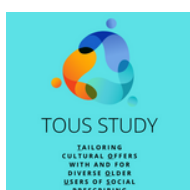


OLD FIRE  
STATION



# The TOUS Study and Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester

## Storytelling report



NUFFIELD DEPARTMENT OF  
**PRIMARY CARE**  
HEALTH SCIENCES

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## Introduction

**The TOUS Study** (Tailoring Cultural Offers with and for Diverse Older Users of Social Prescribing) involves researchers from the University of Oxford looking at how cultural organisations can support the wellbeing of older people (aged 60+) from Global Majority backgrounds. The researchers are interested in people's experiences of these activities and in how to 'tailor' or design cultural offers (workshops, events, performances, or exhibitions) so that they are attractive to this group. More information about the study is available [here](#).

The study uses a combined method of interviews and observations, as well as an approach called the Storytelling Evaluation Method (Storytelling), which was developed by the Old Fire Station arts centre in Oxford. Storytelling involves collecting stories from the people most closely involved in an activity (participants, staff, volunteers) and then analysing these stories in an inclusive, collaborative way. The TOUS Study researchers decided to use Storytelling so that they could hear about what being involved in cultural activities has meant to people in their own voice and words.

**The Royal Exchange Theatre** supports established and emerging theatre makers to create radical and ambitious work in Manchester. It hosts The Elders, a programme including regular Monday workshops, a performing company, and an Elders Leaders scheme. Beginning in 2022, the Elders Dream Projects produced three performances with the African/African Caribbean diaspora, East Asian/British East Asian, and South Asian/British South Asian communities, respectively. The TOUS study collected 10 stories of involvement in the Elders Dream Projects from participants and staff.

On 19 November 2024, the TOUS researchers and Old Fire Station came together with partners from the Royal Exchange Theatre, Creative Ageing Development Agency, Centre for Ageing Better, Manchester University, Manchester Older People's Board to think about what can be learned from these stories.

## Introduction (continued)

**The Old Fire Station (OFS)** is a centre for creativity that encourages people to understand and shape the world in which we live through stories, the arts, and connecting with others. It shares its building with the homelessness charity Crisis and is focused on including people facing tough times in its activities and operations. It developed the Storytelling Evaluation Method (Storytelling) in 2017 and has since worked with over ninety partners to put it into practice.

Storytelling is an evaluation approach inspired by Most Significant Change (MSC). It involves the following key stages:

1. **Identifying storytellers** – people who reflect a range of different perspectives on the project being evaluated
2. **Collecting stories** – each storyteller discusses their experience with a trained story collector, guided by four key questions: What was your involvement? What changed you? Why is this change important? What enabled it to happen? This is not an interview but a relaxed conversation on equal terms
3. **Editing stories** – these conversations are recorded, transcribed, and edited into two-page stories that aim to faithfully reflect the storyteller’s insights while preserving their ‘voice’ – telling it in their own words. The stories are sent to the storytellers for their approval before being shared
4. **Discussion session** – a facilitated discussion bringing together people with different perspectives on the work to discuss the stories and what can be learned from them
5. **Sharing learning** – the outcome of the discussion session is shared in a learning report

## Introduction (continued)



### How does Storytelling differ from other approaches?

- **It centres the experiences of those most involved** - Storytelling doesn't presuppose outcomes in advance. It asks people to share what change looks and feels like for them in their own voice and words
- **It is a meaningful and collaborative process** - Telling your story can be an enjoyable and validating experience. The process can help organisations to listen better, build relationships, and ensure evaluation is collaborative and involves different people and perspectives at each stage
- **It leads to rich and versatile learning** - Storytelling captures rich qualitative data. It's good at measuring change that is unexpected, emergent, personal, or complex, and understanding how change happens. It results in powerful, human stories that help us to learn, and can also be used across wider comms, marketing and fundraising

## Impact and Learning

The TOUS Study/Royal Exchange Theatre Storytelling discussion was divided into two parts. In the first, participants reflected on the stories without any predetermined criteria. In the second, they considered four themes chosen in advance by the TOUS Study research team. The outcomes of these discussions are summarised below.

The best way to learn from Storytelling is to read the stories themselves. They are available in a booklet [here](#).

### Discussion One: First impressions

Having read the stories in advance, participants shared their thoughts in small group discussions on tables, guided by the following three prompts:

1. What is your general impression of the stories?
2. Did anything stand out for you in particular?
3. Are there any themes connecting the stories?

Each table then shared the outcomes of their discussion with the whole group.

The first impressions of discussion participants can be summarised under the following headings:

1. Barriers to engagement in cultural activity
2. Ways to overcome these barriers
3. The health and wellbeing impacts of involvement
4. The responsibilities of creative practitioners working with demographics with more complex needs

The insights generated by Discussion One are shared below, illustrated by quotes from the stories.

## Discussion One (continued)

### 1. Barriers to engagement in cultural activity

- A complex array of intersectional factors including class and cultural, ethnic, or gender identity can contribute to a person feeling unwelcome in cultural sector organisations that in the UK are predominantly white and middle class
- Ageing, disability, and economic insecurity can magnify logistical challenges such as geographical distance, lack of access to transport, or difficulties with mobility
- Experiences of discrimination can make entering unfamiliar spaces very anxiety provoking, creating a sense of vulnerability up to and including a fear for physical safety
- Exclusion and discrimination look different for different groups, even when the historical reasons for it are related, and understanding of shared experiences of discrimination between underrepresented groups can be limited
- Barriers to engagement can be different for individuals within cultural groups, as well as between them

*When I first saw the advertisement, I thought I'd really love to go but I talked myself out of it. I've always been interested in theatre, but I never ever had the courage to come and watch a play. Being mixed race and working class, I always felt it's not for me. There'll be nobody at the theatre that will represent me. So, I just kept away. With the Elders Company, I thought it'll just be all white people, staring at you thinking what's she doing here? Then I spoke with a friend, and she said just give it a try, it's only an introduction. Anyway, I went and yes, I was the only Black person there. (Story 1)*

### 2. Ways to overcome these barriers

- Family, friends, community members, and those who have been involved before can act as a bridge into an activity for new participants
- Commitment is required from staff to build relationships and understand group context and individual needs
- Representation among participants and staff (people who look like me) will make an activity feel more welcoming

## Discussion One (continued)

- Formal and informal procedures can communicate inclusiveness (e.g. a written statement as well as 'positive energy' in the group)
- Matching appropriate creative activities to individual participants increases the chance that people will stick with something
- A focus on process as well as outcome can mean that benefits are felt at each stage, not only on completion of a project
- Using bi- or multilingual approaches and translators will enable participation of those with limited or no English
- An attitude of frankness, openness, and acceptance of the strong feelings (e.g. sadness and anger) associated with structural injustice communicates understanding of the reality of discrimination
- Creative activities can enable reflection on and celebration of the lives of participants

*As a Muslim woman I have certain barriers and boundaries. For example, if I'm in a mixed group like the film workshop I need my personal space. But it was a respectful and caring environment. I felt safe. My religion and culture were respected. The other participant, who was male, called me a name that means big sister. So that's another sign of respect, and he says he knew my father, my mother. So that was nice, you know. So, we really got on and we supported each other throughout this project. And he's been an immense support, and I was for him as well. (Story 2)*

### 3. The health and wellbeing impacts of involvement

- For people that have experienced discrimination and exclusion in wider society, an opportunity to be heard and have one's voice amplified (e.g. through creative collaboration or performing a life story) can be healing and empowering
- Taking part in a group creative activity can create a deep sense of social belonging and of being valued by others
- This can lead to the learning of new skills or the rediscovery of dormant talents and interests, and result in increased confidence
- The increased visibility and prestige associated with high-quality public performance can support mutual understanding between marginalised groups and wider society
- Creative treatments of a life story can help participants to reflect on personal experience, process trauma, and reimagine identity
- Joining regular classes or groups encourages physical activity



## Discussion One (continued)

*The impact is very positive for me, through the activities here. I'm more confident to do things, more confident to explore opportunity, to take part in projects. It enhance my mood. I'm happier. And travelling from home to here, and here to home, actually, this is not a waste of time. This also make you feel better. When I come from home to the tram station it's ten minutes of walking. And I said, 'No, I want to run!' I need to keep fit. I also do exercise in Tai Chi every day. Before, I'm a bit lazy to do that. But I want to keep my fitness for performing here. (Story 10)*

### **4. The responsibilities of creative practitioners working with demographics with more complex needs**

- Organisations should be mindful of resource limitations if they plan to undertake complex relational work, as participants will need support through the process
- Barriers to access related e.g. to unfamiliarity with cultural norms, economic precarity, and/or caring responsibilities are magnified in long-term and in-depth creative activities, meaning that lighter touch or one-off sessions may be easier for organisations with limited resources
- These considerations also create a tension between scale and depth - it is easier to do longer term and more in-depth work with fewer participants
- This raises questions about the ethics and efficacy of social prescribing services making use of smaller and less well resourced organisations

*I've become very aware that some people that were active ten years ago are still around and others I'm seeing less of, and it's because they're older. I suppose I feel like I'm letting those people down by not finding the right engagement for them, but you can only do so much. There's a constant tension between creating opportunities for lots of people and then also properly taking care of individuals. I guess I just remind myself that we're not the health service and we're not social services and we're not people's families. And also, people are adults, and they've got their own resources and resilience as well. (Story 3)*

## Discussion Two: Themes

The second discussion was shaped by themes chosen in advance by the TOUS research team. These themes were:

1. A safe space to explore
2. Performing life stories
3. Being ourselves and being in a group
4. One thing leads to another

Each table in the discussion was given a theme to consider in relation to the stories, before sharing back to the whole group. The insights generated by Discussion Two are shared below.

### 1. A safe space to explore

Researchers were interested in learning about whether cultural activities help participants to challenge their sense of identity or try out new ways of being, and if this depended on the kind of artwork being practiced.

The stories describe different experiences of engagement for different participants. Some had previously enjoyed creative activities but had been unable to continue them due to other life commitments. For these people, rediscovering passions, talents, and interests in later life led to a sense of joy and fulfilment. Others were discovering new skills and interests altogether and trying activities for the first time. Both processes were an opportunity for catharsis, fulfilment, self-knowledge, and confidence building.

*I have now learned a lot and able to share this in the community. I have come to shows and reading and understanding more about the shows. I am having a better cultural awareness that as a Black woman I can do this. There is no stopping you. The arena is opened. All you need is some support to push you; show you the right direction and you can achieve it and don't let anyone fool you that you are stupid! I think coming here has highlighted a lot of skills that I have that I did not know that I possessed. And it makes me very proud, very happy when I get a free ticket to invite one of my colleagues. Introducing them to this arena, that it does exist, and you can come and join it if you want to. (Story 5)*

## **A safe space to explore (continued)**

### **What created positive change in this area?**

- The power of performance to process, reframe, or acknowledge experience (e.g. of grief or trauma) in a safe space
- Because drama is rooted in childhood make-believe play, speech, and movement, it is accessible for people with limited specialist training and direction (other artforms have their own strengths as well)
- A sense that participants have the permission to experiment, and that failure or dead ends are ok
- An atmosphere of collaboration rather than competition
- Openness to different kinds of expression and a commitment to the idea that art can be made in many ways
- Exploration depends on a feeling of safety and can also add to feelings of vulnerability, and as different groups define and understand cultural activity in different ways, setting the right tone will help to build trust and create a sense of welcome (e.g. through micro-actions)

### **Considerations**

- Change doesn't happen in the same way for everybody. For some people, participation in even part of the process may have positive impacts in later life. Completion or participation in a performance is not the only marker of success
- The numbers of people involved is also not the most reliable indication of success – it is also important to consider the depth of people's involvement and the understanding that participants gain of themselves and the creative process
- For those who may not enjoy taking part, it is necessary to balance the needs of the whole group against the needs of an individual who may not be ready, or right, for the activity. A good group atmosphere and identity is a key factor in the benefits for individual participants

## 2. Performing life stories

What does it mean to create artwork based on personal experience? How is this different from performing a piece created by someone else?

The stories of both facilitators and participants describe a preference for using the life stories of participants in creating artwork.

*They feel proud of telling these stories because they struggled a lot. This is a generation who migrated from back home about thirty, forty years ago or even longer than that. Most of them worked in textile industry. They had to work to raise their family, and if they have some siblings back home, they had to send money to them as well. So they didn't think about their education. In the factories, you know, it's not the language it's the skill. So, they just learned the skill and they didn't try to learn English. Other than that, they feel really proud that they struggled in their life, to raise the family, to get the children to study in the universities. Most of them are now pensioners and they are proud of what they did in their life. They liked the fact they were having that story seen. One of them said that when we see a drama or a film around someone's life story, we want our life stories also to be highlighted, to tell the next generation about how we struggled to get them here. (Story 4)*

### What created positive change in this area?

- Participants having a sense of ownership over the creative output, being able to draw on their own expertise rooted in their own experience, and not having to worry about learning unfamiliar content
- The cathartic effects of reflecting on and telling a life story, and having this heard and acknowledged by others (including in high quality, high profile public performances)
- Public performances challenge preconceptions about who the arts are for (often a white, middle-class space in the UK), enabling audiences from underrepresented groups to better engage with cultural activity

## **Performing life stories (continued)**

- Recording and communicating personal stories can preserve information of historical importance – illustrating shared experiences of e.g. migration, cultural expression, and/or discrimination as part of an educational programme
- The capacity of creative activity to process traumatic life experiences and provide therapeutic benefits through being witnessed, heard, and valued
- Contributing to the creation of an artwork builds confidence that can be transferred to other activities

## **Considerations**

- Several storytellers describe arriving in the unfamiliar setting of the theatre feeling afraid and vulnerable. It is only through skilled facilitation and the creation of a sense of safety and trust that creative work using life stories becomes possible

## **3. Being ourselves and being in a group**

What makes us feel like we can truly be ourselves while taking part in cultural activities? Does it help to be with others of our age, gender, or community, or to be in a more mixed group?

The stories highlight benefits from both approaches, and there are always compromises between creating safe spaces for a particular identity group and accessing the social and creative benefits of diversity.

*When the Royal Exchange invited our community to create Four Seasons, I had to do a lot of persuading. If you don't know the culture within a place, you're not confident to walk in. In the past, different organisations would ask why are there no Chinese people coming? But how are you going to go if you don't know everybody, just knock on the door and say, 'I want to come in.' It's very difficult, isn't it? People also don't feel welcome because they don't speak English. They don't know how to ask. The Royal Exchange has done very well by including our group and letting us speak our own language. We actually had three languages, the English subtitles, Mandarin, and Cantonese, so that everyone could understand. (Story 6)*

## What created positive change in this area?

- Sessions designed for a particular community group create opportunities for peer support that can help participants feel safe and welcome in an unfamiliar environment – especially if the group shares experiences of discrimination and may not feel able to discuss this openly with people from other backgrounds
- This can help to bridge underrepresented communities into an organisation or setting that they did not previously consider to be ‘for them’
- Bilingual projects and/or the use of translators can also deepen engagement significantly for participants with limited English
- Groups with shared experience can explore this more deeply through the co-creation of a piece of artwork than if the experience of the group varies widely
- Mixed groups can also offer significant social and creative benefits, for example in Royal Exchange Theatre’s intergenerational projects, although this requires careful facilitation (or support from a family member, friend, or professional) to ensure that each participant’s needs are considered

## Considerations

- The causes of underrepresentation and feelings of being unwelcome in the cultural sector are highly intersectional, and grouping people together under a single identity characteristic can overlook important differences within that group
- Building relationships with a community can involve speaking to mediators or representatives who can act as gatekeepers and shape the response of other individuals to the project – careful facilitation and sensitivity may be required to create the right impression and to make sure everyone’s voice is heard. This can include role modelling and helping the group to reflect on the roles they play as part of the activity
- Being the ‘only one’ of something going into a new group can be a significant barrier to entry

#### **4. One thing leads to another**

Some people say that engaging in one creative activity, like drama, inspired them to try others, such as singing or painting.

If this process is repeated, someone can go from seeing cultural activities as not for them, to becoming increasingly confident, and eventually seeing themselves as an independent creative practitioner who pursues their own interests without support from other organisations.

*I turned sixty last year, and I think in any culture, once you get to a certain age, you sort of think: that's it, we're only going to go to one place now. So, there's no point doing this or doing that. Let's just stay home. But I tried to tidy up my life when I hit sixty. Going to the workshop, that's when I grew to the place where I am now, where each week I'm thinking, right, this is what I can do, this is what I can't do. Now I do other activities like calligraphy, Dream Project and Odd Theatre. (Story 2)*

*I started learning how to act. A Malaysian girl, she taught us. She's very nice. I make lots of other friends. Acting made me more healthy. Inside I feel younger. I try to start learning everything. Like Wai Yin, they've got another course for the Chinese culture. Also, there is one for drawing in Deansgate. I joined there as well. If they got anything new, when I see it, then I book. I spread wider, have wider interests, do more activities. (Story 6)*

#### **What created positive change in this area?**

- Cultural organisations and community groups forming effective communication networks mean that opportunities for new activities are well signposted, and members of a community can develop a sense of belonging in creative activities
- Word of mouth recommendations from trusted friends and family increase a sense of trust in an activity
- Continuity of communication and relationships with participants help to ensure that people don't feel 'dropped' after a positive experience
- Taking advantage of the 'period of receptiveness' after someone has had a positive experience. If 'scaffolding' is in place to support a move from one activity to another, this process can be repeated until someone has the confidence to continue independently

- Often several factors need to come together for someone to take full advantage of an initial positive experience in creative activity – ‘the right place, the right time, and the right people’
- Opportunities to tell personal stories and engage in processes of deep reflection help to shift the relationship to creativity from ‘something that I do’ to being ‘part of who I am’
- Different art forms can inspire and complement one another. Responding e.g. to a performance with a piece of poetry or visual art can deepen creative knowledge and confidence

### **Considerations**

- Often gaining familiarity with cultural activities requires money and time, and this excludes lots of people
- The difficulty of long-term commitment to a project, or to a series of projects, is magnified for those facing barriers e.g. geography, cultural norms, financial resources, religious commitments, caring responsibilities
- Creative processes can be emotionally demanding and exposing when they involve a journey of self-discovery. Support may therefore need to continue after the end of the project
- Disruption to support and engagement (e.g. the covid pandemic, or a change in an individual’s circumstances) can be very destabilising and require extra work to rebuild relationships afterwards
- This kind of work creates ethical challenges for practitioners – what is the limit of professional responsibility, how can the boundaries around a practitioner’s role be made clear to all, how can these questions be addressed through supervision and reflective practice, and how can participants be signposted to more appropriate support where necessary?



## Conclusion

The Royal Exchange Theatre offers a range of sophisticated creative opportunities to Manchester's older communities. Its success is founded on a deep understanding of the support required to improve access to cultural spaces for people over sixty, as well as a commitment to artistic excellence. Having identified the underrepresentation of Global Majority groups in its work, The Elders built relationships with Manchester's South Asian, East Asian, and Black communities through its Dream Projects. Through this work, programme staff and members built on their knowledge of the access needs of elders, developing an understanding of how the exclusion and discrimination faced by racialised groups intersects with access barriers to cultural spaces for elders in general.

These barriers - including geographical distance, economic precarity, caring responsibilities, and reduced mobility - are magnified when combined with, for example, experiences of migration and racism, different cultural norms regarding the arts and performance, and/or limited knowledge of the English language. While all participants in the Dream Project faced some combination of these barriers, there were differences both within and between groups in how easy they were to overcome. Several factors usually had to align for someone to cross the threshold into an unfamiliar space and develop confidence as a creative practitioner: the right time in their life; the right support from the right people; the right activity; and the right location.

For those who were able to remain involved in the Dream Project, the health and wellbeing effects were significant. These included increased physical activity, a sense of being seen, heard, and valued through the celebration of personal stories, a new sense of belonging in cultural spaces, and increased confidence to try new things.

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