FLOURISHING LIVES

Evaluation
Flourishing Lives: Reflective Practice Groups
2021/22

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Contents

About the author

Nicola Naismith is a researcher and visual artist with over 25 years experience working in the arts, and was the Visual Artist Fellow on the Clore Leadership Programme in 2017/18. She works in Higher Education and leads modules exploring Reflective, Ethical and Professional Practice. Nicola is an accredited Action Learning Set Facilitator, Coach and Mentor supporting cultural leaders and creative practitioners who work in a range of participatory and studio-based settings. www.nicolanaismith.co.uk

Authors thanks

My thanks to Flourishing Lives team for inviting me to undertake this evaluation, and for their open approach and logistical support. My thanks also to the partner organisations, the Reflective Practice Group facilitators and participants.

Your feedback

We welcome your feedback on this report - please send comments to:

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Introduction

Flourishing Lives is a sector support and development organisation focused on creative opportunities for engagement. They specialise in work that strengthens, supports and develops the older people's arts and wellbeing sector, provide a spectrum of programmes and services that connect and support coalition members, and amplify the voices of older people[1].

In 2019 Flourishing Lives developed their Reflective Practice offer as one of their seven priority areas of work, in response to feedback from the sector and coalition member organisations. The opportunity to be part of a Reflective Practice Group (RPG) is offered on an open sign-up basis, and organisations can also arrange group or one-to-one sessions for their teams and/or practitioners, with both approaches being led by trained facilitators.

The Reflective Practice aims to:

- Safeguard practitioners' wellbeing
- Sustain and grow practitioners' working practice
- Develop a more robust foundation of support for the people who engage with their services.

Initial feedback from RPG participants has been positive: this report builds on that to contribute a structured, evidence-based evaluation for a set of 12 RPGs delivered across two tranches between December 2021 and May 2022. These groups have been wholly funded by The Baring Foundation, who are committed to promoting the role of creativity in the lives of people with mental health problems,[2] with the majority focus being on participatory arts.[3] Since the grant award, the Baring Foundation have publicly committed to paying reasonable support costs for creative practitioners involved in project delivery.[4] The funding awarded to Flourishing Lives has allowed these RPGs to be offered free at the point of access.

This evaluation will be useful to anyone interested in accessing or providing opportunities for reflection within the in participatory arts sector: creative practitioners, commissioners and funders of participatory arts and creative, operational and leadership teams within organisations.

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[1] Flourishing Lives Website http://flourishinglives.org/

[2] The Baring Foundation https://baringfoundation.org.uk/programme/arts-and-mental-health/

[3] The Baring Foundation https://baringfoundation.org.uk/programme/arts-and-mental-health/what-we-want-to-achieve/

[4] The Baring Foundation https://baringfoundation.org.uk/blog-post/creatively-minded-and-practising-well/

Methodology

This evaluation is based on quantitive and qualitative methods. Desk-based research on the use of Reflective Practice was complemented by conversations with facilitators, exploring the core conditions for successful RPGs. Due to duration of the initiative and available resources, a decision was taken not to use an established Wellbeing Scale to measure impact, but rather to focus on providing opportunities to leave comments in surveys, and/or attend a focus group. As such there were two RPG participant surveys: a baseline questionnaire, which was issued to participants before the commencement of the groups, and an endline questionnaire, issued on completion to facilitate the measurement of impact. There were also two focus group meetings which took place after the completion of the RPGs: invitations were sent to 12 randomly selected participants who had each attended three RPG sessions, of which seven attended. The focus groups were around 30 minutes each, and attendees were invited to claim £30 to cover their time. The 12 organisations who took part in the initiative were also sent a five question survey on completion of the groups.

The planned use of survey responses was made clear to participants at the outset, and each question was optional. Those taking part in a conversation or focus group were provided with information about this evaluation in advance, and asked to return a signed consent form. All survey, conversation and focus group contributions have been anonymised, and grouped using thematic analysis.

It's useful at this point to be clear about who I am referring to throughout this report:

- **Facilitators** are the people who were responsible for holding the space for the Reflective Practice Groups.

- **Participants** are the people who attended the Reflective Practice Groups. They could be freelance creative practitioners working for an organisation, volunteers, and/or the teams who work in those organisations.

- **The group** is the Reflective Practice Group.

- **Partner organisations** are the 12 independent organisations to whom Flourishing Lives delegated the process of recruiting participants to the Reflective Practice Groups.

Reflective Practice: principles and uses

Gillie Bolton describes how Reflective Practice enables us to make illuminative sense of where we are in our own practice, and in relation to our profession and institution. It highlights the difference between 20 years of experience and one year of experience repeated 20 times[5]. These observations are key, for Reflective Practice is at its heart developmental, explorative, connecting and informing of future actions. It can be undertaken alone or in groups, facilitated externally or led by a group member. There are many theories and models of Reflective Practice, including Donald Schön's well known reflection *in* and *on* practice, subsequently developed with the addition of thinking that happens *before* practice, exploring - for example - assumptions or a sense of anticipation[6].

Reflective Practice involves a systematic enquiry to improve and deepen understanding, undertaken in an organised and in-depth way in order to gain maximum benefit[7]. Barbara Bassot describes the areas which can be supported by Reflective Practice:

- Providing a space for deep thinking
- Evaluating and developing practice
- Preventing stagnation
- Striving for excellence
- Making practice creative
- Promoting self-awareness
- Being slow to make assumptions
- Providing an aid for supervision
- Providing a means for constructing professional knowledge[8].

These interconnected benefits will support both the person undertaking the Reflective Practice and those they subsequently work with and alongside. There are different forms of Reflective Practice Groups - Peer Support Groups, Action Learning Sets, Triads, Guided Reflection Groups and Group Supervision. Groups can reduce isolation, prevent burn-out, offer different perspectives, develop understanding of practice, help generate new ideas and prevent stagnation, provide a space to process emotions, question assumptions and help with stress[9]. Reflective Practice is embedded in the

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[5] Brookfield (2009) and Beauty (1997) cited in Gillie Bolton with Russel Delderfield *Reflective Practice - writing and professional development* London, Sage, 2018 p.2

[6] A.R.Scheidegger (2020) cited in Nicola Naismith *Practising Well: Conversations & Support Menu* 2022 p. 16

[7] Lucas (1991) cited in Barbara Bassot *The Reflective Practice Guide - an interdisciplinary approach to critical reflection* Routledge, Oxon, 2016 p.1

[8] ibid p. 2-4.

[9] Ibid p.109

training and education of a range of people-orientated professions[10]. However, it is yet to fully find its way into participatory arts education and training programmes, be integrated into project timelines and budgets, or be consistently included and accepted in grant applications.

In his book *Becoming a Reflective Practitioner*, Stephen Johns explores the importance of guided reflection - specifically skilled guidance - as being necessary for effective reflective learning,[11]and it is this guided reflection which is the focus of this report. The RPGs were facilitated by two qualified therapist facilitators, who between them have 42 years' experience of working in mental health. They are both practising Visual Artists, HCPC registered Art Psychotherapists and Arts in Health practitioners and have worked in a number of clinical, community arts and mental health settings. The facilitators engaged in seven supervision sessions jointly across the duration of the initiative, which were paid for by the grant award. Approaches to RPGs differ between facilitators and the context of the work, however through two semi-structured conversations with the facilitators working on this initiative they shared perspectives on the core conditions for successful groups.

Facilitator perspectives

Successful groups are founded on the establishment of a safe place in which to reflect, with the facilitator providing clear information about the intention of the group. Fostering a witnessing and respectful space built on listening and shared learning, where participants can honestly explore difficult and celebratory elements of the work is key. It's important to distinguish RPGs from therapy, but also to highlight how emotional responses can be part of reflecting. It's important also that RPGs are not seen as a replacement for other forms of support, such as supervision, but that they offer a different kind of space where participants can work at a deeper level to explore care for the individual and from that, understand how they work with their client groups.

Having a Reflective Practice framework which includes regularity (in this instance 3 sessions over 3 months) is important, as is knowing how the space will be used within the two hour timeframe, as this information helps to quickly establish trust and facilitate openness. As an example, a RPG session includes an introduction and a warm-up exercise, followed by the body of the Reflective Practice, consisting of free-flow discussion, a summary and check out. The framework is important in helping to promote a sense of knowing what will come next, with the check-out being particularly crucial, as participants could potentially move straight into facilitating their own creative groups.

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[10] People-orientated professions include but are not limited to Nursing, Teaching, Social-work and Probation-work - and although Creative Practitioners and organisations who provide opportunities for participatory arts are clear they don't belong to these professions, they can share the same or similar work environments. See Nicola Naismith *Practising Well: Conversations & Support Menu* (2021) p.15

[11] Christopher Johns *Becoming a Reflective Practitioner* Wiley, Oxon, 2017 p. xviii

Reflective Practice spaces benefit from being welcoming, playful and relaxed, supported by good housekeeping and robust facilitation with sound therapeutic underpinnings. The space needs to be non-judgemental so it can hold thinking which doesn't fit with other methods of connecting and sharing (e.g. an annual team meeting), and metaphors can be used to help frame participant expectation about how these groups work: chewing things over and digesting, getting things off your chest, providing a blank canvas upon which to draw. The RPG is a place where the subtleties and nuances of the work are held, shared and witnessed, and as such it provides a distinct space for communication, exchange and connection.

A willingness from participants to actively listen and challenge is also key, as is their witnessing of each other, which counteracts the isolation many will have experienced over the pandemic and beyond: some teams may not have met, so being part of a RPG is a valuable opportunity to connect.

Reflective Practice Groups for organisations

Since its inception the Flourishing Lives Reflective Practice offer has evolved to meet the changing support needs of creative practitioners, staff, volunteers, and organisational teams working across arts and health settings. As this area of work grows, Flourishing Lives were keen to widen access to, and awareness of, Reflective Practice support for artists and arts practitioners, and to explore the role of Reflective Practice in service provision. The RPGs funded by The Baring Foundation had the following aims:

For participants
- To provide an opportunity for connection and sharing of work-based experiences
- To support the wellbeing of people working in arts for health and wellbeing settings

For the sector
- To contribute opportunities for support through the provision of free Reflective Practice Groups
- To contribute to and advocate for conversations about support for people who work in arts for health and wellbeing sector
- To contribute to the evidence base of support initiatives.

In line with Flourishing Lives' resource and administrative capacity, the initiative was planned on the basis of targeting - by invitation - 12 participant organisations across two tranches, delegating the process of recruiting the participants to the partner organisations. In tranche one, approaches were made to an LGBTQ+ focused organisation, and another led by people who are ethnically and culturally diverse, but due to the small number of suitable candidates for the RPGs the offer was declined.

Reflecting on recruitment learning at the mid point of the initiative, the Flourishing Lives team implemented changes to the tranche two invitation, resulting in an organisation led by people who are ethnically and culturally diverse taking part. It was not possible to offer space to individual facilitators across different organisations, however a pan-equality network was approached with an offer of RPGs for their member organisations, but there was no uptake.

The final, UK-wide partner organisations involved in this initiative varied in size, with differing combinations of core staff and freelancers. They were:

Chickenshed Theatre, Creative Dance London, Dulwich Picture Gallery, Green Close, Good Vibrations, Hear Me Out, Hip Hop Heals, Koestler Arts, London Bubble Theatre Company, Outside Edge Theatre Company, Outside In, and the Scottish Book Trust.

Across these organisations there are a range of art forms including dance, literature, music, reading, theatre, spoken word, storytelling, visual arts and writing. There is expertise in working with people experiencing or affected by addiction, artists who face significant barriers to the art world due to health, disability, social circumstances or isolation, those connected with the criminal justice system including prisons, medium and secure settings and hospitals, people held within immigration detention centres, people living with cancer, people living with dementia and those affected by social isolation. The work they do takes place in rural and urban settings, online and in-person, in dedicated settings and in the community, and includes working with babies and parents, children, young people, adults, families, teachers and learning professionals.
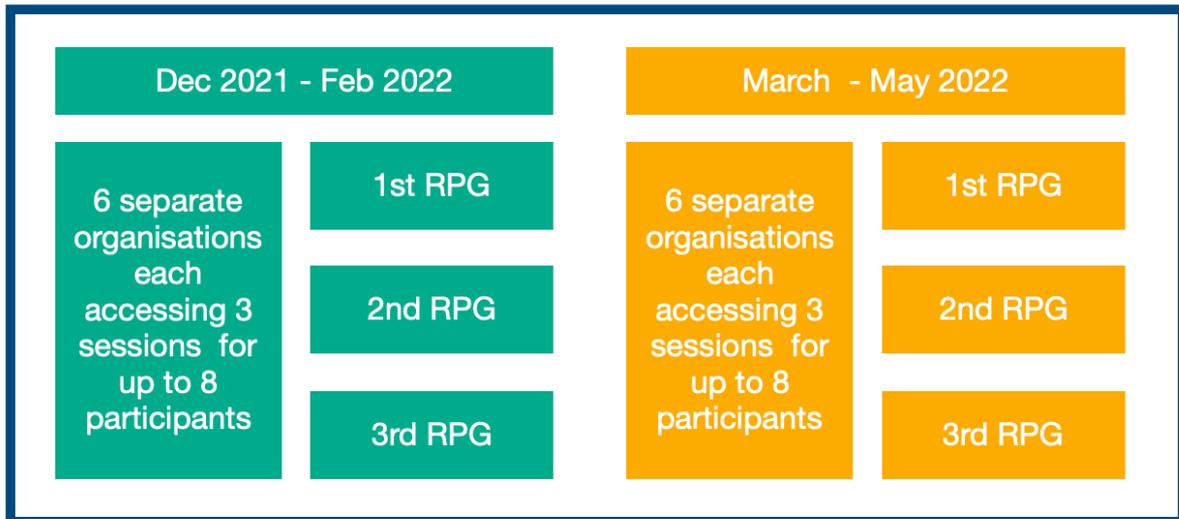
The Reflective Practice Groups offer

Figure 1: Organisation of the Reflective Practice Group Meetings

There were 2 tranches of the programme: December 2021 - February 2022 and March - May 2022. The whole programme consisted of 12 Reflective Practice Groups of 3 sessions each, across 12 partner organisations. Each RPG remained distinct, and participants did not mix across groups. All sessions took place online and were two hours in duration, with attendance varying between 2 and 8 participants in each session. There was an instance of a single participant in attendance, and through discussion with the RPG facilitator there was an agreement to work together on a one-to-one basis for a period of one hour.

Survey responses from Reflective Practice Group participants

Each selected organisation was responsible for recruiting 6-8 participants for each set of RPG sessions. 70 out of a possible 71 responses were received from the baseline participant survey[12], and 41 responses were received from the endline survey. The same four questions were asked in both surveys, with 2 additional survey-specific questions: for the baseline, these were about prior experience of RPGs, and whether charging for attendance would be a barrier; and in the endline they were about attendance. Across both surveys all respondents made use of the free text box to share individual comments.

Demographic information about the participant cohort was collected via the baseline survey, with most participants identifying as female (64%). There was representation in each of the six different age categories between 16 and 70+ with most selecting the

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[12] A total of 71 individuals were invited to be part of a Reflective Practice Group across the 12 partner organisations.

30-39 category (30%). When describing ethic origin, White British was selected by 60%, followed by Any Other White Background (7%) and Asian (6%), with participants also identifying as Any Other Mixed Background, Black/Black British, Irani, Mixed White and Black African, Mixed White and Asian, Mixed White & Black Caribbean and White Irish.
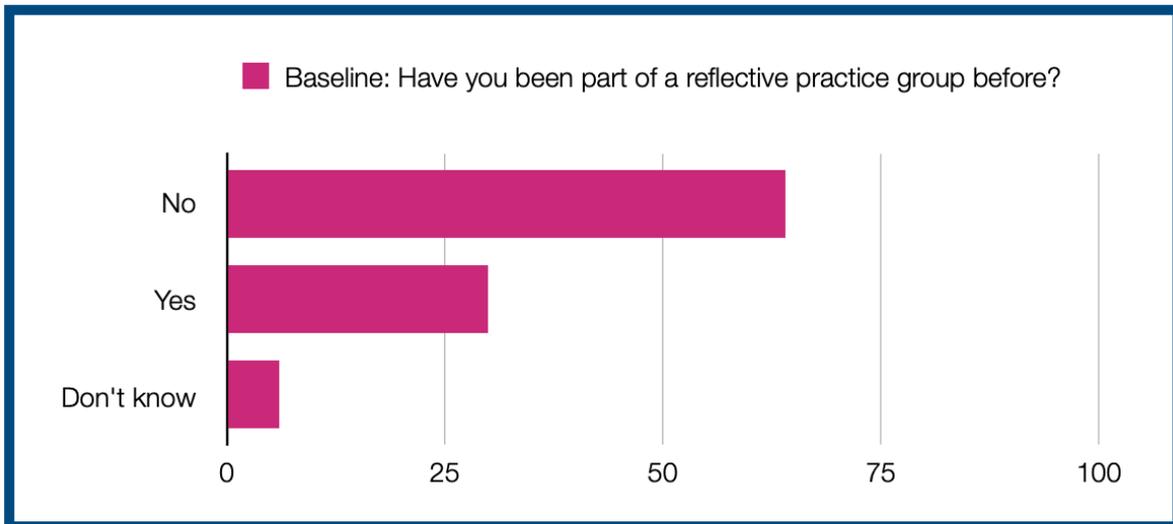

Figure 2: Participant survey responses: Have you ever been pat of a Reflective Practice Group before?
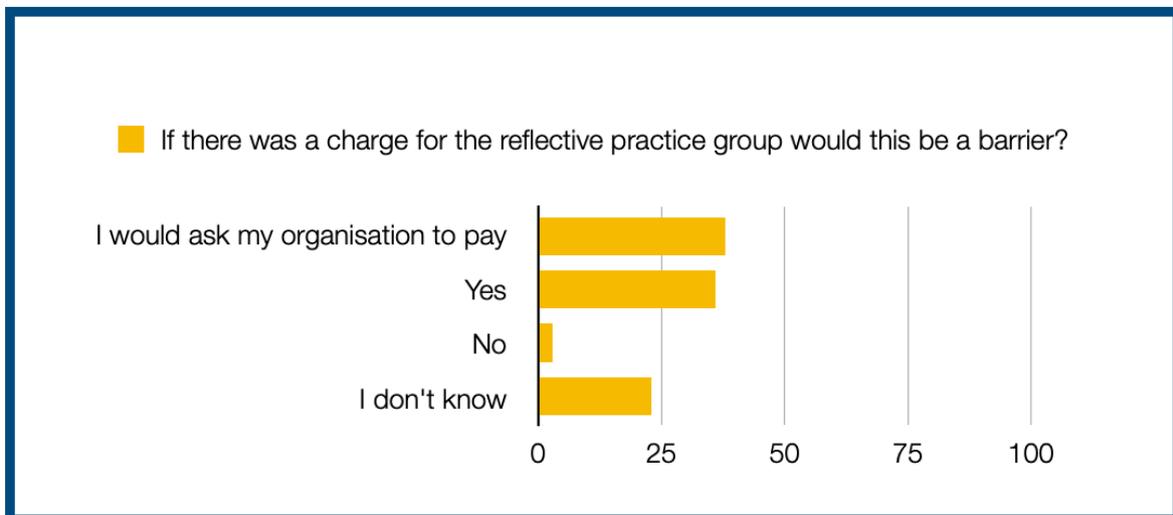

Figure 3: Participant survey responses: If there was a charge for the Reflective Practice Group would this be a barrier?

From the baseline survey 64% of respondents said they had not been part of a RPG before. When asked if charging for the RPG would be a barrier, 36% said yes it would be, with 38% saying they would ask their organisation to pay. A small percentage (3%) said it wouldn't be a barrier, with the remaining 23% not knowing.

Participant ambitions

When asked what participants hoped to gain from being part of a RPG, comments shared in the free text box can be characterised as proactive. The most frequent word used was learn, followed by share. Reflect and support were also frequently mentioned, with support being contextualised as an exchange - a desire to both offer and receive support. Several comments referred to having an opportunity to appreciate, and a desire to develop skills, tools and insights. An opportunity to think was also highlighted, and a sense of wanting to develop and listen to others. Although less frequent, there was also mention of confidence and resilience.

Figure 4: Participant survey responses (frequent words): What do you hope to gain from being part of a Reflective Practice Group?

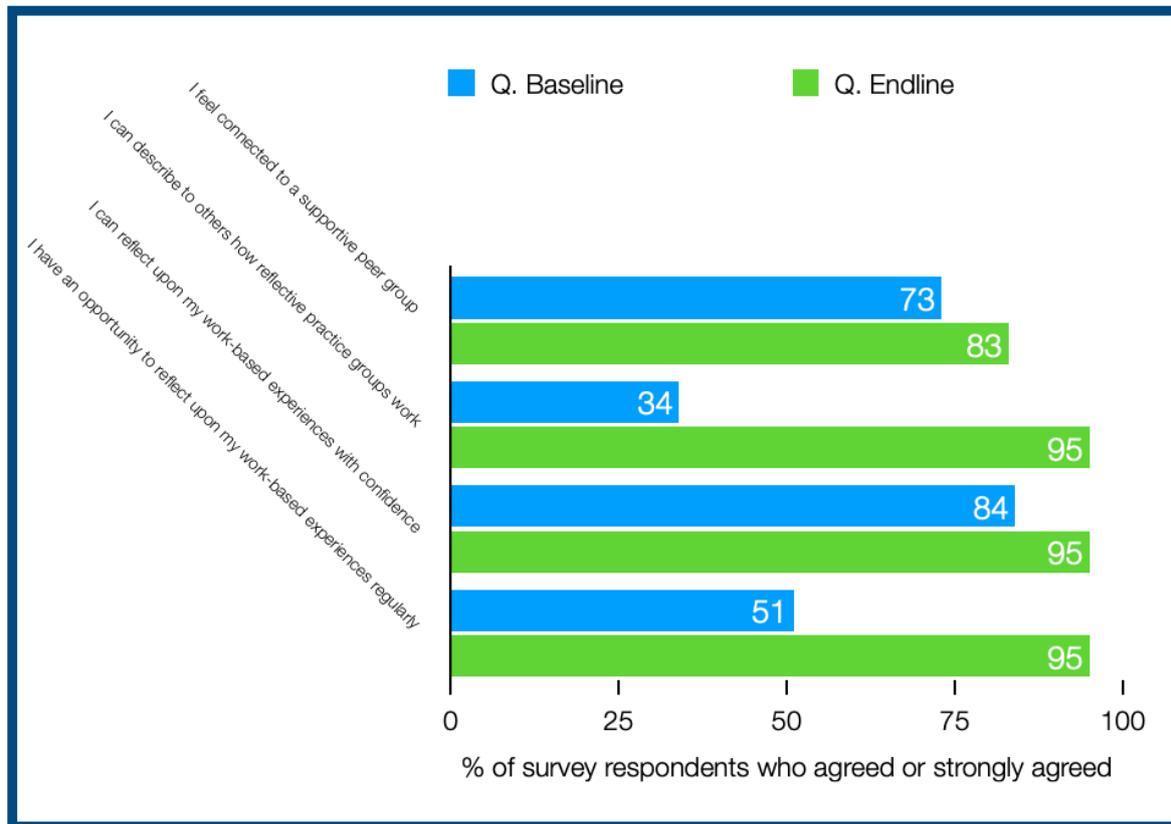## Impact of Reflective Practice Groups on participants

Figure 5: Participant survey responses: Baseline and endline data comparison across 4 core questions

Comparing baseline and endline data indicates there has been a positive impact in a number of ways: there was a high level of feeling connected to a supportive peer group at the outset, however this increased by a further 10% after the 3 sessions. Likewise, the ability to reflect on work-based experiences with confidence, and have an opportunity to reflect regularly, increased by 9% and 44% respectively. Additionally, through a period of experiential learning a significant percentage - 95% - now feel able to describe to others how RPGs work. Nearly 60% of respondents said they had attended all 3 sessions: if they hadn't reasons included prioritising paid work (46%), caring responsibilities (15%), the timing of the session (15%), with other reasons included forgetting, being unwell and difficulty with wifi connection.

In response to the question: *What will you take forward from the Reflective Practice Group experience into your practice?* there were a range of responses, which have been categorised under 3 headings: benefits, challenges, and developmental, with the greater number of comments falling in the benefits and developmental categories.

Participant Comments: Benefits

The most frequent benefit was a sense of commonality, with individuals having the opportunity to share situations from work which others could relate to - both instances where things had gone well, and where there were doubts and challenges. Practical tools and approaches were shared, and there was mention of feeling more connected to a diverse network of colleagues. Feelings of greater confidence in what individuals were doing at work, and how individuals were managing difficulties were also highlighted. Having a safe space in which to reflect supported this, fostering a sense of togetherness which reduced feelings of isolation. Where team members from across a range of organisational roles engaged in a group there were comments about a positive change in team dynamics, and knowing colleagues a little better. There was also an appreciation of the value of Reflective Practice itself: the process of the group, the dialogue generated and the opportunity to share. Being able to take time out and take a step back, and be in a space where individuals felt heard, seen and understood was also highlighted. It was felt that the content of the sessions was just right, with opening prompt questions being felt to be excellent, and there was a sense of being in it together - feeling inspired by the experience of working with the facilitator and the group.The RPGs were also an opportunity to pick up tips that support individual health and wellbeing.

Participant Comments: Challenges

There were a handful of comments about when a session hadn't gone as a participant might have preferred - for example where there was a desire for more structured exercises - however these and similar comments were framed reflectively, and there remained an emphasis on learning. The duration of the work was highlighted - both in terms of session length and number of sessions - with a fear that things shared and learned may not be put into practice after what was perceived as a short initiative.

Participant Comments: Developmental

Many endline survey comments contained phrases such as trying, hopes, needs, ideas and approaches to take-away. These can be classed as developmental, as they communicate ambitions for change, or for integrating what has been experienced. There was an overall sense that it's OK to fail, and that failure is part of the work. Some respondents were intent on trying to separate work and home, with many highlighting the importance of taking time to reflect: on a daily basis, periodically with a peer group and/or at the end of projects. There was also a desire to advocate for reflection time when working with other organisations, and also how evaluation processes could expand to include information about how successfully the work had struck a healthy balance, and been fairly paid.

The need to carve out more time for reflection came across clearly and how this could take the form of further sessions with a facilitator external to the organisation. There was also mention of offering reflective activities to others, including the client groups they work with; and specific training ambitions were also communicated. There was an ambition to take forward the skills and approaches developed through the RPGs, for example listening skills as much as skills to reflect. Intentions were expressed to seek advice from peers, create opportunities and cultivate a sustained effort to nurture professional networks, whilst also striking a balance between the giving and receiving of support.

Participant focus group

A range of nuanced comments came from the focus groups: overwhelmingly there was appreciation for the opportunity to reflect, and to do so with colleagues; both in instances where individuals knew each other beforehand and where they were meeting for the first time. Some organisational teams worked remotely, while others were building-based, and both appreciated the offer of the RPG space, and how it differed from operational check-in spaces and conversations. As seen in the participant survey, learning from others was key, with those newer to this area of work feeling grateful for the tips and approaches suggested by others, and ambitions to reflect more in future had already been actioned between the end of the RPG and the focus group conversation. There were increased levels of confidence, and the groups were seen as a place for moral support, with an expressed desire to keep in contact with each other.

The RPG space was also seen as an opportunity to bring prior professional experience to the fore, and consider it in light of current and future work. There was an instance where a participant was reminded why they do what they do: the purpose of the work and the sense of pride which came from hearing from other group members. There was a desire for greater attendance when groups were operating with two people, but also an appreciation of the smaller groups of four which allowed dialogue to go deeper and be more extensive, in contrast with other perhaps more operationally-focused peer engagement. Pace was also mentioned: not packing in too much meant there was enough space to consider things meaningfully.

The facilitators were highly praised for the way they held the space, which supported participants when there was a sense of not quite knowing what to expect. Others learnt new skills from the way the facilitators ran the sessions and held the space - described as artful and with kindness, which in turn promoted kindness between the group participants. The RPG was seen as a very safe space, and one where empathy was promoted. When requests for the continuation of the RPG provision were voiced by one focus group participant, these were universally supported by others in attendance.

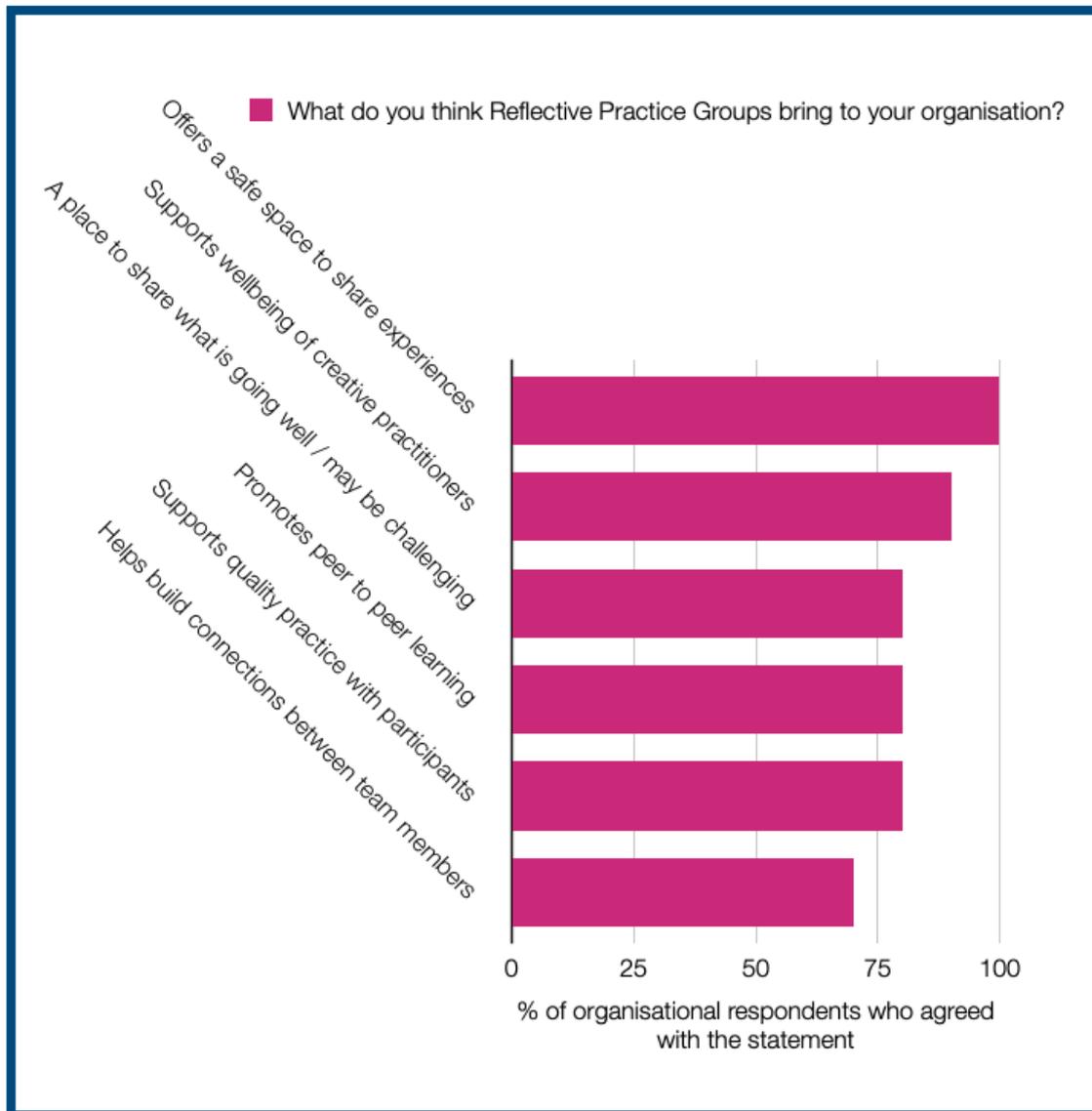# Survey responses and perceptions from partner organisations

Figure 6: Organisational perspectives survey responses

A survey was issued to the 12 partner organisations after the completion of the two tranches - consisting of 5 questions and a free text box - with 10 surveys being returned. 90% of respondents had a general awareness of Reflective Practice Groups before being invited to take part in the initiative, and 90% said they would consider allocating funds to support future groups, with one organisation indicating they are able to access funds, and a further eight needing to access funds to support this. 90% thought it was beneficial that the RPGs were run independently of their organisational structure. There was complete agreement about RPGs being safe spaces to share experiences (100%). 80% agreed the RPGs supported the wellbeing of creative practitioners, promoted peer learning and sharing a variety of experiences, and 70% of organisations agreed they helped to build team connections. Comments shared in the free text box are also grouped under benefits, challenges and developmental thinking.

Organisation comments: benefits

Comments included that the groups were a space to untangle knots and generate understanding, and how it was helpful to have an external facilitator holding the sessions. There was also an appreciation of the opportunity for freelance practitioners to get together and share experiences outside of organisational structures. The opportunity to deeply explore their work and the impact it can have on them was deemed helpful. There were comments about the valuable nature of the opportunity, and the important nature of this kind of space in which to process experiences.

Organisational comments: challenges

The issue of allocating time to attend groups was highlighted. One organisation shared there was a keenness to attend at the outset, but as project work developed participants tended not to prioritise sessions, as it was harder to keep the space. In another instance, some participants had reported that the sessions were not so helpful for them, as they felt they had done this sort of thing before, and once they'd done one session, there didn't seem to be any progression - but they went on to say that others had found it useful. Some team members in senior or supervisory roles didn't feel comfortable in the space, and asked not to attend.

Organisational comments: developmental

There was a proposal to formally split the purpose of sessions, with one part being focused on developing practice and sharing practical challenges, and the other giving space for processing the lived experience that has been shared with practitioners, and the impact that has had on them. One organisation thought there had been a good take up of the RPG as they already had an established culture of reflective and collaborative learning, but there was a keenness to develop a more clinical element. There was interest in being part of the conversation about how this work develops in the future and how this could be developed in a region specific way was also mentioned. In relation to attendance challenges, one organisation reflected on the need to make space for reflection and wellbeing, and that in future they would look at embedding it within projects.

Analysis and discussion

The participant responses were overwhelmingly positive, however there are caveats to the data, as the endline survey received 29 fewer responses than the baseline. It can be considered that those who were unable to attend all three sessions - for whatever reason - may have felt less inclined to complete the survey, and conversely those who has attended all 3 sessions were more engaged with the evaluation process. Helping to mitigate this, the organisational survey responses - although small in number at 10 - did offer further perspectives, with comments in the free text boxes more evenly distributed between benefits, challenges and development.

From the 70 responses to the baseline survey it was clear that the participants framed their ambitions for the RPGs proactively, which can be viewed as a willingness to engage in the process - a key ingredient for successful groups. In this initiative there were participants with a wide range of roles and responsibilities coming together in one RPG and a sense of togetherness and greater sense of connection was noted. This wasn't the case with every group and so in common with organisational working cultures the way in which participants are grouped for RPGs is an involved and nuanced process. It's also important to note here that RPGs are not the only form of reflection open to participants from organisations, and as such other methods of reflecting may be preferred. Additionally, the benefit of being part of an RPG comes from not only finding it a positive process in itself, but also discovering that Reflective Practice preferences may be located in other methods and approaches[13].

Organisations viewed the groups as positive, safe spaces for peer-to-peer learning; supportive of wellbeing; helping to build connections between teams and supporting quality practice with participants, with 90% seeing the benefit of them being externally provided. RPG spaces are useful additions to both existing organisational communication structures such as team meetings, and other forms of reflective practice such as collaborative learning and supervision. The RPGs were seen as a place to untangle, which indicates an understanding of the complexity of the work, and the need for spaces in which to process experiences.

There was fluctuating attendance across the groups, and predominantly this was linked to a need to prioritise paid work or new work commitments which had arisen in the interim. Organisational teams are often working at capacity, and freelance creative practitioners are often living with financial precarity. Mitigating this is potentially challenging - offer dates too early and other freelance work comes in which needs to be financially prioritised; offer them too late and co-ordinating dates across teams is likely to be difficult. As one organisation suggested, embedding reflective practice into a project would help to protect time and support attendance at the groups. Although the survey didn't ask a specific question about paid time to attend it is likely some, if not all, were attending on organisational time. Paid time needs to be guaranteed to ensure there is opportunity to attend.

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[13] See Nicola Naismith Practising Well Conversations and Support Menu 2021 p.17-25

The short duration of the initiative - three individual sessions over three months, each two hours long - was connected with concerns that it may be difficult to implement and sustain the group learning. Some participants already had experience of RPGs, whilst to others it was a new way of reflecting, so it would be useful to collect perspectives on the preferred number of sessions and to understand to a greater extent how these sessions fit in before, around and after project delivery, which in turn would aid the formation of future offers.

There were instances of individual RPG participants wanting to nurture and keep new networks going, and this is where organisational and sector support with resources and paid time would be helpful. Again, it would be useful to gather perspectives from RPG participants on what would be most helpful to them as an alumni group. It could, for example, be a light touch - sharing contact details, with permission - or setting up a wider alumni network with periodic meetings to facilitate dialogue between groups and/or individual participants.

The RPGs in this initiative have functioned in such a way as to promote and quickly establish honest exchanges between participants. The skills and experience of the facilitators in holding the RPG spaces was key - the conditions they created in their respective groups, and the attention paid to being welcoming, kind and empathetic, whilst holding good housekeeping and facilitation processes. These factors combined led to a consistently high-quality experience for participants, and therefore anyone interested in setting up RPGs should consider the skills and experience of the facilitator.

Conclusion

This initiative has supported access to RPGs for 71 individuals across 12 partner organisations, offering quality opportunities for reflection and connection with a variety of positive impacts.

The desk-based research shared some evidence-based foundations of what Reflective Practice can do, and its interconnected benefits including: providing space for deep thinking, preventing stagnation, promoting self-awareness and providing a means for constructing professional knowledge - all of which have been indicated across this evaluation. The key condition for effective RPGs, and on which all else builds, is that of a safe space in which to reflect - which is established by working with highly skilled and experienced facilitators.

The Reflective Practice Group participants have felt a positive impact in a number of interlinked ways: a strong sense of commonality has developed through opportunities to engage with in-depth exploration and connection with colleagues, supporting established teams and those who had newly joined organisations. The opportunity to honestly share work-based experiences - both celebratory and challenging - within a non-judgemental and safe space has increased levels of confidence. A further impact marker of this initiative is the desire to remain engaged with the work itself - regular reflection - which the majority indicated they wanted to do. Furthermore, there is a desire from some participants to keep in touch with these new networks, which indicates an ongoing commitment to valuing these peer groups.

Over half of participants had not attended a group before, so this initiative has reached individuals new to this way of reflecting, which is key to supporting the sector. The ambitions of the participants before starting the group were proactive, and this indicates a willingness to engage in the process. After the three sessions participants reported increased levels of connectedness, demonstrating an understanding how the RPG itself works.

Organisations were also positive about the initiative, with all survey respondents agreeing RPGs offer a safe space in which to share experiences. Both organisations and participants offered evidence of developmental thinking around how groups could operate, indicating stakeholders feel invested in the development of future iterations.

Recommendations

Accessing arts funding has always been challenging, and is even more so given recent events. However it is important to remember the foundations of arts and health, and participatory arts provision - freelance creative practitioners and organisational teams. Support for their wellbeing is paramount, both in their own terms and in relation to working with clients. To support the sector and the individuals who work within it, it is recommended:

‣ Allocating further financial resources for Reflective Practice Groups so a greater number of people have access. This could be via fundraising, embedding the cost in grant applications for arts and health projects, or through the provision of dedicated funds to a suitably experienced external provider.

‣ Prioritising the conditions for good attendance: the importance of 'free at the point of access' must be maintained and complemented with paid time to participate, either via organisations or through the provision of bursary funding or similar to ensure equity of access.

‣ Supporting the connections between Reflective Practice Group participants - on completion of the RPG - via the formulation of a participant-led, organisationally-supported alumni for ongoing engagement with the work and each other.

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