Using digital inclusion and co-production to reduce loneliness and isolation: Working with older people through supportive creative arts-based connections.

Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance; whose mission is to provide support to performers and creators by developing and facilitating their creative lifestyles, enabled an online community to establish and thrive through a creative arts-based programme.

Who are Trinity Laban?
Trinity Laban's overall focus is to equip people with skills that positively impact society; by focusing on digital accessibility they ensured that those less likely to take part were fully included, creating connections, increasing social bonds and given a safe place for expression.

Trinity Laban's Arts Café
When the Covid pandemic hit, like so many services, Trinity Laban's Arts Café was forced to move online. After emerging from lockdown restrictions, Trinity Laban made a conscious decision to review what they could learn from the experience and how an Arts Café might thrive in a digitally inclusive space.

Trinity Laban was interested in looking into whether the same bonds that are formed from meeting in-person could be re-created from meeting online. Plus, they wanted to reach the people who have limited or no access to technology and digital tools.

Questions they wanted to answer
Q. How could we use a similar format to try and reach more isolated people?
Q. Could an alternative online space reach the people who used to attend in-person sessions but were no longer able to?

Setting the scene for an inclusive experience
The online Arts Café looked to replicate an in-person session by providing participation packs and technological support.

- Participation packs: tea, coffee and art materials provided by post increased feelings of being part of something and strengthened feelings of connection.
- Technological support: access to technology and full support to get online was provided by a specialist digital inclusion partner.

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How sessions were structured

The sessions were scheduled to start at a certain time, but the online space would be open for people to arrive when they liked beforehand to check in and chat.

- Weekly Arts Cafe, 1.5 hours over 14 weeks
- Over 20 participants signed up
- Workshops delivered by 4 different artists; a music leader, co-creation specialist, visual artist, dance and film artist
- Co-creation focus in all sessions, aiming to support the group to develop agency and voice

Taking a co-design approach

It was important to co-design the Arts Café with the participants. Trinity Laban worked with the GPM team, who delivered a co-production session sharing a variety of tools and methods to engage and involve people, increasing confidence and inclusion. The sessions included Power Sharing, creating an equal space where people felt heard and valued, using the "Time to Think" approach, and how to bring the whole spectrum of co-production principles and values into their online space. The group created guidelines together and used online tools such as an interactive whiteboard to share what they wanted and needed to feel welcome and able to take part.

How the group fully embraced their online world...

The co-designed guidelines helped the group to build a space where people's vulnerabilities were considered and respected. They were able to sing on mute or dance with their cameras off, until they felt confident enough to visibly join in and show themselves fully.

What was the outcome?

For many members of the group, the online sessions acted as a stepping stone to returning to activities and groups in person, by re-building their confidence. It also provided an alternative space for people to share their creative work with others in a way that they hadn't previously tried.

The members' confidence around digital technology grew throughout the programme - peer support and encouragement around the technology happened naturally, with people helping each other to access and participate in the sessions. The participants experienced a journey of learning new skills and developing personally, as well as making new friends.

It felt like an online family and the group facilitator reflected that the space became a place for people to do something real, get to know each other, and feel part of the organisation and community.

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What members of the group had to say...

'I look forward to my Tuesday I must admit, it's a place to step out of my comfort zone if only a little, start that process off, do something with other people, have the continuity of every week this is happening'

'I can still enjoy nature, it might be different... but I can still enjoy nature in a different way... and almost slowing down and stopping and observing more'

'I was feeling like I was losing all this - what made me me'

'I find it very therapeutic doing this these things, the music, the art, the movement'

Top tips for anyone delivering a digitally inclusive service!

- Find a community partner that can help and support you to get set up.

- Allocate time either side of the sessions for participants to join, and time to debrief afterwards.

- Send participants accompanying materials in advance via the post to replicate an in-person session as much as possible and encourage feelings of connection and membership.

- Open the online meeting in advance of the start of the session to recreate the in-person welcome and arrival time at the start of in-person sessions. This allows time for questions, having a cup of tea and a general chat.

- Invite people to say something and share their voice right at the beginning of the session – ask an opening question or reflection or conduct an appreciative inquiry.

- Let people know what's happening in the next session and how to prepare.

- Have something tangible that the group is working towards as a collective. This can encourage joint ownership and co-creation.

To receive bespoke support tailored to your needs, aspirations and aims, get in touch with the Good Practice Mentor team! We provide support by sharing the Ageing Better learning and best practice around how to reach, involve and connect with older people in local communities. Email GPM@syha.co.uk for a chat.

With thanks to Trinity Laban.

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