



Online Creativity Groups and Mental Health



Notes from a Roundtable Discussion



February 2020



64 Million
artists!



Executive Summary

This report summarises the discussion at a roundtable event hosted by 64 Million Artists exploring issues of mental health and wellbeing for individuals taking part in creative activities in online groups. It builds on Creativity in Mind, research carried out by UCL and 64 Million Artists in 2018/19. The report lists key topics raised by the roundtable attendees, and identifies related principles of good practice. A conclusion attempts to draw out an underlying theme from the discussion, and its implications for the future development of a creativity-based digital asset.



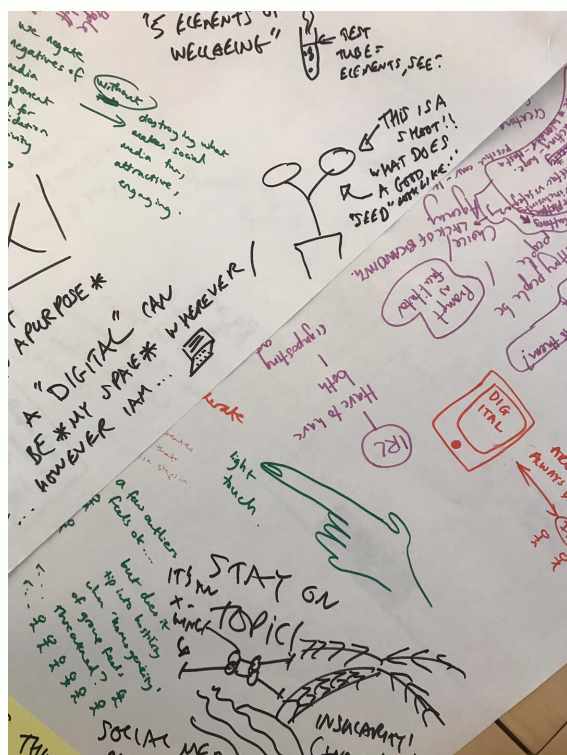
Exploring how we thrive creatively in groups online

On the 11th February 2020, 64 Million Artists invited 35 researchers, arts-in-health specialists, clinical practitioners, funding professionals, and individuals with lived experience of mental ill health to take part in a roundtable discussion. The event was focused on issues at the intersection of three topics: mental health, digital participation, and everyday creativity. It built on *Creativity in Mind* (CIM): 64 Million Artists' collaborative research project with UCL Division of Psychology and Life Sciences (Tribe, 2019).

Clinical researcher, Dr Rachel H. Tribe, shared the positive findings of her pre-publication research with attendees. The quantitative and qualitative data showed that the 55 participants' symptoms of stress, depression and anxiety decreased, and their overall wellbeing increased, after taking part in 30 days of simple creative challenges and sharing their experiences with each other in facilitated WhatsApp groups. Five participants in *Creativity in Mind* attended the roundtable discussion.

The roundtable was focused through three lenses, each of which were discussed for 20 minutes: (i) user experience, (ii) facilitation, (iii) wider social implications. These topics, which were decided on in collaboration with the researchers, were chosen to reflect different levels of relationship concerning digital participation, namely: individuals' internal and inter-personal experiences; participants' sense of involvement with those facilitating and moderating online experiences; and the wider role of creativity-based interventions in complex ecologies.

A facilitator and note taker were present at three separate discussion tables to navigate and record the discussions that unfolded. The following summary is an attempt to capture the key topics and themes that emerged from those notes, but inevitably there will be some omissions in an attempt to synthesize the arguments. Each section is followed by a principle of good practice which has practical implications for the future development of digital creativity-based intervention for those who experience mental ill health.



User experiences in online creativity groups

Safety

For individuals with lived experience of mental ill health, safety in online groups emerged as a central topic, and a range of opinions about the factors that contribute towards a felt sense of security were explored. Some claimed that anonymity, and the fact that they didn't know other members in real life, enabled them to "open up", "share", and explore their "vulnerabilities as well as achievements". On the other hand, some users feared being criticised or judged if they shared creative work which "might not be very good" or "good enough". Various criteria contributing to a sense of online safety were discussed. These included: the size of the group (smaller groups were generally considered safer); the quality and quantity of facilitator intervention; clarity about the group's structure and purpose; and the level of peer-support within the group as a whole. Negative factors in digital groups generally, included the nature and functionality of the digital platform itself (e.g. notifications), a lack of facilitator presence, facilitator ambiguity or clumsiness, and a lack of clarity around group task or purpose.

Principle: *Design to make users feel safe*

Self management and resilience

There was a general consensus among the CIM Participants that, for individuals with common mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression, self management in online forums was key. Many talked about the user experience of WhatsApp or Facebook, for example, saying that notifications could overwhelm or add to one's "digital burden" (see Huang, 2010). Different levels of participation and "presence" were discussed: from participant observation at one end of the scale, to the frequent or even "excessive" posting by some users at the other. One CIM participant talked about using the intervention at a set time of the day as a way of managing his screen time. Issues of self-responsibility and personal resilience in relation to online group activity were discussed.

Principle: *Make functionality of an intervention supportive of users' mental wellbeing*

Distraction from distress

For many participants with lived experience, creative expression and the sharing of creative work with the online group were supportive and "therapeutic" experiences. One attendee said the CIM experience had been a "life saver" and offered welcome distraction whilst caring for her ill mother, as well as her own depression. The tension between positivity and the "allowance" of mental distress in online groups was explored. Some appreciated a wholly positive focus, whilst others found this "Pollyanna-ish". The framing of the online group's purpose was discussed as a determining factor on the allowance for discussion about mental health. For example, the differences between a "creativity support group" versus a "mental health support group," were considered.

Principle: *Make openness about mental health struggles acceptable but maintain a positive culture*



Creativity, exploration and discovery

Several attendees questioned whether creativity was a determining factor in the level of support, or therapeutic benefit, online group members experienced. Several theories, as well as the CIM research results (Tribe, 2019) were explored. Creative prompts were considered as opportunities for "self-exploration," "distraction," "having a go," and "trying something new". Creativity could also give online groups a sense of task-based identity. The benefits of CIM's heterogeneous creative challenges were debated, compared to more focused, artform or project-specific activities (drawing, knitting or cookery, for example). Advocates were found for both specific creative briefs, and more open creative prompts.

Principle: *Celebrate creativity and its potential for self discovery, self acceptance, and social connection*

Young people

Attendees pointed to generational differences in online experience. Young people spend relatively large amounts of time in digital spaces, particularly on social media, and are exposed to higher levels of toxic behaviour.

Safety is the key feature for them in user-led digital design processes, as a reaction to cyber-bullying and the gamification of “popularity metrics” (see RSPH, 2016; De-Sola Gutiérrez, 2016). Some wondered whether creativity-based interventions offered opportunities for intergenerational mixing which, due to various social pressures, is harder in real life. One attendee pointed to generational differences in online behaviour norms, which made intergenerational digital spaces hard to design for.

Principle: *Consider the online safety of young people, their behaviour, and needs*

Social isolation and digital exclusion: older people

Linked to the above topic, the opportunities of digital interventions, particularly ones engaging everyday creativity, were debated in relation to the social isolation of some older people. Might loneliness, as a risk factor, be mitigated by having access to an online creativity support group? However, the subject of digital exclusion and the elderly was also raised. Designing, and producing content for, the unique needs of older users as well as their carers was discussed, as were the implications for the broad subject of social prescribing (see Randall, 2002 and Age UK, 2018).

Principle: *Consider the needs of older people, their carers, and issues of digital exclusion*



Belonging and group identity

Different concepts of belonging were discussed in relation to online group identity. Attendees pondered why they felt a sense of belonging, or not, to particular forums. Contributing factors included: a common issue or cause (e.g. mental health), a sense of purpose (e.g. supporting each other), a clear sense of mission or task (e.g. creative challenges), and shared values (e.g. openness, acceptance, tolerance, kindness). Broader issues of group belonging were also discussed, including qualities such as members' homogeneity versus their diversity, and acceptable versus unacceptable types of discourse (see, for example, research on contentious registers of discourse on Mumsnet: Pederson & Smithson, 2013). One attendee made the point that influencing factors would be implicit, as well as explicitly stated.

Principle: *Be clear about the group's purpose, mission and culture. Pursue diversity as a value*

Social media

Many attendees talked about the negative, or triggering effects of social media use on mental health. However, some attendees pointed out that the wider literature does not support a negative correlation between social media use and mental ill health. Meta-analyses show mixed outcomes of mental illness and wellbeing (see Seabrook *et al.*, 2016). The design features of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram were debated, with their focus on intentionally “addictive” and “sticky” features which promote user scrolling, clicks, and exposure to advertising. Uncertainty about privacy, data security and GDPR issues was also aired. The pros and cons of using existing social media platforms versus a new intervention (for CIM) were discussed. Generational differences in online behaviour emerged as a key theme for this topic.

Principle: *Engage in user-led design processes*

The facilitation, moderation and holding of digital groups

Potency, permission and protection

The “holding” of the CIM groups, in terms of facilitation, received attention in the discussions, in relation to both quality and quantity - i.e. frequency of posts. Overall, the research showed that the facilitation was perceived to be a positive part of the CIM experience (Tribe, 2019). The modelling of qualities, by the facilitators, was felt by most participants to help create a sense of safety, containment, and permission within the group. One CIM participant noted that, “The fact that the facilitator would post every day and share something, usually not very good, that they had done themselves, was encouraging and gave me permission to share my stuff.” Qualities such as facilitator warmth and friendliness, expressed through tone, were also mentioned in relation to how encouraged and supported users felt.

Principle: *Attend to the quality and quantity of facilitation*

Distress online

There was much debate about the level of support that could be reasonably offered to individuals with experience of mental ill health by a creativity support group like CIM. The framing of CIM as a creativity support group rather than a mental health support group was mentioned. Levels of facilitator support, and professional expertise, in digital forums were also considered and various existing models (e.g. Elefriends.org.uk) were discussed. The importance of procedures for handling perceived distress was emphasised, especially in relation to issues of administrator accountability and responsibility. Routes for signposting distressed members to appropriate mental health services was believed to be important. Blended models of facilitation, including AI or machine learning assistance to flag users' distress to human facilitators, were also introduced.

Principle: *Have effective procedures when it comes to approaching user's distress. Explore emerging technologies. Be clear what is and isn't offered.*

Scalability and peer moderation

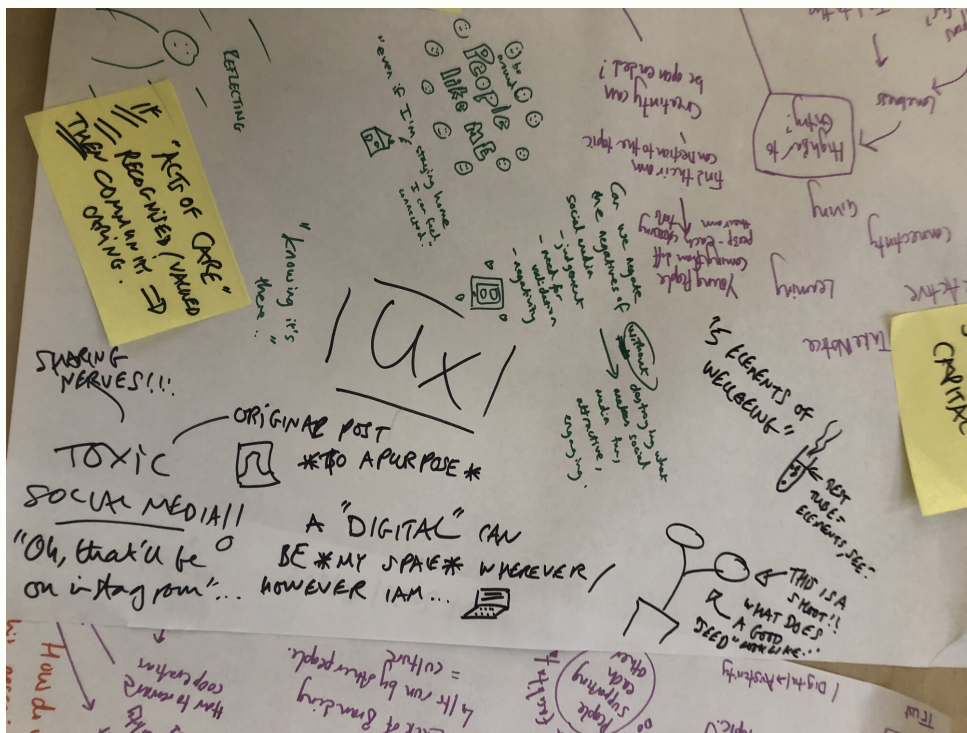
Facilitation was discussed in relation to the scalability of an intervention like CIM. Some attendees considered the potential for "champions" or "super-users" to emerge as facilitators, or co-facilitators, within the groups. Linked to this, opportunities for facilitator training, by 64 Million Artists, were suggested. One attendee questioned the need for centralised, "professional" facilitation at all. Issues of facilitator consistency in devolved or peer-supervised models were raised. And related to supervision, issues to do with bad practice, lack of boundaries, or the pursuit of self-interest were raised in relation to some existing peer-facilitated forums. Many attendees agreed that the facilitation model of an intervention like CIM would be a determining factor for its scalability.

Principle: *Develop models that are scalable without sacrificing quality or safety*

Sustainability and longevity

CIM participants mentioned some of the ways they had developed their experiences after the end of the 30 day intervention. One said that, having “rediscovered” her creativity as a result of taking part, she had signed up for further creative activities in her community and had made new social connections as a result. One CIM group had carried on, un-facilitated, on WhatsApp at the end of the 30 days. Several of the participants had arranged real life meet-ups, and all the roundtable CIM participants had taken advantage of more than one meet-up opportunity. “Putting a name to the face,” was felt by more than one CIM participant to be a valuable part of their overall experience. Peer-led initiatives to continue and maintain both creativity and relationships were celebrated.

Principle: Consider the sustainability and longevity of an intervention from the beginning, for both users and creators



Digital communities and social trends

Routes to real life connection and intimacy

Many attendees felt that online interaction was no replacement for real life "connection" and "intimacy," and it was agreed that social connection and relationships were central to the benefits of group creative activity, both online and off. It was felt that digital interventions such as CIM could be "pathways" and "bridges" from the digital realm to the real-life social connections. The opportunities (for wellbeing) and threats (to safety, accountability, etc.) were discussed in terms of signposting users to organised events, including peer-organised ones, "in real life". In general, most attendees thought that a digital intervention could be both a stand-alone user experience whilst also signposting users to additional offline creative and cultural offers.

Principle: *Blend an online experience with opportunities for real-life connection*

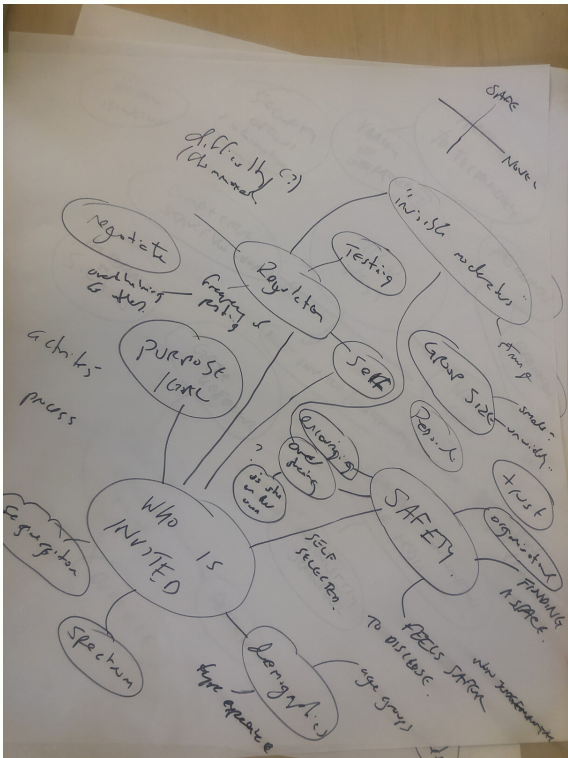
Defunding and digital opportunity

The role of digital assets was discussed in relation to the wider funding culture, austerity, and the defunding of creative and cultural opportunities in the community. "Is there a danger of digital being promoted to mask deficits in the funding landscape?" was one question raised. Examples of digital services being developed by the NHS to tackle service shortfall were mentioned. More than one attendee recognised the reality of austerity and the need for digital assets in both the arts and culture, as well as public health sectors. Several attendees mentioned the need for funding bodies to recognise the "intersectional" nature of creativity and mental health interventions such as CIM, sitting as they do, between cultural and health ecologies.

Principle: *Pursue multiple, as well as alternative, funding models for creativity and health assets*

Arts, creativity and public health

Linked to the above, wider issues of intersectionality between domains of arts and culture, public health, and clinical research were raised by several attendees who are working within these intersections. Growing awareness within the cultural sector of the wellbeing benefits of participation on the one hand (ACE, 2020), and the urgent need for community-based assets for NHS social prescribing on the other, were both felt to be relevant to the development of assets like CIM. However, one attendee wondered whether the stress on medical and scientific models of knowledge, and research into the benefits of creativity (see, for example, Fancourt, D. and Finn, S., 2019), over-determines conversations about the benefits of creativity. Does the arts-in-health movement, with its stress on research outcomes, implicitly link creativity to symptomology or



An emerging theme?

The boundaries of online groups

This summary gives a flavour of the rich discussion that was covered at the roundtable. And, as can be seen from a just a cursory glance at the topics above, each warrants its own discussion - if not its own series!

It may be possible, however, to identify an underlying theme, relating to experiences in online groups, and one which holds potential for the future development of an intervention like *Creativity in Mind*. It concerns concepts of *openness* and *closed-ness* in relation to groups. Many attendees introduced topics which were related to both the actual and perceived boundaries of the group. Might it be these different types of boundaries (structural, cultural, ethical, implicit and explicit, etc.) which contribute to participants' sense of safety, containment, and autonomy within them?

Concepts of boundary have significance for the future development of an intervention like *Creativity in Mind*, as they influence things as diverse as: *user experience, group size, group purpose, group task, data protection, facilitation, peer-support, safeguarding, and signposting*. Perhaps we can extend this concept of boundaries to creativity itself, seeing creative prompts as doorways that invite participants to open up, as opportunities to explore new territories, as pathways to discovering new ways of thinking, doing or being in the world, and for creating new social connections which are supportive, nurturing, and life-affirming.

Thriving creatively online: signposts for future development...

64 Million Artists are committed to exploring and developing digital assets that support mental health and creative flourishing. We are exploring the development of a bespoke online platform designed by users. Our mission is to achieve this through our core principles of co-creation, everyday creativity, and cultural democracy (64 Million Artists and Arts Council England, 2016/2018). This roundtable discussion forms part of our strategy of working with partners from different domains, including clinical researchers, third sector professionals, funders, digital experts, practitioners and individuals with lived experience.



Appendix:

Roundtable Attendees

5 x Creativity in Mind participants

Philippa Cahill
Director, M&F Health

Lorna Collins
Expert by experience, peer support worker, writer

Alex Coulter
Secretary & Project Manager, APPG Arts, Health & Wellbeing

David Cutler
Director, The Baring Foundation

Jemima Frankel
Community Coordinator, 64 Million Artists

Harry Harrold
Director, Neontribe

Dr Vyv Huddy
Clinical Psychologist, University of Sheffield

Jo Hunter
CEO and Co-founder, 64 Million Artists

Richard Ings
Relationship Manager, Arts Council England

Peter Kelly
Digital Transformation Manager, MIND

Dr Anna Lavis
Research Fellow (Health & Population), Birmingham University

Tom Madders
Director of Communication, Campaigns & Participation, Young Minds

Liberty Martin
Arts Practitioner, writer, producer

John McMahon
Senior Manager (Policy & Research), Arts Council England

David Micklem
Co-founder - 64 Million Artists, writer, producer & arts consultant

Phillipa Reive
Director, Creative Campus, Snape Maltings

Chris Rolls
Senior Project Manager, 64 Million Artists

Laura Saxton
Programmes Manager, 64 Million Artists

Helen Shearn
Independent consultant in arts, health and wellbeing

Jude Smit
Practitioner Psychologist and Psychotherapist

Dr Rachel H. Tribe
Clinical Psychologist, UCL

Jasmine Waldorf
Community Arts Practitioner & Mental Health Advocate

Emma Walker
Researcher, PhD., Epidemiology Dept., UCL

Dr Rachel Winter
Research Associate, Manchester NHS Mental Health Trust

Tony Woods
Arts in Health Programme Manager, Kings College London

Hayley Youell
Events Coordinator & Administrator, Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance

References

- 64 Million Artists & Arts Council England (2016) *Everyday Creativity*. Creative Commons <https://64millionartists.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/culturaldemocracy.pdf>
- 64 Million Artists & Arts Council England (2019) *Cultural Democracy in Practice*. Creative Commons <https://64millionartists.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/culturaldemocracy.pdf>
- Age UK (2018) *Digital Inclusion Evidence Review*. Creative Commons https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/age_uk_digital_inclusion_evidence_review_2018.pdf
- Arts Council England (2020) *Let's Create: Strategy 2020-2030*. London: Arts Council England. <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/our-strategy-2020-2030>
- Fancourt D. and Finn S. (2019) *What is the Evidence on the Role of the Arts in Improving Health and Well-being? A Scoping Review*. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2019 (Health Evidence Network (HEN) synthesis report 67)
- De-Sola Gutiérrez, J., Rodríguez de Fonesca, F. and Rubio, G. (2016) Cell-phone addiction: a review. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 7:175
- Huang, C. (2010) Internet use and psychological well-being: a meta-analysis. *Cyber-psychology, Behaviour and Social Networking*, 13(3)
- Peterson, S. and Smithson, J. (2013) Mothers with attitude: how the Mumsnet parenting forum offers space for new forms of femininity to emerge online. *Women's Studies International Forum*. 38. 97-106. 10.1016/j.wsif.2013.03.004
- Randall, J. (2002) *Digital Arts and Older People*. London. The Baring Foundation <https://baringfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/DigitalArtsOP.pdf>
- RSPH (2017) *#StatusOfMind: Social Media and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing*. <https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/campaigns/status-of-mind.html>
- Seabrook, E,M,, Kern, M,L, and Rickard, N,S. (2016) Social networking sites, depression, and anxiety: a systematic review. *JMIR Mental Health*, 3(4). doi:10.2196/mental.5842
- Tribe, R.H. (2019) *A Mixed Methods Exploration of 'Creativity in Mind', an Online, Creativity-Based Intervention for Adults Experiencing Low Mood and Anxiety*. D.Clin.Psy Thesis: London: UCL - unpublished