

COMMUNITY ENGAGED ARTS PRACTICE



A GUIDE TO CREATING PEER SUPPORT AND COLLABORATION STRATEGIES FOR SENIORS

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ARTS &
HEALTH
PROJECT
HEALTHY
AGING
THROUGH
THE ARTS

Introduction

I have been the lead artist for a seniors' group within the *Arts & Health Project: Healthy Aging Through The Arts* since the project's inception in 2006. The following guide offers some insights my group and I have enjoyed over our eight years of work together. It is also based upon my research into arts-based practices in public environments, conducted initially at the University of British Columbia and, currently, at Simon Fraser University. Research is conducted for many reasons. In my case, the reason was simple – after 40 years of teaching in a lot of different contexts, working as a lead artist in the A & H Project has been the most exciting, the most challenging, and the most rewarding of my experiences! I wanted to reflect on why this work has been so inspiring and about how it might be most effectively taken up and shared with others.

Background

Quirk-e (the queer imaging & writing collective for elders) began as a traditional writing group. I was the teacher, and so I called the shots! This is not a 'wrong' way to work; in fact, teachers in short-term projects need to be quite directive in order for the group to achieve its artistic goals. In this longer-term project, however, relationships and responsibilities have changed over time. We have ended up in a different place – a fluid dance that constantly reflects the subtle interplay between the group as a single entity (with its own voice), the group as a collection of individuals (many discrete voices), and the leaders of the group (me and my assistant, Kelsey Blair).



Claire Robson (on right) and Kelsey Blair with Quirk-e's Memory Boxes

We have all learned both to step forward and to step back, to take responsibility and to trust that others will take it, to talk and to listen, to make critical and affirming observations. And it is this dance that has become crucial to our work together. Collaboration and peer support are central to our practices, not just 'add ons.'

About this guide

In this document, I hope to offer concrete and practical ways that artists can work to build strong groups – groups in which members support each other and engage in exciting collaborations. The more traditional teacher of creative work such as dance, writing, or visual art is used to asking questions like these: How can my students' work be strengthened? What techniques and skills might they find helpful right now? What progressions can I build into my curriculum to develop strong, confident artists? How can I offer critique and feedback that is both constructive and challenging? You will continue to ask these questions, but you will need to add more as you stay responsive to the 'voice of the group,' which is greater than the voices of its individual members. This kind of listening is different from taking a show of hands, and certainly radically different from listening to what the most vocal and outspoken members have to say, or suggest. It is a deep listening, which requires humility and strength of purpose as you answer new questions as honestly as you can:

Clearly, there is no blueprint for this work. Each group and each of its individual members is different. Each group will be different, week-by-week, as it evolves. At the beginning of each year, there will be optimism, enthusiasm, and new members to integrate. At the end of the year, there will be anxiety, as the annual showcase approaches and nerves are frayed. Rather than a blueprint then, I offer some broad guidelines, in the hope that they will be helpful and transferrable into your practice.

What does my group need now? Is this different from what they say they want? What is the general level of confidence and enthusiasm? What interesting directions are emerging from the group's work? How can the group be challenged? How can the group be made safe? What is working and what is not? Who is confused and frustrated right now, and why? Who might help them? Whose work has provided an exemplum that can be shared and celebrated? What opportunities have emerged for collaborations?

Community Engaged Arts Practice

What community art is not

- Community engaged art is not about individuals making art side by side. For sure, there are times when the people in your group will need to work alone, and not every project needs to be collaborative, but in community art, even independent work contributes to the life of the group, and is informed by the group's identity. We often begin our group by hearing what someone has just written – work that may inspire new work that talks back, builds upon, or affirms the work just heard.
- Community art is not your typical art class, where 1) the teacher frontloads some basic techniques 2) the class experiment with these techniques, and 3) the teacher critiques their efforts.
- Community art cannot be contained by the traditional 'curriculum,' in which outcomes are predetermined and then student 'performance' is assessed.

What community art is

- Community art depends upon peer support and collaboration in the original sense of the word *depends*. It *hangs upon it*, like fruit on a tree.
- Community art is disobedient. As your group evolves and becomes more complex, it will jump over the boundaries of your thinking, your practice, and your assumptions about age, art, and ability.
- Community art revisits the original meaning of the word 'curriculum' – a *coursing*, like an electric current.
- Community art is emergent. It is at its best when new outcomes - results that no one ever dreamed of - surprise and delight the artist, the facilitator, and their audiences.
- Community art extends beyond workshop hours. Connecting with others helps elders in the groups overcome isolation and depression (two of the main complaints reported by older individuals).
- Community art builds confidence and agency as people discover new skills.
- Above all, community art builds strong communities. Because of their collaborations, many of the seniors in our groups are more likely to reach out to others who are unable to attend, say because of ill health. They also help each other with such things as house moves, pet care, or sick visits and meet socially at birthday parties and celebrations. They support each other through times of difficulty and times of joy.

Though robust social networks do develop naturally, it is essential that seniors' workers and artists understand how to help the process along. The community artist crosses boundaries to enter new ground. S/he knows how to teach painting (or dance, or digital video) – but also how to explore a highly volatile interpersonal terrain.

This does not mean that s/he becomes a therapist, a nurse, or a friend. Indeed, it is important not to take too much on, to absorb pain or depression, to make promises that can't be kept, or give some individuals much more time and attention than others. As a lead artist, you will be working with a seniors' worker (attached to the community centre) who is highly skilled in offering individual support and assembling local resources to help seniors with specific problems, questions, or challenges. Instead of trying to 'solve problems,' (which may or may not be solvable), I try always to focus on the work, in the belief that this is the best way I can help people understand and work through what life has offered. As artists, we know how to help the work get stronger, and over the years, I have seen that when this occurs, the person who wrote that piece becomes stronger too.

It is perhaps more accurate to describe the community artist as a community *architect* – someone who creates a design for the group and oversees its construction, adjusting the plans as the work goes along. Hopefully, the following ideas and strategies will be helpful in this endeavor.

Collaborations Outside Group Time

At the beginning of their work together, my *group* was more a collection of individuals – a few knew each other, but many did not. As time passed, I began to notice that they were beginning to meet outside workshop time, and to call on each other for help. One of the first instances was a cry for help from someone who was hospitalized after a fall. "I'm so tired of people calling me Mrs. and asking about my husband," she emailed. "Bring gay regalia!" So we did. Members of our group showed up to visit with rainbow flags and Pride buttons.

It's not just in times of crisis that communities matter. It's common now for people in our group to work in each other's homes, to meet in coffee shops, or to stay on after workshop hours to help each other out, or complete fun projects. These collaborations go beyond the tasks and experiences I have designed, and I don't even hear about some of them till after the fact. One of the more fun examples involved six or seven of the group boarding the same bus to ride down Hastings Street. They took pictures and made notes (with hidden cameras and notebooks), then made a video of their ethnographic findings. They didn't tell me beforehand because they thought I might get into trouble if they were arrested! In this way, the members of Quirk-e have begun to discover their own artistic directions.

In order for all this to happen, there are some enabling structures the lead artist might set in place:



Contact Information

At the very least, it is important that every member has up to date contact information for everyone in the group (addresses, phone numbers, and emails). It's a good idea to hand this out as hard copy as well as to send it electronically, since not everyone has a computer or is good at file management. A group email list is extremely helpful, so participants can just hit reply all to engage with a group conversation. Needless to say, when it comes to sharing personal information, requests for privacy should always be invited and respected.



Members of The #20 Bus Project About to Board

Circles of Care

Seniors are more prone to miss sessions, and some find it difficult to understand or remember what has been said. Feeling that they are 'lost' about what's going on can make for high levels of anxiety. Many host artists in the project are used to sending out email summaries, reminders, and copies of materials. However, it can also be helpful to establish circles of care.

In smaller groups, it might be enough to make sure that every individual has a *study buddy* who will take notes or pass on handouts or information to a partner who missed a session. In our large group of 26, I designed *Circles of Care*, by having everyone identify three or four people they feel comfortable with (some names may appear in more than one circle). Members within a circle of care might notice when someone in their circle doesn't show up, or seems unhappy. They might call or email, or just show up with ice cream!

Here below is a handout about the Circle of Care in my group:

Keeping people close...

We all want to be held close, and as we age together, it gets easier to fall from the group's web of connection. These little circles of connectedness may help everyone stay in touch, even when they can't make it to the group.

If someone is in your circle of care, you might...

Notice when someone is away.

Give them a call.

Send them an email and let them know what they missed.

Increasingly, some of us need a ride on Wednesday mornings, and, yes - a phone call to remind us that it's Wednesday today!

Here's a first draft of our care circles. It's okay if names are repeated. We can inhabit several circles of care!

I'm happy to add names to the list.

Feel free to let me know if you want to be in a different place....



Collaboration Inside Group Time

Check-ins

Check-ins offer a quick and effective way to find out what's going on with everyone in the group.

Purpose. Members of the group and facilitators learn things about each other that go beneath the superficial. As trust is built, sharing about problems, joys, and concerns becomes increasingly intimate. This intimate sharing of information helps the seniors identify meaningful themes for their work as well as building strong social connections.

Method. Each participant is given a certain amount of time to speak about how they are feeling at that time, without judgment, response (including helpful advice!), or interruption. Seniors often feel invisible in our culture, and knowing that others will listen carefully to what they have to say (even if it isn't cheerful and positive) can be something they look forward to all week. The artist or seniors' worker can facilitate this process according to the group's needs at the time. Parameters are as follows:

1. Length. It is very important to state the maximum time available, and to stick to it fairly closely. This maintains equity, keeps comments focused, and prevents over-talking. Even with large groups, or when time is short, a lot can be communicated in one minute, and groups can become adept at using their time well. Timing can be monitored by the facilitator or by a member of the group who can simply announce when time is up.
2. Topic.
 - a. Check-ins may be general. For instance, in a small group, members might share what's going on for them that week at the beginning of every session.
 - b. They can also be more specific. Instances include checking in after holidays or breaks (which can be both fun and difficult for many seniors).
 - c. Check-ins can also be used to *poll* the group on issues about the work in hand, for instance, a quick 'share' as a way to debrief a show or arts experience.
 - d. They are also a useful way to begin group feedback and critique. When everybody quickly lays their cards on the table about a piece of work or an issue, it helps to avoid one or two vocal people setting the tone as quieter people keep silent.



Respectful communications

As your participants work together about issues and art they care deeply for, it is not unusual to find that personality conflicts and differences emerge.

1. Avoid triangulation. If someone comes to you with a complaint, ask if they have spoken with the person that they are complaining about. This should always be the first suggested step. Offer to mediate only if you feel it is absolutely necessary.
2. Everyone must be encouraged to speak only for him or her self. It is never okay for someone to suggest that they can speak for others.
3. My group drew up guidelines for respectful communication. We first had a whole group discussion in which we brainstormed what worked and what didn't, then I pulled their ideas into a list, which we discussed once more before producing the following document:

Some Dos and Don'ts for Communication

DO

- Wait to be acknowledged before speaking
- Speak one at a time
- Speak only for yourself
- Try to be positive

DON'T

- Interrupt
- Speak over other people
- Speak for others

IF YOU HAVE A COMPLAINT

- Think carefully about what bugs you and what you'd like to change. It's easier for the other person to hear you if what you say is clear and specific.
- Raise concerns with the person or people who you want to make that change, rather than someone you feel might be 'on your side.'
- If you really can't do that, you can raise complaints with your lead artist or seniors' worker. However, we'll need your permission to share the conversation/complaint if we are to do anything.
- Let's avoid 'splitting' and triangulation.
- Serious complaints can be taken to the project manager.

The more that group processes can be discussed and aired in this way in order to produce consensus and ownership – a sense that the group has its own culture and ways of operating - the more cohesive and empowered the group will become.

Technology

Some groups, including mine, have used technologies with great success (these include blogs, wikis, and social media sites such as Facebook). Again, though these do allow for vibrant conversation and keep people connected even when they can't attend sessions in person, they can exclude those without computers, or without the skill and confidence to learn the technology.

You may be surprised at how little some of your folks know about file management, email attachments, or even the need for antivirus programs (be warned!). It's a good idea to conduct a simple initial needs assessment by handing out a form that asks these kinds of questions. Once you understand what they do and do not know, you can run short workshops to build the skills that are needed for your work. I'd make the following recommendations, based on my experience:

Break down the information and present it in small chunks and easy steps. Keep it short – some will be quickly overwhelmed. Use a digital projector and screen so that they can follow along with your computer screen as you walk them through it. Have simple handouts they can take away (including screen shots). Use more skilled members as teacher's aides, working one on one with less skilled members. Remember that seniors are sometimes more prone to panic. Stay very calm and always be patient with their frustration. Revisit the material and offer opportunities to try new skills out immediately - they may understand at the time of the session, but need reminders and refreshers, and they need to put learning into practice to really understand it.

Above all, make the workshops relevant and meaningful. The more you can relate them to the work in hand, the better. An example may help...

As we were working on a joint anthology, I felt that it would make life easier if my group knew how to use the *reviewing* functions in Word. First I found out who understood and used this function, and who did not. I then paired up those who knew and those who didn't, as I made a short presentation, digitally projecting my desktop as I used a one-paragraph document to show how to accept changes, and how to reject them, as they followed along. Then I sent out, by email, a short and easy exercise testing these skills. The challenge was to accept and reject changes, save the results, and send the file to me by email.

Most of the group were successful. Some were not. I worked one on one with those who were still experiencing difficulty and also teamed them up with more experienced members of the group (research shows that those who have learned a skill recently are often best at explaining it to others).

Almost all of my group can now use the review function effectively. A few still find it difficult. It is important to accept that not everyone can master every skill. When they can't, make them feel okay about it (humour helps) and find alternatives (with some, I still work with hard copy when editing).

Group Work

One of the biggest assets of the Arts and Health Project is its timeline. Instead of a typical short-term arts experience, this project has extended over nine months each year for several consecutive years. A long timeline such as this is important for seniors as some of them take longer to learn new skills, and it allows them the time they need to learn to work together.

The lead artist should pay particular attention to how the seniors' working groups are built (who works with who), and to carefully consider how group work can be conducted with the best chance for real collaboration and success over time.

It's my belief that we haven't thought enough about group work, in our schools, universities, and community organizations. We often randomly break people into groups to *discuss* certain preset questions, appoint a scribe, and someone to *report back*. Then we sit back and hope that things will be okay! In reality, group work can be highly frustrating and unproductive for people of any age, especially when a few people dominate the conversation, and others wander off task and waste time. A key building block for successful collaboration is the creation and monitoring of effective working groups from the outset of the project.



The following guidelines may help:

1. Decide whether group or individual work is appropriate to the creative task in hand, and remember that not every decision need be endlessly negotiated! Knowing when to call the shots and when to offer time for group process is a key skill for the lead artist.

For instance, though the general artistic direction of the project will change and emerge as the group works together, it can be problematic to put this to a vote, or even open it up to discussion. Lead artists have the experience and know-how necessary to challenge seniors with new and exciting directions. Though they should always pay attention to the group's emergent needs, the group depends on their expertise to set creative directions.

An example that illustrates this distinction:

- The lead artist decides that the theme of *Journey* will be explored through a specific medium (say improvisational dance). This is non-negotiable in the sense that the group works within the creative vision and expertise of its lead artist (closed decision, though it may build upon earlier work and should build upon a sense of the group's needs and abilities).
- S/he chooses to open the project with individual writing about important journeys (closed decision, based on artistic pedagogy).
- These are read and discussed, as the group teases out and records common themes and interesting ideas (open decision, but with facilitation). The lead artist design artistic experiences (i.e. create a four minute improvised dance with a partner) in which these themes are creatively explored (closed decision that opens free artistic practice).



- The group discusses and critiques the products, as it considers what might be presented at the end-of-year showcase (open decision with facilitation).
 - The lead artist makes final suggestions and critiques as the work is revised. Peer critique is also employed. A fine line must be trodden between supporting the individual artist's decisions about his or her work, and maintaining artistic standards and integrity. These are productive conversations! (facilitated creative process).
 - The lead artist considers practical issues (such as staging, transport, invitations to visiting artists who might help the project). Though s/he might consult the group around artistic matters (costumes, visuals, script), s/he is protective of the group's creative time and tries to free them from involvement in minor decisions (closed decisions with consultation).
 - If decisions become controversial, the lead artist must be willing to act as a firm leader. It is okay to say, "We can't reach consensus here, and all these points of view have merit. However, we've spent enough time on this, and I have decided that Option B serves us best" (closed decision).
2. It is tempting for strong personalities to take over process, and for the rest of the group to let these people *get the job done*. However, true group work means that all voices and opinions are heard and respected. In the long run, overzealous leaders incur resentment and prevent others from being fully involved. For group work to be sustainable, it is important to stress that though it may take longer in the short term, long-term progress occurs when everyone feels heard before decisions are made. Each group needs to recognize its responsibility to ensure that each person's point of view is heard and acknowledged. Everyone needs to know that they have a responsibility to speak up.
 3. Consensus is different from a majority vote. While minor decisions can be put to a vote, it is worth having groups pursue consensus on major decisions, as they negotiate compromises that everyone can live with. Once consensus is reached, it is necessary that everyone buys in. No harbored resentments!
 4. It can be useful to allocate tasks, such as time keeping, note taking, and simply keeping the conversation on track.



5. Try to rotate groups, rather than allow people to stay with their friends. This will promote peer support and collaboration, as people get to work with those they don't know as well. This can be achieved in several ways:
 - a. Establish groups by purpose or intention and invite people to join for that reason
 - b. Ask the group to work with people they have not worked with before
 - c. Choose the groups yourself, looking for mixed abilities, or personalities, or people who are likely to work well together
6. Set meaningful tasks and be clear about what outcomes you'd like the group to achieve. For instance, you might break into groups of four and have the members share, in turn, the story of an important journey they took (be sure to set a time limit for each narration, and remind them when time is up). The group might then brainstorm for ten minutes the overarching themes and commonalities of their journeys and compile a list. They might then discuss this list for a while, to refine it and consider which themes grab them most. They might end by voting for each theme, in order to choose their top three. The lead artist would maintain timings, and check that the groups are on task and maintaining equitable conversations. At the end, the lead artist could bring everyone back together in the larger circle to share and discuss these suggestions. The whole group might discuss these for a while, then decide (perhaps by vote) on a final three, which might be the group's new artistic direction. The lead artist might then set a common exercise to everyone: *e.g. Choose one of these three themes. Write for 20 minutes about a time you stood at a crossroad, took a bold step, or reached some kind of destination.*
7. Be willing to say if you notice something that is challenging group process. It's okay to say something like "I noticed that you made a decision last week, and haven't stuck to it. Why is that?"
8. Move from small (partner work) to large (groups of more than four) to allow group skills, trust, and communication to develop gradually over time.



More Collaboration

Collaboration with other community groups

Look for new and unusual opportunities for the seniors to meet, share information and work with others. Risk taking is a big part of forging new peer support networks, and you might be surprised at how people who seem polar opposites can get along. The picture below shows members of my group (who all identify as LGBT) meeting with another A&H group of elderly Chinese women, few of who speak English. Though these two groups seemed worlds apart on the surface (one queer identified and one whose members said they had never met anyone who was openly gay), and they didn't even speak each other's language, they had a wonderful afternoon together. As you can see in the photograph below, the puppets made by the Chinese women acted as excellent intermediaries as we all sat in a large circle to chat. With the help of an A&H translator, we talked and joked about our lives and our respective art. This was an extremely unexpected friendship, but one that has endured. When the two groups meet, there are waves, smiles, and loud applause for each other's performances.

Of course, older people can also be important mentors within their own demographic

It's important for all of us, old or young, to feel that we are contributing, as well as being helped or done for by others. Old people often have wisdom and knowledge to share, and younger people can learn from their stories.

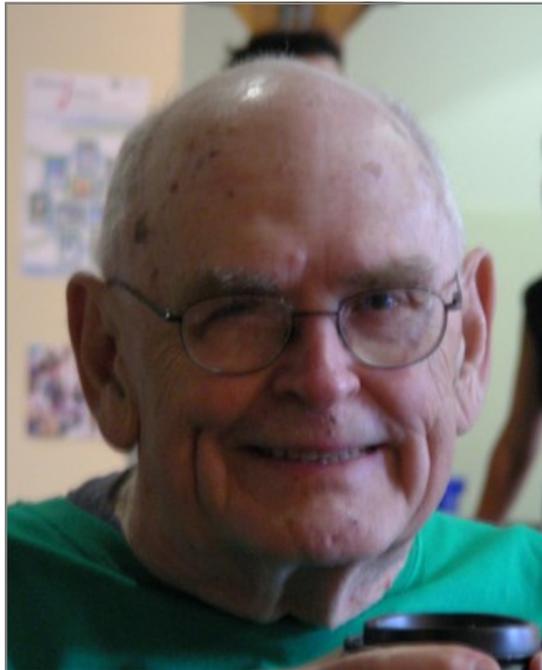
The members of my group recently ran a three-hour writing workshop from 50 queer and questioning youth and 30 youth workers. Some of the youth were going through difficult times with their families and their lives. Hearing the stories of older people who faced the same challenges and survived was hugely important for them, and as they came up at the end to shake hands, hug, ask questions, or tell their own stories, the members of my group knew that they had made a difference.



Members of the Strathcona Project Showing Their Puppets to Participants from Britannia

Collaboration with Community Partners

It is part of the Arts & Health Project's mission to showcase the seniors' work. All the groups in the project are supported by community or seniors' centers and these centers showcase the seniors' work as well as support the annual project year-end exhibition and performance. It is also possible to forge connections with other organizations such as schools, institutes of higher education, libraries, or organizations interested in oral histories, cultural, political, religious or ethnic activities. We have found that finding and connecting with varied audiences creates strong group cohesion and agency. It takes time and energy to build a robust network, but it pays dividends over the long haul. On a practical note, such partnerships help show potential funders that your group has real impact in the community.



Bill Morrow – One of Our “Living Books”

Participants in my group have taken part in a Human Library project at the Vancouver Public Library, where they became “living books” in order to share their rich and varied experiences with their “readers.” Member Gayle Roberts was principal author on a report completed by The Canadian Professional Association for Transgender Health. Member Paula Stromberg has visited Cambodia and Africa to chronicle the lives of sex workers in third world countries. We’ve presented to thousands of Vancouver residents over our eight years together - at the University of British Columbia and at Simon Fraser University, at conferences, in schools, community centers, Pride events, local cafes, and local organizations, such as the Grandview Drugs and Alcohol Coalition. Members of the group have protested homophobia in seniors’ residences, spoken up for AD/dementia sufferers in the health care system and campaigned for gay refugees whose lives are in danger. Though many are physically and mentally frail, and several are experiencing cognitive change, I think they would all see themselves as making a difference by contributing what they can to the group, from designing fliers and offering critique, to speaking on the stage.



Seniors as Resource

Seniors know a lot.

It is important that seniors regard themselves as an important resource – a pool of wisdom, knowledge, and experience that can be shared with others. Always try to involve seniors in the work of the community.

Consider the following questions:

- Might one of the group do this job instead of you? Whether it's putting out snacks, making a phone call, troubleshooting a problem, making a request, or writing a grant, some of your seniors can probably do it, and you can sure use their help! Members of my group have written two successful grants in the past two years. Without them, the group wouldn't even exist.
- Where can achievements, publications, performance or artwork be published and shown? (Schools, cafes, local businesses).
- How can seniors teach, help, and support each other, both during and after sessions? Who has skills and how might those skills be shared?
- What projects best lend themselves to collaboration? How might this collaboration be effectively structured?
- How much are *you talking*, and how much are *they doing*?
- How much challenge is productive and how much is stressful?

A Note on Changing and Aging

The seniors you work with will not get any younger – indeed, the reverse is true, in that some probably already have physical and cognitive ailments and limitations, and some may develop them as the group ages together. There are many ways in which the lead artist can help individuals stay connected:

- Speak up, speak clearly, and make sure people who are hard of hearing sit close to you when you are giving important information.
- Send out reminders of what you said, or pass out handouts.
- Break instructions down into chunks, and make sure to repeat it. Too much information at one time can make for huge anxiety!
- Check for comprehension. Pick up anyone who seems to be having trouble understanding. If many people seem unclear, start again - and more slowly.
- Make sure that people who need to sit down have a chair to sit on (for instance, when you gather round to see something).
- Build in breaks.
- Make sure that you cater to individual needs with creative responses (such as writing down a script on index cards for someone in a play who has difficulty remembering).



- Strike a balance between challenge (meaningful tasks are the best antidote to physical and cognitive aging) and support (which extends the possibility of continued engagement).

Again, the members of the group can be an excellent resource. It can work well to pair someone with skills with someone who needs to learn them or who can benefit from them. Perhaps some examples will best illustrate this point:

Bill was not feeling great about his writing. At 84, he was finding it hard to concentrate and worried that he was holding the group's work back. He approached the lead artist to say that though he loved the group, he was thinking he should drop out, since he didn't feel he was contributing much anymore. The lead artist told him that his story was far too important to be lost, and paired him up with Judy, an extremely shy member of the group who was an excellent graphic artist. Together, they created a graphic memoir that told Bill's story in pictures and words. Both people benefitted, and Bill is still in the group.

Maggie and River were both going through a tough time. River was in constant pain, and Maggie was increasingly forgetful. They complained, individually, to the lead artist that they were feeling disengaged. She told them that she wanted them to co-create a twenty-minute performance for the end of year showcase, because the group needed them to show what it was like to hurt, and to forget things. They threw themselves into this project and had quite a bit of fun with it. River still hurt and Maggie still forgot things, but the audience loved their performances, and they felt reconnected with their creative energy.

Bridget has dementia. She told the group about her diagnosis, and asked for help. If anyone sees her off track, they remind her what she's meant to be doing. She feels safe in the group, and everyone helps keep track of her keys, her purse, and her writing folder. She and her partner have written a poem in two voices about Bridget's illness. It's hard for them to read it without crying, but they still do, because they want other people to know what it's like for a couple when one person has dementia.

John was very discouraged. He was not highly skilled at digital editing and so was having trouble completing his digital video for the showcase. His partner has Alzheimer's and he is doing a lot of caretaking. His own health is not great. His lead artist asked Richard, a highly proficient veteran member of the group if he would help. Richard went round to John's one evening and together they completed John's project.



Some Final Tips and Suggestions

Ongoing support, whether from circles of care, the lead artist, or the entire group can be very simple and practical. Here are some simple suggestions:

- Maintain a stash of cards and postage stamps. It's easy to pass it round the group for everyone to sign and send a little message to someone who needs support.
- Have a time for announcements – interesting events, opportunities, or articles in the newspaper.
- Encourage ride-sharing.
- Start a phone tree for such things as bad weather cancellations.
- Celebrate birthdays and achievements (with song, laughter, and applause).
- Invite people to make inspirational opening offerings (a reading/showing of their work, or someone else's).

Don't Forget That You Have Needs Too!

Remember that you have needs too.

Being a lead artist is demanding work, in terms of time and emotional/physical/psychic energy. Working with seniors can feel like a big responsibility – you'll hear some sad stories, and you'll get very attached. I have found it important to *set some boundaries*, as they say. No kidding!

Be clear with your group from the outset about the kinds of email, requests, or phone calls you *will* respond to, those you *might*, and those you *probably will not*. Members of my group know that they can always email me with a question if they are confused, and that I like them to contact me if they can't get to the workshop (we always run through who's away, and why – and remind ourselves to call or email if necessary). They also know that I read most of their online conversations and chat, but may not comment or respond. They are highly respectful about making requests for help outside of workshop time and know that in practice, I don't have too much time to help one-on-one in our large group. They are used to signing up on a sheet a week or so ahead for this kind of help.

It's helpful, healthy, and productive to talk to others working in the field, and as an Arts & Health artist, you'll have opportunities to talk with other lead artists and the project managers, and to attend workshops in which ideas and skills are shared. While we look forward to the new ideas and initiatives that you and your seniors come up with, we are always ready to answer questions and share ideas.

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- Roundhouse Community Arts & Rec. Centre
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- Sunset Community Association
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