



Community Artist Network ©

'I Come From'

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Evaluation undertaken by
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Introduction

The 'I Come From' project worked with a diverse range of people from Nottingham and beyond in order to provide a platform for their stories through creative writing and performance poetry. Through poetry and story-telling we have creatively engaged three diverse groups in a series of workshops led by Trekkah Benjamin, Ty Healy, Plentiful Poet and Joe Andrews, with guest workshops from Joshua Judson and Jake Weaver. Using the form of poem 'Where I Come From' written by world-famous poet Elizabeth Brewster, three 5-week workshops, produced a series of anthologies empowering our participant's voices and developing their confidence. The work was then illustrated by Raphael Achache and pressed in preparation for an online showcase event, which offered a performance opportunity. By recording and presenting these stories we can address misconceptions and views that create barriers in our society. As part of the legacy for this community project digital resources packs were created from the anthologies which aimed to open up a forum of discussion between our participant's stories and the wider audiences that engage with them. These resources was targeted at groups from the Refugee forum, Framework and Outburst where these personal stories may have a most impact.

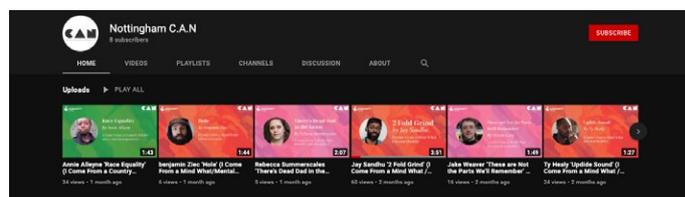
This is the first project from Nottingham CAN, funded by The National Lottery Community Fund. Nottingham C.A.N is a network of artists, dedicated to exploring and developing how the arts can have positive impact and enrich our local communities. Using the arts as focus we aspire to socially, creatively and educationally enrich local communities, supporting, nurturing and facilitate active community engagement between the local community and Artist. We achieve our mission through two main focuses, the first being direct artist-led research, consultation and engagement within local communities and the second being the training, development and support of aspiring and already practicing community artists.

By focusing on these two areas we cultivate well-informed community arts workshops, sessions and events, that have direct impact and explore wider community issues through the arts.

Within the 'I Come From' Project we worked with 42 participants in a series of 15 poetry workshops with a total a 59 poems submitted towards the 3 anthologies themed around **Gender & Sexuality, Race & Immigration and Mental Health.**

After the workshop phase we did an open call out for people who did not take part in the workshops to have the chance to submit to the anthologies. We had a total of 59 poems submitted externally, equating to 118 poems submitted in total. Working alongside illustrator Raphael Achache and designer and zine maker Dominika from Rising Issue 78 poems were selected to feature in the 300 anthologies that were printed. So far we have distributed 178 of these anthologies to people throughout the UK, Europe and even the US and Australia. As we could not hold a celebration event in person due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lock down, we held an online event where 62 people attended throughout the evening, celebrating the amazing work of our participants and promoting the printing anthologies.

As we could not deliver the last phase of the project, doing a roadshow with the printed anthologies, we agreed with the funder to create a digital toolkit for community groups, schools and youth centres, to use our anthologies to open up platforms of conversations around the topics we explored. Working with a professional film crew, we shot 14 performances of the poems featured in the anthologies.



https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLcqvyRc8GUbENWPH7d6piID8_T3d_XxT

These videos were QR coded in the anthologies and also distributed, alongside PDF downloads of the anthologies to 16 community groups, and available on our website to download for free <https://nottinghamcan.org/resources/>

The aims of this project included bringing together diverse groups and building stronger relationships with wider audiences, supporting individuals to reach their creative potential through poetry and creating 'safe spaces' for the discussion of sensitive topics and emotionally charged experiences. The outputs from the project included the published poetry anthologies, an online showcasing event which included live poetry performance as well as a legacy resource reaching out into the local community, working with marginalised groups in particular. The following report addresses these aims and outputs, as well as reflecting on the learning from the project in relation to Nottingham CAN's future work.



Diverse groups and wider audiences for poetry

Participants commented on the relaxed atmosphere of the workshop sessions which was great for exploring difficult topics. Being able to meet new people and make valuable connections was a clear benefit at a time which lockdown conditions were impeding people socially. For some participants, this was the first time they had joined a poetry writing group and commented that they felt able to share ideas, read poems out and not feel embarrassed or intimidated. Bringing people together of all ages, genders and ethnicities, participants reported that they found the diverse groups non-judgemental and non-competitive. Participants found the mental health group friendly and supportive, in light of all participants having experiences ill mental health at some stage, which participants felt enabled them to understand each other and to empathize with the stories of others when issues resonated with different people.

With the race and immigration sessions in particular, participants felt like they were able to share their own experiences: “One of the first things that we did was to go around and talk about our own background. We could all share it as well and we all had different background as well. It was incredible. I found that I actually learnt quite a lot about people’s experiences from different countries and the different things that they had gone through. Things that I found were similar with my own experience but also things that were different as well. So, it opened my eyes in that sense”. Through this experience participants were able not only to learn more about poetry techniques, but also about themselves. For example, one participant – Deanna – reflected on an exercise she had undertaken in the form of writing a letter from one of her relatives who had emigrated. She shared that she found this challenging as she had to envisage what they would convey to her, but also that this exercise enabled her to confront different stereotypes and negative ideas around immigration. She reported that it had been a valuable experience for her to be able to address that.

The diversity and the openness of each poetry workshop group to participants with no or little experience in poetry was appreciated as “unlocking the door for poetry”. Participants who did not have an ‘academic’ background or a degree in English literature reported that they had found the sessions and content accessible for them. The Gender and Sexualities group in particular attracted participants of not only diverse gender and sexuality, but also for different background and from all over the country. In this regard Nottingham CAN was able to reach both local and wider communities.

Supporting people to reach their ‘creative potential’ through poetry

Having a dedicated space each week for participants to engage with poetry writing, reading and experience the work of others was highly beneficial for their individual creative development. Working together with other enabled the ‘bouncing of ideas’ and value of being around other creative people. One participant – Natasha – reported that: “I signed up for these workshops because I hadn’t touched my notebook or done anything to do with poetry since lockdown. It was my way of channelling back into my poetry. I’m an amateur poet as I write poetry for emotional release but in the last couple of years, I’ve started to take it a bit more seriously. These workshops have helped me to reflect on my style and learn techniques that are new. Also connecting with like-minded people has been great during lockdown, when I’ve not been able to connect with people in real life. It’s very refreshing having that commitment each week”.

For those who had previous poetry writing experience, the workshops were an opportunity to push the boundaries of their creative work and experiment with new forms of writing. These included looking at examples of things like guzzles and sonnets, things with specific rhyming structures and repetitions that participants played with to see how they could mix them up. Frequently experiencing challenges set in workshops, time for free writing and creating short pieces of poetry within the dedicated timeslot, was a stretching and surprising experience for many participants. For example, one participant remembered a challenge to write something, in five minutes that fitted a certain rhythm: “A kind of rap type rhythm, which finished with a certain line. And then we all read it out to the same rhythm as if it was a long piece. I think doing that in such a short period of time and then being asked to read it out in its imperfect form, was a real challenge for me. It challenged my perfectionism”.

The opportunities the workshops offered to share work and received feedback was also commented upon: “The sharing back of the final poems was one of the most rewarding things because even though I had less self-doubt than usual, I read it out to some of the other people in the workshop where we all feedback to each other, was positive reassurance. As well as doing the critical bit”. One of the workshop leaders feedback on the popularity of an editing session which he ran. This enabled participants to have comments on their work and respond to them whilst sharing this experience with the group. Through receiving peer feedback and performing their poems participants felt that they had gained the creative confidence and motivation to keep progressing with their poetry. For some this was the encouraging stepping stone that they need to begin to think about sending some of their work off to publishers.

In addition to the poetry activities, the illustration accompaniment was inspiring and enlivening for the participants. Each poet has the opportunity to work with an illustrator who would bring their words to life through drawing. Participants valued this experience for being able to articulate what their poem meant to them and see this translated into visual form. The illustrator commented that having both individual and group discussions enabled him to “have a discussion about what each poem meant for everyone in terms of visuals, which were just kind of a vehicle for what their feelings”. The illustration phase, which came during the last week of the workshops served as a holistic experience for the participants in terms of visualizing their creative work over the workshop period and for publication within the anthologies.



Creating ‘safe spaces’

The workshop themes of mental health, immigration, gender and sexualities are important and challenging experiences for people in society today. This project approached these topics with the sensitivity and empathy that they deserved and that was echoed by the participants. Participants reported positively, not only developing their poetry skills, imagination and critique but also about the social process of coming together to discuss these issues. Workshop leaders planned activities and prepared resources to ensure that participants would feel comfortable and reflective in discussing these topics. Key pedagogical approach for this included setting clear boundaries from the outset, keeping up with content warnings and creating a ‘safe space’ for discussion, with many commenting that the workshops had felt like a ‘cyclical’ journey.

In particular with the gender and sexualities theme, one participants stated that: “I haven’t really had a space to be able to explore gender. That was why I joined and I really enjoyed the process of being able to become a lot more playful in exploring sexuality. It completely changed my approach to how I thought about those topics and how I wrote about those. It helped me come into a happier place in general about my identity”. Other participants commented that writing poems, in particular about mental health, felt like a form of self-therapy, where they were able to express themselves freely without holding back. Poetry as an artform offer a mechanism for metaphor is sharing and dealing with difficult experiences from participants lives prior. The workshop leader for the mental health group recounted: “one lady who wrote about a cat and it was a metaphor for like, not depression essentially, but like comfort blankets and whatnot. As she was explaining it, we all kind of thought, oh, it’s a poem about a cat and actually no, it was like a much deeper concept”.

Outputs

In February 2021, Nottingham CAN hosted an online event to celebrate the work that project participants produced in the workshops by giving them the opportunity to read their poetry and meet the larger network. It also launched the anthologies, platformed the various artists involved in the production of these booklets and allowed for the artists to come together in an important display of collective wellbeing.

Of particular note was how the event fostered a sense of community. One participant stated: ‘we were [a] [...] very diverse group of people and yet we “felt as one” because we were each trying to share individual perspectives, thoughts and feelings, about difficulties and experiences we’ve lived through.’ Specifically, the experience bound the participants together across difference: ‘We couldn’t help but feel this was something unique, special and [bound] us together, as a body or a community [as] thinking, feeling, creative writing people.’ The online event facilitated readings and provided a more reassuring environment in which less experienced performers felt confident and supported to perform. One poet said: ‘Beforehand, I was worried about reading out my poetry and I wasn’t feeling confident, but I felt good afterwards as I think it went well and I got a really positive response.’ The principal way in which poets were reassured was through the support they received in the chat, which showcased the supportive community ethic. ‘It was super welcoming and not pressured at all. Very safe.’ Another said: ‘Really supportive’ and that s/he ‘particularly liked the way other poets and audience members wrote nice comments in the chat during everyone’s performances. That was lovely.’ Although the pandemic has altered the way the project was delivered, this testimony affirms how alternative models can tease out new forms of supportive communities. A more complete account of the event can be viewed [here](#).



Future learning for Nottingham CAN

The design of this project to work with creative poetry as an emotional and social outlet around particularly sensitive themes such as wellbeing, migration and sexualities was intended to inform the working practices of Nottingham CAN as an emerging community arts organisation. Adding the further restriction of running this project during the lockdown conditions of the COVID-19 global pandemic presented a further challenge for the practitioners. However, an evaluation session with the practitioners brought to the fore the affordances of working in a new way, using digital platforms to host workshops and performances. For example, participants reported that Zoom has helped to create a 'safe space' where they were able to open up about sensitive issues.

Practitioners reflected that the flexibility of zoom in terms of breakout rooms and digital attendance was a benefit to the project as they surmounted some of the usual barriers for community artists working in this way. Ty, leader for the mental health group reflected that:

“What I really appreciated was that because you weren’t in a physical space, when you are meeting new people and sharing ideas, especially in my group and when it’s mental health, it’s not the easiest thing to kind of share with. But I think because everyone was in their own house, they would sit down and they could mute and turn cameras off when they wanted to”.

For some practitioners having engaged with online facilitation for the first time, now felt as if this method of running digital workshops was now 'tried and tested' and that future work could continue in this format with or without future Coronavirus restrictions.

