Chaos: A Co-Creation

Introduction

Today we are going to speak about our experience of our yearlong collaborative project between Masters level illustration students and participants of social service provider The Chaos Group, which was initiated to explore the potential of illustration to serve as a tool for exploring mental health. Although there have been numerous personal and collective outcomes of this project, one tangible result of this process is this book I am holding up here, called 'CHAOS: A Co-Creation', so today we will talk largely about the co-produced methods involved in creating this book, and draw upon supporting research and initiatives that helped inform the process and outcomes.

Background

The project began at the start of last academic year with (2018) a group of Authorial Illustration masters' students and several participants of the Cornish-based social service CHAOS group, all of whom having suffered mental health issues, long-term disability, addiction or situational barriers. *CHAOS Group (Community Helping All of Society)* are unique in the way that they work holistically with their participants, building confidence, making positive change, increasing skills and ensuring people are given the opportunity to get back into employment training or education. Their provisions include Café Chaos, a radio station, a hair-dressing salon, and nearby, on the Roseland, a farm where service users assist with the running of the working farm, and can benefit from equine therapy, as well as the creative provision which is the area this project fell under.

We met every Wednesday afternoon: Myself and Steve helped facilitate the sessions, and two support professionals or 'change coaches' from CHAOS group were present each week. The first meetings took place in the welcoming and warm environment of CHAOS café with an illustrative workshop devised by the MA students and staff, creating animal cut-outs and then narrating their backstories through creative writing, imagining the mental-health challenges and social issues they were facing and giving a sense of their individual character and quirks.

Alongside this first creative activity, time was given over to a group discussion of setting shared goals for the project, which was supported through one of the support coaches, Mel, introducing the 'learn-to-lead' method as way of creating a supportive atmosphere where all views could be shared in a non-hierarchal manner. More on this tool later.

The project's initial core aims arising from this session were to explore the potential of authorial illustration to unlock those places closed down by life's negative experiences, and also to shine a light on the holistic approach that the CHAOS group take, through the participants' own voices. Could an illustrational mindset – one rooted within personal authorship – bring out those personal voices, re-kindling a sense of worth and self-esteem?

Methodology

This has been a community-based participatory research project. At the heart of the project was the concept of shared creative process, a 'thinking-through-making' and virtually all of the examples we are showing here are collaborative works. Although early sessions were devised by the MA members of the group, over the course of the project, we would collectively devise the content week by week. The point is that no one individual arrived with any answers, but rather, as a collective, we sought to find ways forward through action research and direct collaborative practice engagement.

Using the specific focus of the MA Authorial Practice course gave a framework on the 'authorial' to draw out the individual voice of each participant.

Funding and Outlining some of the goals

Early discussions outlined how the European Union Social Fund and National Lottery Community funding could develop a book publication to support the project's aims. Advantages of the book format was its ability to share the project so that it could be used by other organisations to explore and implement similar creative methods, serving to present how the collaborative process can be developed by using art and the written word in conjunction. Also, as terms such as graphic medicine and bibliotherapy enter public discourse around mental health engagement, it was felt that a publication could contribute to that conversation too.

The weekly sessions

The sessions were strategically run at the same time each week and at familiar venues, to create a safe place, to get the best out of the group. Alongside the diverse creative activities the aforementioned ' learn-to-lead' sessions were implemented to guide the conversation about what we wanted the publication to be.

Learn to Lead

Using this model, the group is presented with suggested topics or a question to decide as a group, how they wish each session to run. At the end of each session feedback is given and actions are then drawn from the process to make sure the lessons were co-produced, so no one person is controlling the essence of the session. This in turn created a safe environment for the group to explore and challenge difficult and emotional material, which was then interpreted into stories and artwork. http://www.learntolead.org.uk

Here is an example of some of the early discussions, responding to the question 'Why are we here today?' As you can see there were difficult conversations and one of the challenges of working in a non-hierarchal method, is to negotiate as a group how the aims and content is guided.

Co-Creation

We took inspiration, both theoretically as well as aesthetically, from the publication 'Co-Creation' published earlier this year, in France, which is a research initiative into co-creation and socially engaged art practices. The book, edited by Celine Poulin and Marie Preston, along with Stephanie Airaud has proven to be an invaluable resource. We will briefly mention some of the key themes covered in their book, including Vulnerability, Inclusivity, Indeterminacy and Duration in this paper.

Vulnerability

For example, in discussing vulnerability, in an interview with artist Nuria Guell (p.164), the authors describe the process of working with people of varying states of stability and consider questions such as how you take into account the different status of the participants and avoid reinforcing an asymmetrical situation? Is it possible to establish a symmetrical relationship inside a group when people do not share the same privileges? And, how do you

avoid pitfalls such as victimisation and paternalism? For us, the aforementioned 'Learn-to-lead' was a vital tool in addressing these concerns.

Inclusivity

Inclusivity was an important factor, and when we met weekly, mostly at Old Bakery Studios in Truro, we all joined in: change coaches, tutors, service-users and students: mental health being a universal issue we all became participants, and were careful in using language to maintain that a participant meant every one of us involved. Later in the co-editing process putting the book together, we worked as a group to reflect the nature of our collaborative project through co-designing the book's layout, structure, colour scheme and image-text relationship. A recurring theme felt by all was the idea of the journey itself rather than the end goal which was on one occasion keenly felt when one Wednesday afternoon we visited a local beach, battling against the elements to create a giant butterfly, whilst symbolically losing part of the pebbles to the relentless waves, yet being satisfied at the end of the session, knowing that we had worked as a team and the results were good enough; reminding us of a journey much like the metamorphosis of a butterfly: the stages of change, rather than the end result, which had been the point all along, much like friendships, work, social experience and ultimately life. These stages of metamorphosis were later adopted to form the four practice-related chapters of the book: The Journey, Pupae, Emergence and Taking Flight; each interspersed with informational chapters.

In the paper 'Co-designing non-hierarchical community arts research: the collaborative stories spiral' Gilchrist *et al* seek to break the chains that have bound the dominant constructions of community to equally dominant modes of research. They were offering a new co-designed conceptual framework with the potential to open up the workings of communities by examining them from the narratives of those who have everyday experience of these communities. They achieve this by situating the framework within an arts practice approach to data generation that celebrates the narrative life stories of individuals as members of dynamic communities (Gilchrist *et al, 2006).*

In moving beyond current methods the framework they set out reflects their, ' … commitment to generate accounts of communities of people that do justice to their collective wisdom, dynamism and creativity, as well as their transience, their needs to transform, and their responses to change. The conceptual framework therefore seeks to generate knowledge

about "us" as a collective, rather than "them" as a community, or "us & them" as a reflexive but discipline-bound research project. Gilchrist *et al* stating that, 'there are groups of people who share a mutual recognition of skills and experiences that allow them to commit to a "new narrative scholarship" through which they seek, through practice, to deepen their understandings of how their communities function.' The paper cites Crow and Mah (2011), who suggest that research into communities has changed, from 'an underpinning in social scientific methods that have treated community members as research subjects, to arts-based action and participatory methods that have increasingly viewed community members as co-researchers.

This paper led us to social psychologist Jerome Bruner, whose work, followed Paul Ricoeur's thinking where Ricoeur stated that, 'narratives must be understood as ways of accessing "lived time" through a process of accrual; that is, narratives do not exist, *per se*, but are constructed and reconstructed through the act of self-telling such that, eventually, people become the autobiographical narratives by which they tell about their lives (Bruner, 2004, p.694). Bruner's work has enabled us to highlight the central aspect of our project as the telling of autobiographical stories of all participants and the subsequent contemplation of the deeper structures we each use to tell these stories, because we enact these deep structures in our everyday lives, forming our futures. As Bruner himself says: 'There seems indeed to be some sense in which narrative, rather than referring to "reality" may in fact create or constitute it, as when "fiction" creates a "world" of its own: empowering each individual to author their own life-story. Employing Bruner's psychological analysis, can give us the opportunity to reflect upon our project outcomes, considering the deep structures which we, mostly unconsciously, employed in the way we chose to set out our autobiographies.

Through this process, we can raise awareness of other ways of structuring these autobiographies, considering the dynamics that mediate these stories, and how a greater awareness of possibilities can create the opportunity to 're-author' our life-story, as Bruner suggests, the narrative creating or constituting reality and bringing positive change.

Indeterminacy
Apart from the initial presentation of the idea of co-creating what was then a very loosely defined idea to make a book, all power was given up to the group supported by the 'Learn-to-Lead' process, giving all members an equal say in decision-making. Looking back, we can

appreciate the value of this early period of 'unknowing' which, although it caused some confusion over the first weeks of the project, established the ground out of which the group vision, beyond any single individual, emerged. This has been key to our project's evolution and, as Pablo Helguera, quoted by Marnie Badham in the *Co-Creation* book (Badham, 2019, p.207) states, '… essential to the process (of co-creation) is the 'indeterminacy' required as a co-creative project develops — when collaborators share the 'responsibility for developing the structure and content of the work.' Marie Preston stresses the idea of shared specificities, foremost among which she places indeterminacy; 'leaving open the possibilities offered by singularities that we each represent. Preston states that, 'For "collaborative participation" or co-creation to occur, an initial indetermination — in the construction of the process, its aims, or again in the modalities of encounter — is I think, necessary.' Stressing that she tries not to think of a project in terms of the finality of the process.

Duration

Another very important factor for our project was the temporal aspect, and Preston also stresses this importance of time to allow for the unfolding of the work. Preston describes how the 'long time frame makes it possible at once to get to know each other, to create a relationship, to identify current activity, and to allow forms to emerge and be discussed, and also allows a to-and-fro between productive and non-productive time. A good example of this 'non-productive' time were our weekly 'hacky-sack' sessions, which started out as a warm-up and soon became an institution. We all found it important to ease our way into the sessions, as some of the issues we were discussing could be difficult and sensitive, so we needed to feel safe and have a sense of trust. Hacky-sack involves the shared goal of collectively keeping the ball in the air (a soft bean-bag), and as you can imagine this led to a lot of laughter, and a huge sense of camaraderie, highlighting for us in hindsight the importance of play and 'non-productive time' in the building of trust, crucial for making success of these kind of long-term projects.

Another key text, as mentioned earlier, was 'Co-designing non-hierarchical community arts research: the collaborative stories spiral' from 2015, by Gilchrist, Holmes, Lee, Moore & Ravenscroft. The paper argues, '… that there can no longer be clearly demarcated boundaries between "academics" and "community partners" in a genuinely co-designed arts research process. Rather, there are "research partners" who share mutual recognition of skills and

experiences that allow them to commit to a durable "new creative scholarship" that reflects their collective identities. The paper stating that:

> 'The conceptual framework is a new approach to qualitative research; its value lies in putting the participants at the heart of the research process where they not only generate narrative, but also situate, mediate and remediate it in ways that extend conventional participative research practices.'
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> (Gilchrist, Holmes, Lee, Moore & Ravenscroft, 2015)

The Authorial

What we mean by the 'authorial' in the present context is the enabling of 'group authorship.' Preston says that co-creators are its 'authors,' stating that, 'from a legal standpoint, the author of a work is a person who invests their subjectivity in the form produced.' (Preston, 2019, p26). As arts and mental health is already such a well-developed field, we have tried to focus on the unique strengths around authorship that we could bring to the table in order to attempt to seek to innovate. But, throughout the process we have been led by the group and all decisions have been arrived at collaboratively. Like *CHAOS Group* itself, our project has sought to build resilience and learning skills in the participants, and to develop communication skills and experience for our postgraduate students.

Summing up

As an example of primary research, we hope the book will contribute more broadly to research in the area of co-creation and socially engaged art practices, as well as functioning as a guide for other institutes and organisations to learn from and develop new ways to tackle the main causes of individuals suffering mental ill-health. Art and being creative is another form of communicating without the pain and emotion of speaking about challenging events directly, but rather individuals can become a character, create an imaginative voice, or create a persona, helping to explore their own perspectives at a safe distance, making the intolerable tolerable again.

The illustrative process has enabled all of us as participants to gain insight into our own mental health, enhancing emotional and social resilience. The overall process has helped the group to learn to trust and explore feelings and thoughts in a safe and collaborative

environment: overcome emotional barriers, learning to find the courage to speak in a group, share creative ideas using new and exciting mediums, working in groups and individually, learning to find new ways of communicating through imagination and storytelling, sharing ideas and listening to others, being non-judgmental nor feeling judged, sharing personal stories and allowing the group to explore this through their own art and interpretation.

On the screen here you can see some of the participants' responses in their own words.

To conclude, the deep structure of the story we each construct about ourselves, 'our life story' is, according to Bruner, not only a case of life creating our story, but of our story creating our life; the deep structure of each life story informing our present actions and shaping our future. (Bruner, J. 2004). What emerged therefore, from our weekly creative sessions, was not just the stories themselves, but a growing awareness for each individual of the underlying structures they chose to construct their stories: awareness being the first step towards positive change.

Perhaps Lacan would disagree; explaining that the formation of the outside self will take an individual 'in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual, or, rather, that will only asymptotically approach the subject's becoming, no matter how successful the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve, as I, his discordance with his own reality.' (Lacan in Swedlow, 2010, p.92)

All participants have sought to frame what was essentially an action research project in terms of new insight effectively shared through a publication. We achieved the goal of creating a co-produced illustrated book by the end of this year-long project, something that all the participants feel proud of, and with the hope that their journey can impact and make a difference to others in the wider world.

It is clear, as Celine Poulin says, that each actor involved in a co-creation changes place and status and does so within a reflective logic. To paraphrase Poulin, our project feels like a tiny piece of research in an extensive rhizome (p.14, Co-Creation).

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