, not having to always lead sessions in any obvious way:

> *'you've got the confidence to do that, you can be creative …'* (Carl)

Equally, the artists reflected on feeling increasingly relaxed about being 'silly' with participants. Les mentioned his assurance that out of the apparent chaos of some sessions, something valuable would emerge:

> *We're confident that out of that chaos something wonderful will come. It will, if you pursue it.*

However, Laura the dance artist wondered whether asking about confidence was the most relevant question – she commented that as a professional dancer she was quite confident about her skills and that the sessions did not necessarily affect this. She suggested that it might be more appropriate to explore what artists learnt from the sessions: noting that she felt she learnt something from every single session.