

Practice-sharing case study

Outreach work with young people with learning disabilities



Louise Jordan, a folk musician and singer-songwriter, has been running weekly music workshops with young people with learning disabilities as part of Salisbury Arts Centre's music outreach work with young people. She was one of the SWAG (Swindon, Wiltshire and Gloucestershire) Musical Inclusion programme's 'breakthrough practitioners', supported to develop her practice in working with young people in challenging circumstances. In this case study Louise talks about how she's developed her practice, and what she's learned.



About this case study

This case study has been written to share practice and prompt reflection, discussion and development of musical inclusion work. It has been written for music practitioners working with children in challenging circumstances, as well as funders and project leads/managers, as part of the legacy of Swindon Wiltshire and Gloucestershire's [Musical Inclusion](#) programme (see also last page).

About the project

Salisbury Arts Centre's Music Inclusion Project consisted of music workshops and music industry seminars for young people at the Arts Centre, as well as music workshops in two 'cold spots' outside of the city centre, at Bemerton Heath and Tidworth. Bemerton Heath is listed as one of the most deprived wards in the county, with few local amenities and very little on offer for young people. One quarter of the population of Salisbury lives there, but it's two miles from the city centre.

Simon Morris, Salisbury Arts Centre Engagement Officer, said: "Our experience was that young people from Bemerton Heath just wouldn't come into the Arts Centre because it's a four mile round trip. So the idea was, if we can reach just a few young people, that would be a good starting point, because I believe arts organisations need to deliver creative opportunities directly out in communities. It's part of a much longer engagement strategy – I'm realistic about the length of time and development work needed."

Louise Jordan takes up the story:



How did you get involved in the outreach work at Bemerton Heath?

"I'd already been working with Adam Varney, who was to be the lead practitioner for the project, at the Arts Centre's Zone Club (a music club for young adults with learning disabilities). I was asked to be his co-worker for this project, and as part of this, to be involved in some training and development. This would develop me as a practitioner in a number of ways. For example, the initial idea for the outreach work was to use music technology to create soundscapes, something quite out of my comfort zone. My experience is in traditional/folk music and in songwriting."

How did the project come about?

"Simon and his colleague had originally contacted various community organisations in Bemerton Heath. There was a group of young people with physical and learning disabilities run by Mencap based at St Michael's Community Centre, and they were interested in exploring music, so Simon and colleague arranged for us to work with them. The original plan was to work with them for four sessions, and then to bring in non-disabled young people, but

as it happened, we didn't get any take-up from other young people so it ended up being an exclusively learning disabled group."

What happened in that first session?

"Particularly in that first session, but also throughout, it helped that Adam and I were familiar with how we both work, how we work in that context, and what strategies we both use. We had to be very quick thinking and responsive to the needs of the young people which might vary week-by-week or moment-by-moment.

"We started by using different 'getting to know you' techniques – they weren't what we'd planned, because it takes longer if you're not sure what difficulties young people are facing. You use a huge amount more energy and positivity so you can gradually feel where the ground lies for the group and the individuals in it.

"We were aiming in that first session to develop participants' confidence in what we were doing, getting feedback from them about what's difficult, what's too hard and what's challenging in a good way.

"We chose to start with basic rhythm activities that didn't use voices, because we quickly realised that one young person didn't use verbal communication at all; two used their voices selectively; and another didn't use verbal communication at all; and another struggled with what she said through speech and it was hard to work out what she was enjoying."

How did you go on to develop the sessions, particularly around what participants wanted?

"The breaks gave us an opportunity to chat to some of the group about what they liked, and what was working and we tried different strategies to seek feedback at the end of sessions. For example, we used sheets asking the question 'how confident do you feel in your music making' with a bullseye in the centre. We'd ask them to show us where they were, near the centre (very confident) or on the outside (not very confident). We'd also do a quick interview with each of them, asking what have they enjoyed, what do they want to do again. They were all really keen on rhythm, particularly something called the Rainstorm Soundscape.

"So we continued to use body percussion to create soundscapes. At the start of the sessions these young people didn't seem to consider that rhythm was a skill, but we spent a couple of sessions on it as it's very inclusive, even for those who can't clap or speak. For example, Martin* would look to the left to say yes, to the right to say no. If myself or a support worker sat with him with an iPad, he could choose the sounds he wanted by indicating yes or no when they were played. Sometimes we'd hold the iPad to his hand so he could make a noise. We'd go round the circle, taking turns to build up a pulse, and he wouldn't do a clap, but he'd still be part of it, and when that happened, his smile was amazing!

“Between sessions, usually by email, we’d work out the next week’s session. A typical plan would be laid out on an A4 sheet with headings. Each session was structured, but very flexible and responsive to what happened on the day.

“We chose activities to get the group to be very active in making choices with their music making. There was an activity called ‘The Conductor’ which was popular, which uses body percussion and voices. One person leads everybody, showing or telling them in various ways according to what works for them to start, stop, get louder, quieter. Martin was able to do that through eye contact – which took a fair amount of concentration on the part of the others. That was really empowering, and they told us afterwards that they really enjoyed leading their friends in making music, as well as making sounds together.

“We also take recordings at each session and then play them back at the next session, and get their feedback to develop reflective practice among the young people about the music they’re creating.”

Was it difficult agreeing activities to suit everyone?

“Around eight young people aged 16-22 were involved, but towards the end of the project we had a few changes in the group. A couple of people stopped coming – one due to ill health – and a couple of new people turned up because they’d heard about it from their friends, and they wanted to do singing.

“Again we had to think quickly, as literacy is a problem for two of the group. So we started with a call and response activity, one person singing and the group responding. That meant they didn’t have to read or even say anything, they could just hum along.

“Finding voices is a challenge: getting the pitch, helping them to find their voices when they don’t usually do singing. We have four who really enjoy singing, and with the others we just used different methods to engage them in the singing – for example, doing songwriting.”

What methods did you use?

“One method was called ‘PoeTree’ – you draw a tree on a piece of paper and start at the roots, asking for a word to do with ‘Things I Like’. Then you draw branches, and for every word you create two separate words on branches. One of the words rhymes, another is an associated word. Martin could join in too as he has a folder on his communication device listing things he likes, and things relating to them. We then played a blues riff on the guitar, asked the group to improvise over the top with the words they chose, and they really enjoyed that.

“So for the next three weeks, they took turns on the microphone and improvised using those words, and came up with a song. One young person just picked up the mic, started singing, and using words they hadn’t used before – they were really getting into the swing of improvising. And because they

were getting a response – immediate feedback from peers – they felt confident that they could say whatever they said in their head, they were clearly very safe, and they were talking about what they were interested in.

“Gradually they contributed their ideas, with each person taking the lead depending on what they felt was their strength. One person was a good rhymers, and so he’d done a lot of that; another didn’t use speech much but tended to mimic other people, so we included something she was mimicking.

“Everyone was very inclusive: they were all particularly keen and able to celebrate their work as a group, and applaud each other. One of them would say, ‘Martha hasn’t contributed yet’, so we’d ask her what she wanted in the song. They already had those skills of appreciating, feeding back and involving each other. And they’re very proud of their achievements together.”

How did the programme end, and what happens next?

“The culmination of their work was that they sang their song on stage at Salisbury Arts Centre, supporting a professional rock band from Bristol. The feedback from the audience was incredible. Members of the local community and other performers on the night (both the professional touring band and the other young and emerging bands on the line up) cheered. Parents and carers of the young musicians were incredibly moved. Martha’s mother couldn’t believe she had had the confidence to stand on stage with the group and they were all delighted with what the group had achieved and the evident progress in their musical skills and overall confidence. What was noticeable for me was that this group was the only one to invite the audience to sing along with their song and to make appropriate sound effects for their song. The group was so keen for everyone to share the music with them and to have a great time.

“Mencap staff have been really positive and pleased about the outcomes for each of the young people, and have subsequently been very supportive in exploring ways they can continue the work as a more formalised partnership with the Arts Centre. Adam has also been asked to work with them as part of their wider activities: it’s a progression route for him, as he’s a care worker in a home for adults with learning disabilities and he wants to do more music.

“Two of the group are now coming to Zone Club (one of them already comes), and I’m hoping that by coming to the Arts Centre for the performance, and their parents seeing them at the Centre too, it might encourage the others to get involved. Working in new spaces is always challenging for young people with disabilities, so it’ll give them confidence to come into the Arts Centre.”

One participant has already even signed up to join the Songwriters workshop course, which is open to all young people regardless of whether they have disabilities or not.

What have you learned, and what has helped?

Inclusive practice is simply good practice with all young people

"I've always believed that inclusive practice is the best way of practicing. You start without any preconceptions and allow yourself to be constantly surprised by what people do, and then give good feedback and reward with positivity. To actually see how important that is for these young people has made me want to work with similar groups in the future. And when I'm devising other projects in the future, I'll be inclusive and think more broadly about the work – I think that's really important."

Time to talk with case workers and young people improves quality

"We were lucky that Mencap had sent a few of its case workers along who knew most of the young people. It's been really helpful to consistently have support workers there who we've been able to get advice from. Simple things like, we didn't know that young people would need a break half way through the session. But that break was helpful too, because we could find out more about the young people, what they respond well to, and what technology we may be able to use. We'd say, 'we're planning to use this app, how will that work?' It really helped us to build trust and confidence much faster ... Having this time was really important. We might have had even more time: originally it was planned that we would have a portable studio on a trolley called the Boom Station. But it wasn't possible for it to be put together in time, so this had a knock-on effect in that we had to spend a lot more time setting up the equipment individually – we'd planned to be able to take the trolley in and it would take five minutes to set up."

Co-working with another music leader has been crucial ...

"Adam's been aware from the start that I'm not confident about music technology, but I felt confident to tell him what my strengths and weaknesses were. Working with Adam has been amazing as he's so experienced in working with people with learning disabilities. It helps that we drive to and from sessions together and so we bounce ideas off each other, help each other with strategies for co-working."

... as has observing/being observed, skills sharing and mentoring

"When I first got involved with the work here, we went to the other Zone Club at Wiltshire Music Centre to see the good practice that was delivered there, and to work with practitioners. We observed them, and then were able to get involved as much as we were happy to. We then started

delivering Zone Club in Salisbury at the Arts Centre, and practitioners from other parts of Wiltshire and from Bristol came over to support us, which was really helpful. We attended three days of training in inclusive music leading with Gloucestershire Music Makers (now The Music Works), and we have had the support of a mentor, who's very experienced and is involved in Arts Award, and that's been really helpful. And we've been networking with other practitioners in Salisbury and further as well. In terms of practical, hands-on support, SWAG couldn't have done more for us."

** Names have been changed*

About Musical Inclusion

Musical Inclusion is a central part of the strategy of [Wiltshire Music Connect](#), the county's music education hub. It involves ensuring that all children and young people who want to can make music.

This particular project was supported by funding from Youth Music through its Musical Inclusion programme, administered through a partnership between three music education hubs – Swindon, Wiltshire and Gloucestershire (SWAG). SWAG was one of 26 Musical Inclusion projects across England, tasked with ensuring that children in challenging circumstances were able to access music-making opportunities through music education hubs.

The work involved delivery of music activities with a range of partners, strategic working to ensure integration of musically inclusive practice in work with children and young people, and workforce development to ensure quality of provision.

Find out more

Musical Inclusion:

<http://network.youthmusic.org.uk/learning/musical-inclusion>

Salisbury Arts Centre:

www.salisburyartscentre.co.uk

Simon Morris, Engagement Manager

simon@salisburyarts.co.uk

01722 343027

07790 388561