Creative Later Life Reporting

Introduction

Over the past two years, we have conducted interviews with CAN group members and the representatives of the organisations in which they are involved. We have participated in and observed CAN meetings, and facilitated discussions around wellbeing, creativity and evaluation as part of these meetings. We have transcribed and analysed data from these activities, and from the creative ageing storytelling project. We have also observed and facilitated discussion for members of the Banbury heritage group. This work has gone hand-in-hand with, builds on, and has been informed by our research as part of the Connecting through Culture As We Age project.[1]

As a result, in this document we can present the building blocks of a framework for evaluating creative ageing activity. This is based around the following understandings: (1) creativity is best understood when it is situated in the context of a person's life; (2) that there are five key themes that help us understand how creativity might relate to wellbeing; (3) that standard wellbeing measures are not sufficient on their own; (4) that evaluation should be about practice, not reporting. Based on these, we can also make some suggestions for what CAN might be able to achieve in future. Finally, we share some of the vignette 'a-ha' moments that helped us to build this framework.

1. Creativity and the Life Course

As we age, we face moments of transition: in our sense of self, the roles we play, the opportunities we look for, the challenges we have to face. Those experiences don't occur in isolation from each other but are intimately linked together. This is the 'life course' perspective – that questions such as "what do I do now?" are shaped by what we carry with us from the past and how we choose to head into the future.

For older adults, this time of life is often full of transitions: retirement may be an opportunity to re-engage with interests that were out of reach when raising a family or working a regular job; there may be an opportunity to search for a 'new purpose' that uses the skills, insights and contacts gathered over a lifetime; perhaps a move to a new home has come with social loneliness and the search for social connection; there may be a period of ill-health, the loss of loved ones or new caring responsibilities that challenge a sense of someone's identity and value; there may be a void after a long working life that needs to be filled with colour.

In our conversation with CAN members (and further afield), there is often a wellbeing story at the heart of a turn to creativity: new demands are made on wellbeing; new needs emerge that are going unmet; new life opportunities arise but the social and cultural capital needed to act on them is not yet in place. Indeed, for many, creativity isn't something sought out with a 'creative end' solely in mind but, rather, a wellbeing need first. When we look for tools that can help us flourish in transition – to meet those wellbeing needs – everyday creativity can be a huge source of strength.

> *For Dave, joining a theatre group has helped him learn to listen more to others; to hear what they are actually saying. It has also helped him find the tools he needs to*

[1] https://connectingthroughcultureasweage.info/

communicate complicated feelings, for example in relation to personal loss, where they have been missing from a culture of 'burying feelings' in his generation.

Can we engineer this relationship between wellbeing and creativity? As one CAN member put it: "Creativity comes to people at different times, but always the 'right time' for individuals". Often, that 'right time' arises because someone has chosen to be more receptive to creative opportunities around them, for example in response to a new or unmet need in their own life. This may be through an active choice to participate, an invitation from a friend, 'reluctantly' tagging along or even an ultimatum from a family member. Whatever the route-in, participation can give someone what they know they need, but also what they didn't realise they needed. In this way, someone's sense of what 'wellbeing and creativity' means for them will emerge side-by-side at a time and pace that is right for them. Perhaps, then, a turn to everyday creativity is best approached as an opening-up of possibilities for wellbeing grounded in someone's life course, not as an "intervention", i.e. a 'problem to be solved' or engineered from the outside.

If the value of creativity comes to someone at the 'right time' for them, then what does this mean for arts/cultural programming and evaluating the impact of creativity on people's lives? It suggests a focus on growing, rather than narrowing, the opportunities available to engage in arts and cultural life – so that more people might find what works for them when they need it. It also suggests a need for new evaluation tools that can help trace how everyday creativity and wellbeing impacts emerge side-by-side (as a function of the life course). It also suggests the need for new organisational practices that can link programming, sense-making and evaluation together, so helping uncover the full potential of everyday creativity on wellbeing.

2. Five themes for Creative Wellbeing

Over the last couple of years, we have worked closely with older adults, many from minoritized backgrounds, to ask: what does engaging with arts and culture mean for you? Our work with CAN builds on insight from the 'Connecting Through Culture As We Age' project at the University of Bristol. Through in-depth journaling, interviews, collaborative workshops and funded-opportunities to be creative producers in their own right, we have been able to uncover what everyday creativity looks like for older adults in the real world and why it matters to so many people. Through CAN, we have been able to extend this work, opening up new questions about the life transitions that define growing older and that bring creativity and its impact on wellbeing so sharply into focus. How does everyday creativity relate to wellbeing? We see five themes emerge again and again.

- **Enjoyment** captures much of what happens 'in-the-moment' when we participate in arts and cultural life: feeling inspired, surprised, or being in-tune with things around you.
- **Connection** develops the relational nature of creativity further: from finding links to your own story, to seeing others in a new light or developing a shared purpose together.
- **Growth** focuses on personal transformation, capturing the value of learning something new, being challenged in what you know, or seeing yourself in a new light.
- **Role** centres on how someone shapes the experience of creativity in their lives, from 'being oneself', through feeling valued, to making a difference in the lives of those around you.
- **Future** describes how creativity can change what lies ahead, whether through embracing a new direction, gaining control, or seeing where change is needed in our lives.

Enjoyment, Connection, Growth, Role and Future: when seen together, these five themes define a space for wellbeing. Seen through the lens of someone's life course, together they capture the "stuff" of living well as we age. The value of everyday creativity, so often arising in response to a wellbeing need, lies in producing moments of joy, driving a sense of connection, opening-up new ideas in your life, helping define a purpose, and shape ideas of a future in which you can imagine a place for yourself. Our work with CAN shows that this relationship between wellbeing and creativity may come to each of us at a different time in our lives, and when the time is right.

> For one CAN participant, retirement has meant an opportunity to return to ceramics. The deep immersion it offers has changed how they now thinks to their future: *"In terms of how it's changed me, it's made me really slow down, enjoy, and think about the journey as much as the destination. It's potentially been a problem for me in retirement, because that's not the way I'm used to working… It's about enjoying the here and now and not thinking so much about what's going to happen next week, next month, next year… it has made me stop and think about what I'm doing, and enjoy what I'm doing more. That helps you to process your life a little bit better, in terms of your mental health and wellbeing"*. [Creative Later Life Storytelling Project: Doing it Differently]

What does the 'wellbeing lens' bring to how we think about creativity? We're learning from CAN that for some there may be rich, common ground between creativity that exists 'in the everyday' and creativity expressed through more formal engagement with arts and cultural practice, such as learning an art form or engaging in professional art training. But so, too, does the 'everydayness' of creativity share common ground with other activities in someone's life that we may not always associate with being creative: coaching a young person's football club, fishing at a river bank, cooking a meal for friends.

For many, arts and cultural participation in its broadest possible sense may share the same wellbeing origins as well as wellbeing elements, such as Enjoyment, Connection, Growth, Role and Future. We see this, for example, in how someone may engage in different forms of cultural participation hand-in-hand, without needing to question whether there is a 'difference' between them. Because, so often, a turn to creativity is sparked by a wellbeing need (rather than, say, the desire to learn a particular art or cultural practice for its own sake), distinctions between forms of cultural life may 'miss the point': what matters for someone is finding the right drivers and levers for wellbeing at the right time for them.

3. Why not WEMWBS?

Most creative organisations, and the people who work in them, will have a deep-seated desire to understand the difference their work makes to people's lives and society. A need to inspire change, to transform and to enable individuals and communities is often part and parcel of their mission. Project funding is often tied to an impact agenda, measured through evaluation. However, evaluating the impact of creativity on people's sense of wellbeing has proven to be far from easy. There are well-known validated measurement tools designed to measure changes in individual wellbeing, or its component parts: the Warwick-Edinburgh Wellbeing Measurement Scale (WEMWBS) is commonly used, as is the ONS-4. Such tools are attractive to funders and organisations because quantitative results from them can be more easily compared, and their use suggests increased rigour. Used well, they give valuable results and can support in-depth understanding of wellbeing impacts that align with other fields such as health and economics.

> However, we asked the organisations involved in nominating members for the CAN network about their experiences of using tools of this kind, and their responses were illuminating: *'they're not participant friendly', it just 'didn't seem to capture what we're doing through the project'; 'there's no way of linking results to the actual programme'; 'asking people whether they're lonely right at the outset? – we just found that was a horrible way to start a project'; 'people find it difficult to understand, they ask "what do I say to this?"'; 'people know what it is for, they fill it in with good grace, but I'm not sure it was helpful for us except to provide something for the funders'; 'we handed out the forms, but people interpreted the instructions completely differently and we just didn't have any faith in the results and didn't use them in the end'; 'there was a clash of time frames because we were interested in how our participants benefited in the moment'; or 'our participants are pretty canny, they understand the underlying reason for the evaluation and they answer accordingly'.* [Quotes extracted from interviews with CAN group organisations]

The content of the quotations above speaks to real problems for evaluation using these tools: a lack of knowledge and skills and of suspicion among creative organisations, the potential for their use to damage relationships with participants, and a sense of a gap between what the tools revealed and the kinds of change that interest organisations. Asked what they wanted evaluation to feel like or do, organisations told us: 'to feel useful, to be natural, regular, reflective, part of the activity itself', 'conversational, about drawing out information and difference', 'telling us more about the collective, collaborative, creative process itself', 'digging a little deeper underneath the effusive praise', 'an outcome in itself', 'about how you tell the story', 'involving our participants'.

In one of the CAN meetings, we asked members to tell a story that might convince someone to try something creative that they loved based around a simple structure: why I do this activity, what impact it has had on me, and what change it might inspire next.

> Paul told us about getting involved in acting, including as a costumed volunteer at a heritage property: *'It's fundamentally fun, but not just about filling time, it's about getting out and about, meeting people and contributing as well. I've been involved in setting up my own theatre company - there's an excitement about not knowing what might come out of it!'*
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> Sheila told us about her love of gardening: *'It reconnects me to childhood experiences. Even when it's raining you force yourself to do it and then you realise it's worth it. The taste of home-grown strawberries, so different from the shops. Seeing the flower, there's such a sense of anticipation of things to come."*

Across our work, participation in this simple activity has shown us that when the invitation is extended, people want to talk about and make sense of their everyday creative experiences. It has shown us that they are experts in relating ideas about creativity to wellbeing concepts such as 'fun and enjoyment ', 'connection with others', 'personal growth', 'a sense of my role in the world', and 'looking ahead to the future'. This stands in stark contrast to many wellbeing measures where someone will be asked to report (through ticking boxes) on the 'global' state of their wellbeing. Here, the meaningful thread that connects why someone engages in an activity, the impacts that count in the context of their own life course, and what that change might signal; that thread is broken. We have not yet encountered someone who didn't want to tell their story. Yet, evaluation tools so often close-down that engagement. How can we tolerate such *own goals*?

4. Evaluation as Practice, not reporting

Evaluation should be the glue that connects quality arts/cultural programming and funding decisions together. When done right, it should help everybody: for participants, evaluation should support reflection and sense-making; for organisations, evaluation should provide insight into what participants value in their work, what they're looking for, and unmet needs that might be addressed; for funders, evaluation should reveal the most important impacts for their attention.

In reality, however, this is often not the case. Conventional evaluation approaches can fail in large part because they only serve some of those implicated in their work: evaluation may serve the needs of funders but run counter to what organisations know really matter to their service users; evaluation may serve the needs of organisations or researchers, but feel extractive to those participating; evaluation may richly detail lived experiences, but frame those experiences in a way that leaves funders and policy makers lost at sea. At worst, a rising fatalism around evaluation means the perpetuation of a culture of evaluation that weakens, rather than strengthens, the relationships between participants of arts/cultural life, arts/cultural organisations, funders and policymakers. Who bears the responsibility to get evaluation right?: It is all of us.

The Centre for Cultural Value has recently put forward a number of 'principles for good evaluation'.[2] These offer an account of what it means to be people-centred, beneficial, robust and connected in evaluation work. They call for a corrective to common evaluation practices, for strengthening the agency and dignity of participants, recognising the connected and social nature of experience, and opening-up methods to serve different audiences simultaneously. Our work with CAN is helping show new ways forward – a move towards evaluation practice as a meaningful part of organisational culture, rather than just an 'unloved and compulsory task'. Only if everyone benefits from evaluation activities will we be able to break free from the stigma evaluation brings. Here are three emerging ideas:

Everyday creativity comes with patterns of expression that evaluation tools should respect and can build on.

Perhaps an opportunity to participate in a theatre course has come your way; you decide to join in because you're looking for something new in your life; when you reflect on the impact of that experience later, it will be measured against a sense of your own needs and interests; afterwards you may ask: what now? What possibilities does this open? What else is out there? If evaluation tools can lock into patterns such as this – the way creativity and wellbeing work side-by-side – then they may help not only uncover impacts that matter, but also help articulate those stories that are still in the making or haven't yet been told. This 'making sense' of lived experience can be of value to someone independent of how organisations or funders may go on to work with that insight.

Engaging with the social grain of sense-making can only strength the stories we tell about wellbeing and creativity.

It is unlikely that the full impact of everyday creativity will happen all at once or with thunder-bolt clarity. The process of sense-making takes time and often requires other people: acts of listening, sharing, questioning, affirming, comparing, contradicting, and so on. Further, whilst the impact of creativity on wellbeing will be very personal, *because* it is proper only to you, a group activity may be the first time such impacts are actually given voice. The power of storytelling to make an experience 'real' cannot be underestimated; it cements a sense of self in the life course

[2] https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/our-work/evaluation/evaluation-principles/

that can become a foundation for future change. Evaluation tools that can work with the grain of social sense-making will have more power to articulate stories about creativity and wellbeing that matter to all of us.

The way people tell stories about creativity and wellbeing lends itself to depth, variety but also precision.

Often, an anchor point can help someone situate their story about creativity and wellbeing in a way that makes most sense to them and others. Because a wellbeing need is often at the heart of a search for everyday creativity, having the choice to tell a story about Enjoyment or tell a story about Connection (or in relation to Growth, Role or Future) can help both localise and fine-tune sense-making. From an evaluation practice stand-point, this can simultaneously open up deeper storytelling whilst also uncovering shared patterns of wellbeing needs, impacts and orientations toward arts and culture. The latter will be more useful to organisations, funders and policy actors; it can be layered with simple descriptive statistics and quantitative forms of reporting that reveal the 'bigger picture' around creativity and wellbeing.

5. What can CAN do?

What this work is uncovering is how everyday creativity can open-up a world of transformation: it will come to different people at different times, but always at the 'right time' for individuals, and will be proper to them. Everyday creativity may help someone simply to 'carry on' during a difficult time in their life, but it may also help someone find a new purpose that draws together the skills, interests and experiences they have gained across their life course.

Seen through the lens of the five wellbeing themes, a bigger picture of transformation emerges: more people are seeing how enjoyment in arts and cultural life can have positive impact on all areas of life experience; more people are experiencing how 'learning something new' can lead to a deeper change in their sense-of-self; more people are seeing how a step change from participant-in arts and culture to leader-of arts and culture is possible; more people are asking how 'carrying on' into the future might be transformed to actively shaping a future in which they can play a part.

Why is this significant? Many CAN members have long been active in promoting a positive image of ageing and tackling the age discrimination that people experience in their everyday lives; they can offer us a long-view of changing social and cultural attitudes that should be helping orient us all towards a more inclusive and creative future as we age. Whilst a role for advocacy to tackle ageism in our institutions and public life remains, this outward-facing push for change must now also incorporate an inward-seeking pull for participation. Helping older adults change the narratives they have about themselves is now key, and arts and cultural participation is one important way for older adults to see themselves in a new light – as people with agency, with creativity and with a contribution to make.

Collectively, we could decide to 'leave it to chance' that people will find their wellbeing and creativity story at a time that's right for them. Alternatively, we could lean into this step change and ask how new opportunities for creativity and wellbeing can flourish in place where people are. The Creative Ageing Network has already proved valuable in helping its members understand and articulate the relationship between wellbeing and creativity in their own lives. As a forum for sharing lived experiences, celebrating new narratives and reflecting on the change that is still

needed, it offers a necessary foundation for different groups across the UK to explore what ageing creatively might look like nationally.

What more can CAN do? Many people participate in CAN because creativity has had a transformative impact on their lives. This makes them uniquely placed to contribute to the big questions around ageing creatively. This could mean helping members and member organisations explore in greater depth what their own unique contribution to the network might be, whether that's through offering lived experience, leadership or insight into best practice. This could mean helping members actively strengthen connections between groups to build new collaborative partnerships, stronger funding consortia, and set-up project 'spinoffs'. This could mean setting up CAN as an experimental space for testing and integrating evaluation practices. This could mean positioning CAN as a funder- and policy-facing sounding board to help reframe and critique developments in the Age Sector.

This is nothing short of imagining a role for CAN and its members in 'growing the sector' i.e. increasing the opportunities available for everyone to find their wellbeing and creativity story at the right time for them. This needs to be driven, supported and enabled by older adults themselves.

6. A-ha moments

People don’t put limits around ‘creativity’

There is little value to imposing boundaries around what creativity is. People don’t do that naturally themselves. They see creativity in cooking, in sport, in gardening, in the everyday.

We asked M to tell us about something creative that she does that she would like others to know about. She talked about cooking: *“When I was young we had no money. My grandmother had 13 children, she could make a meal out of nothing. That’s stayed with me. It’s not about ‘fun’, it’s part of me - doing something with leftovers or whatever’s in the cupboard and then bringing people together to sit and eat and talk over a glass of wine.”*

A participant in the creative ageing storytelling project talked about taking up walking football: *“The best creative thing I found since I retired is walking football [...] I don't want to sit in the house. I don't want to sit watching television. I don't want to go to the pub every day. I need something more than that, something to give me fulfilment. I’m glad I’ve found that. Because it's not over when you retire. It’s not over. No way!”*

Evaluation of creative ageing activity can’t assume that the arts are exceptional.

Social connection must be integral

Evaluators and facilitators of arts and cultural experience naturally want to know what it is about a particular kind of activity or artform that might be transformative for an individual or a group.

A group organiser said: *“It would be good to understand what’s going on with the creative activity itself. I get the benefits of the social connection, this feels quite clear, but what’s happening with the music? What works?”*

But when we talked to people, they described social connection as integral to the kinds of individual change that can happen when we engage creatively with the world. They described a natural drive towards being social, and a natural desire to make sense of their creative experiences with, in relation to, or for other people. They showed us that creativity and any sense-making about it *are* social activities.

P talked about what he gets out of being involved in theatre-making: *“it's all part of being involved in a team. Collaborative, collegiate effort is something that I do particularly enjoy.*”

M talked about what she had got out the CAN group, reflecting that it had coincided with a time in her life when she felt she felt she needed to embrace and learn different skills: *“this group has been about communication and sharing different ideas, it doesn’t matter what you produce, it’s about what makes you feel good.”*

An organisation representative summed up the issue when she told us what she really wanted to understand from evaluation: *“What is it about the collective, collaborative, visual, spatial, creative*

activity that people are doing with other people in a space (the whole thing) that is responsible for the benefits that they can see - the benefits are not really the interesting thing."

Evaluation, like creativity itself, needs to centre the social aspects of sense-making activity.

Some forms of evaluation will shut down sense-making

Organisers of creative ageing activity described moments where an evaluation tool has failed them.

For example, evaluation tools that are designed to be completed before and after a set of activities may impose artificial time constraints on change.

An organiser told us why establishing a baseline with participants was tricky: *"sometimes people go backwards because at the start they don't know what they don't know."*

Another talked about how, in their work with people with dementia, externally imposed evaluation time-frames seemed to 'clash' with now the participants themselves experienced time - they couldn't capture the potential for benefits in the moment or as a result of extended relationships being developed: *"Where do you start? Where do you end? Do you just pick a moment in time?"*

Sometimes a tool itself is simply not right. We asked CAN members to try out a variety of wellbeing measurement scales. One talked about attending a completing a mood scale before and after attending an event: *"you could get the impression it was a bad exhibition because you came out more upset. The mood scale was lower, but that's not the point. It was deeply moving. It wasn't the right tool."*

Evaluation needs to embrace emotional complexity and it must be sensitive to the context in which creative experience happens and the time-frames that matter to participants.

People naturally tell wellbeing stories

People may never have spoken their creative wellbeing story out loud, but when you invite them in the right way, they are generally able and willing to tell it. We found some common narrative arcs to these stories.

These included a natural inclination to identify a need for, or a potential barrier to wellbeing (often linked to a moment of transition in their life) that had led to a prompt to engage in creative activity which they then associated with change, growth or even redemption.

M told us: *"In a previous life, a long, long time ago now, it seems, I worked in the government legal service for nearly 40 years, retired in 2011, then never having done anything creative whatsoever, I discovered, well, first, primarily dancing... That got me started on a completely new life, a new path, a new passion. And then it moved to writing. It moved on to getting involved in a bit of sculpture. I'm also now doing a singing course. Quite simply, it has changed my life completely. It's given me new passions, I suppose, a new purpose in what I want to do, what I want to achieve."*

P told us: *“I don’t think it would have happened so much if it hadn’t been for COVID. My family was always telling me off for going out and about on my own – but there was no one around, so off I went all round Oxford and took lots of pictures. I enjoy finding out about things. A lot of people hadn’t done anything arty since school but it’s amazing how the group progressed, it was a social thing, you didn’t have to go out but you could have a laugh about what you’ve done.”*

Evaluation can give people the tools to tell those wellbeing stories.

Capturing moments of transformation…

When it works well, evaluation can itself be transformative.

A meeting of the Banbury heritage group included a presentation about a nineteenth-century social housing pioneer. We ran a simple exercise afterwards designed to provoke reflection on the meaning the group might be having for participants. A participant described how he felt inspired now to actively connect what he had just learned to his own experience with housing and his faith and ministry by producing a sermon about the topic.

Several other attendees who had been reflecting together to answer our questions, described feeling motivated to meet up to attend another event being held at the weekend on the subject. As they left they were still exchanging telephone numbers.

Evaluation can be as meaningful for those involved in the creative activity as it is for organisations and funders.

…and failure

But evaluation has to also be able to capture moments of difficulty or failure.

Several examples struck us. The first is from an early meeting of the Banbury heritage group, where we were exploring what had brought participants to the group. P talked about her extreme loneliness following a bereavement, her sense of feeling on (she called it this) a ‘cliff edge’. She was looking for something that would pull her back from that edge. We noted that she was not in subsequent meetings we attended.

Another is from a discussion we facilitated that, again, explored the beginnings of the creative wellbeing story for people. One participant listened a lot but spoke little during the discussion, but approached us afterwards to reveal a deeply painful personal ‘backstory’ and her sense of how arts and cultural experiences in a group were helping her through that difficult moment.

Evaluation must be able to cope when experiences are not what people need or when people need to subvert the methods and tools evaluators provide.

Don’t mention the ‘E’ word

People are used to evaluation feeling like a tick-box exercise or a prompt for praise. Just mentioning the word ‘evaluation’ sometimes feels like a shorthand request for this and people respond accordingly.

One organisational leader told us: *“Participants are ‘wise’, they usually understand the underlying reason for an evaluation if it is to demonstrate to funders, and they answer accordingly.”*

Another said: *“They [participants] know what it is for, they have a bit of a laugh over it, fill it in with good grace, but…”*

And a third said: *“It can be difficult to get below the ‘effusive praise’ [...] I’d like to dig a little deeper.”*

As a result, facilitators (and evaluators) can be ambivalent about the role and place of evaluation in a project. This may also be because they know that participants have had bad experiences with evaluation in the past, for example, where questions about ‘loneliness’ or mental ill health, have been insensitively phrased. This can mean that evaluation is introduced apologetically or not at all.

Evaluation needs allies and critical friends, not cheerleaders or apologists.