

Connecting to archives through creativity to support wellbeing

Slide 1

I'm going to describe a series of workshops delivered with the aim of engaging those outside of academia with archives and museum collections.

I'm going to discuss the response to these workshops from the participants

And look at Studies into the benefits of creative activities for well being

I'm then going to ask what is the next stage for the workshops, how can their benefits be quantified and used to greater advantage

Slide 2

My background

I'm a printed textile designer and three years ago I completed a practice based PhD.

My research aims to introduce and open up archives to those outside of academia, and to find creative approaches that will engage wider audiences. I founded the Tangible Archive Research Group, with academics outside and within the university, archivists and curators to promote and understand the importance of the materiality of our archives. I aim to use archives for more than academic study, to foster new approaches and to learn from them through creativity.

An approach I am currently using to engage audiences with archives is to run stencil print workshops with imagery I have designed based on archive material, and for the past eighteen months I have delivered textile stencil print workshops in association with the archive of a corresponding museum collection, exhibition or gallery.

Slide 3 workshop view

I translate imagery and colour palettes into designs that can be printed by anyone, with no experience or artistic ability. I provide all the equipment and materials and within a two hour session, participants focus on producing an outcome. The process is easy yet requires concentration.

I have now delivered over fifty workshops, and have devised a system that works for everyone, from nine year old girls at a south London youth club to very senior citizens, all having little or no artistic experience at all. The participants background varies widely, from marginalised groups with mental health issues, to those seeking a break from a demanding workplace.

One of the organisations I am working with is London Museum Studios with whom I have delivered workshops for Age UK, mental health groups, Carers support groups and NHS Better Lives, supporting those recovering from alcohol and drug misuse.

I have also delivered workshops in Bolton with mental health support and women's community groups. In addition to many workshops with the general public for other museums and archives around the country from Brighton to Northern Ireland.

Slide 4

Method

In the workshops I provide everything needed to create a finished stencil product, based on archive material. In the London Museum Studios, one of the themes is tiles in London, this slide shows a 1900 decorative tile, a Roman floor tile, and a frieze showing a coffee shop barista from 1700 looking much as a barista looks today! People can start to relate to these images, and then to the history and heritage that they imply.

Slide 5 example

I show the stencils, colours and my own example prints of how the stencils can be used. My designs don't just copy, they use the archive as inspiration, so this is inspired by the previous slide of birds, but the colours come from other objects.

Slide 6 film

and I demonstrate how to stencil, As can be seen in this stop motion film

Slide 7 workshop

In the workshop situation, the participant is given stencil images and a set of colours, from which to make their own selection, allowing them to become co-designers in the response to the archives. The printing through the individual stencils, with dye applied by stencil brush, encourages them to be spontaneous and individualistic in their composition. The participants are generally not trained in formal design skills, yet they are "thinking through process" as Donald Schon describes, as they make their mark, reflect on it and then react. Participants are offered an open ended opportunity to design their own composition without requiring any previous artistic experience. This freedom within pre-determined parameters allows for intuitive and experiential knowledge to be brought to the fore.

Slide 8 Samples

They are provided with a tote bag, a tea towel or handkerchief, dependant on the project and before starting they practice on small samples of fabric.

Slide 9 Finished bags

Participants in all the groups enjoy the activity, the finished product and being part of a group.

As a methodology for engaging participants outside of academia, connecting them with the artefacts in museum and archive collections the process is effective. The creative activity, it could be argued, allows for an intuitive understanding of the qualities within the original objects that bypasses any necessity for historical knowledge.

However, the feedback forms that I circulate afterwards show that as well as enjoying the process, participants find it relaxing and therapeutic.

Slide 10 examples of finished bags

Feedback is collected from participants with self-reported reflection (SRR) gathered in tick box statements and free text options.

The feedback shows that participants almost universally report feeling that they had taken part in a creative activity (96%) with almost as many feeling that it had been a positive experience (91%) reflecting a high satisfaction with the type of creative content.

The process of making evidently brings a level of happiness, evident in the 76% of participants who offer free text comments equivalent to 'enjoyable' including 'lovely', 'wonderful', 'fantastic'.

The making process leads to a finished article to take home, a signifier of personal achievement to the majority with 88% agreeing it was important to them.

Most found the workshop to be a relaxing experience (84%) and in the free text there are many comments relating to peaceful, calming, relaxing and therapeutic. One suggested it could be bereavement support, another that it should be recommended for time away from screens.

Those from the community groups City Carers and Age UK particularly appreciate the communal aspect of the activity, and having an opportunity to take time away from everyday concerns.

Slide 11 feedback form

This is a form from one of the group at the NHS Better Lives support group for those recovering from drug and alcohol misuse – who wrote in the free comments - 'today was good'. From someone dealing with complex issues, this is a positive response, a window of the day was improved through this creative activity.

But my feedback is unscientific and anecdotal. How the workshops are producing the positive effects that they seem to be doing I can speculate about but have no empirical evidence for.

Slide 12 Flow

For example the sense of Flow. Now I'm sure you are familiar with the description of the sense of Flow that we enter when focussed on what we doing, and when I look at the criteria set out by **Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi**, ["**MEE-high CHEEK-sent-mee-high**"] I can see how the stencilling fulfils each point. Here are some of them-

The activity is intrinsically rewarding.

The act of adding colour to the brush, stencilling and then lifting the stencil to reveal the new shape is in itself satisfying.

There are clear goals that, while challenging, are still attainable.

The task is clear, yet requires some thought and planning. It does not become stressful but is not so easy that people become bored.

People experience feelings of personal control over the situation and the outcome.

The design choices are up to the individual and the final design is within their control, yet is open ended rather than being prescribed and following a formula.

There is immediate feedback.

As soon as printing starts, the results are evident, showing the participant what they are able to do. Within a group situation, there is constant feedback and praise between participants.

People know the task is doable, and there is a balance between skill level and the challenge presented.

Participants experience a sense of working on a task that requires them to engage yet realise immediately that they are able to do it, and have been provided with the correct tools to be able to fulfil their own design choices

There is intense concentration and focused attention.

The group often falls silent during a workshop as the participants think about their design, make their selections and then print.

Slide 13 connection to well being

Even this girls youth club whose ages ranged from 9 to 14 worked quietly and steadily on their designs.

I don't need to tell this audience that the arts are integral to our development and happiness..

Recently, Professor Daisy Fancourt's publication, *Art Cure: The Science of How the Arts Transform our Health*, has shown that 'engaging in the arts improves the functioning of every major organ system in the body, even helping us to live longer (2026). The research has considered all forms of arts activities and shows that the benefits for mental wellbeing lead to benefits in physical health. She talks of the prescription of arts classes as being literally 'life saving' for patients for whom other conventional treatments had been unsuccessful.

According to Prof Fancourt, Arts engagement helps to fulfil core psychological needs, such as having a sense of autonomy. It helps us to master our emotions, to cope with everyday stresses and situations. Taking part in the arts supports our physical health, sociability and help us to live longer. Yet our participation in art activities as part of our routine and lifestyle is actually diminishing. Prof Fancourt is amazed that the benefits go unrecognised.

Slide 14 Quote UK arts and health

However, just this month UK Arts and health reported on a gathering organised by the World Health Organisation, stating that 'With 2.8 million people out of work due to long-term sickness and ill-health costing the UK economy £212 billion annually, the case for creative health is as **economic** as it is clinical. Arts interventions return up to £8.56 in social value for every £1 spent. The question is no longer whether the arts improve health, it is how and when the government decides to act'

Slide 15 Arts for Health quote

Textile crafts appear to be particularly good at being able to satisfy a need for comfort and tactility in creative activities. Stitching and knitting are usually the most accessible.

Slide 16 Knit quote and stencil film *Its rhythmic movement is key. The brain likes rhythm because it is predictable, it makes your brain feel safe. (Corkhill 2014)*

The therapeutic qualities of knitting are fairly well documented and recognised, although still overlooked as a form of treatment that might be considered by health practitioners.

Betsan Corkhill's 2014 book is considered seminal in the promotion of knitting as a powerful tool for helping to alleviate or cure many different mental health issues and behavioural problems.

I would like to be able to claim the process of stencilling as having similar therapeutic effects as knitting. Stencilling also has a rhythmic movement of the brush tapping the dye onto the cloth and the sound itself is calming. One of the great advantages is that the activity of stencilling does not need training or experience, whereas knitting is a skill that needs to be learnt.

Slide 17 TFL symbol bag

An example from the NHS Better Lives workshop is this bag printed by a young girl on the drug and alcohol rehabilitation support programme. She arrived in a black hoodie looking defensive and uninterested, but selected the London Transport roundel to start printing with. As the workshop progressed, the London Museum curator asked if anyone was aware of London history or had any connections to a particular area. The girl started to tell the group about her grandfather working as an overseer in the Isle of Dogs, and her mother being a ticket inspector on the buses. I pointed out the London transport symbol that she had selected and I could see her make the connection between her family, herself and her history. Later, while printing, she had relaxed considerably and while hammering away with the brush remarked that 'this is a really good thing to do when you're angry with someone'.

Slide 18 two photos and quote

The sense of belonging to something is recognised as being one of the ways in which the arts offer a sense of well-being.

"Through arts and culture engagement it is possible to find ways to connect not only with each other but also with ourselves, supporting a sense of resonance with our relationship with the world" (Jensen et al, 2023, p.24).

This is an added benefit of these particular workshops, I believe, they offer a connection and an awareness of the past, of our culture in the form of physical objects rather than abstract ideas. This sense of belonging and sense of place is understood intuitively through the making activity, as the participant responds to the archive.

Slide 19 feedback

This slide shows feedback from a recent participant, and the comments make the delivery of these workshops so rewarding. The free comments read 'such a lovely workshop. Very calm and peaceful activity in good company. Much needed respite from caring worries. Thank you.'

This feedback and the previous, demonstrates that the positive effects reach a wide spectrum, from the young through to older groups, suggesting connections are made in different ways, dependent on the need of the individual.

So what next, where can the anecdotal and self-reported feedback lead? Do there need to be clinical trials to provide evidence in the medical world of social prescribing?

Slide 20 handkerchief print

I am interested in setting up a clinical assessment to quantify the effects of these stencil print workshops, to have them recognised and added to the range of different ways in which we

can engage with arts activities. There are many different models for workshops that can be trialled, for example, working on group pieces, perhaps contributing to a single artwork for a specific location. Or rather than short one off workshops, a series in which participants work on producing a collection of outputs, or a more intricate and challenging piece.

I would like to collaborate with others interested in promoting creativity as a means of supporting wellbeing. A large scale study of stencil printing under controlled conditions would be able to demonstrate how it is providing benefits on multiple levels, to different types of participant. I welcome suggestions and comments on how I can connect to those who can help to bring this about.

I believe it is important to communicate to those who have the means to make change, that creative activities are not a luxury or optional for some groups of people with time and money but should be available to all. They are a vital means of self-expression and one that is undervalued in our current education and well-being provision.

Slide 21 Thank you

Please do come and talk to me if you would like to be involved