

What I Wish I'd Known Then: My Three Top Tips for Engaging 'Vulnerable' Women in Arts-Based Research

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Throughout my adult life I have worked with so-called vulnerable groups in various roles, including as a social researcher, community artist and adult educator. Through this engagement, I have learnt to view vulnerability as an 'amorphous concept', which is often quite meaningless to how research participants view themselves (van den Hoonaardan 2019, p. 3). For my PhD study, I chose to work with women who could be considered acutely vulnerable, as all were survivors of childhood sexual abuse, sexual exploitation and recent homelessness. In this module, I reflect on my experiences of facilitating a collaborative, arts-based research study with nine 'vulnerable', yet extremely powerful, young women.

Please note that for some readers the content may be difficult; although no reference is made explicitly to the participants' abuse histories, the trauma they endured is seen to impact on their ability to fully engage in the study.

Why art, research and adult learning?

I understand arts-based research to be a qualitative approach in which some form of art-making is employed as the primary mode of systematic inquiry (McNiff, 2011). Arts-based research can include all artistic disciplines, from dance and drama to music and the visual arts. The artistic approach is usually linked to the practitioner's interests and strengths. In my case, I chose to employ the visual arts as I have always been a keen visual artist. In my late teens, I led art and photography groups when volunteering at a mental health charity. In my twenties, I trained as a social researcher and continued to work with what were considered vulnerable and marginalized groups, developing my qualitative research skills in order to capture lived experiences. I now practice as a qualitative researcher, adult educator and community artist. Arts-based researcher Patricia Leavy (2015) argues that there is a certain synergy between art and qualitative research, as in both the practitioner aims to illuminate something about the world which they chose to study. I recognize this synergy in my own work and see how the two complement each other. I would add that as a feminist adult educator, I believe it is important to create an environment where participants can connect, develop relationships and have learning

experiences *as women* (Tisdell, 1998 *her emphasis*, p. 141). The feminist, art-based adult educator, Darlene Clover (2016) views the arts as “critical, creative forces in education, learning and knowledge mobilization” (p. 4). I recognize the power of the arts and have witnessed through my own praxis how important the arts can be as a tool for engagement and communication.

Background to the study

I approached a Glasgow-based charity which supported young female survivors of sexual abuse and sexual violence. I knew the young women had requested an arts class in the perceived safe space of the charity building. I volunteered to work as an artist, facilitator and researcher and to run a once weekly, 2-hour visual art session within the communal area of the charity offices for over a 6-month period. The purpose was to explore and document the relationship between arts-based adult learning and recovery from the trauma of abuse. Nine service users and five staff members agreed to participate. I supplied various art materials including paint, pencil, ink, oil pastel, clay and wire. Each week I led a session, introducing techniques and supporting the women to create artworks (See Figs. 1-3). I journaled their artistic efforts and photographed their learning, making extensive field notes following the session. Towards the end of the fieldwork period I asked the participants to take part in an in-depth, semi-structured, one-to-one interview. The photographs of the process were used as visual prompts to aid our discussions.

The young women involved in the study had lived experience of gender-based violence and trauma and this undeniably influenced their ability to engage fully in the arts-based learning and the research process. Even as a seasoned practitioner,



Figure 1: Participant artwork in wire and sequins.



Figure 2: Participant artwork in acrylic inks.



Figure 3: Participant artwork in plasticine and wire.

the sessions were sometimes surprising, behaviours unpredictable and the learning took unexpected turns. I would like to share my experiences for those planning to engage similar groups in arts-based adult learning and/or research. These may not be universally applicable but I hope they are helpful in assisting practitioners to reflect on and shape their approach.

TOP TIPS

1. DO: begin with a session plan but be ready to modify or even drop it!

Before commencing the fieldwork, I became increasingly concerned that my skills as an artist-facilitator would not be sufficient. Leavy (2015) argues that arts-based researchers do not necessarily need formal training in their chosen art but can begin where they are and learn as they go. However, I wanted to present as an arts-based researcher and educator, able to facilitate a process that was robust and well structured. I was able to shadow a community arts organization in order to observe the work they undertook with marginalized groups. As a participant/observer I noted the pace, the materials, the outcomes and outputs of their work. From this experience, I went on to create detailed lesson plans. I designed warm-up activities and produced examples of artworks in various materials including acrylic paint, ink, pastel, pencil, wire, plasticine and clay. I practiced my craft on family and friends, and through these carefully planned steps, I felt ready to conduct fieldwork.

In reality, my plans did not work out quite as I expected. We did explore art materials and experiment with various techniques but the anticipated learning outcomes were unattainable. This was because I had not fully appreciated the process of recovery and the impact of trauma on the women in my study. Every aspect of their lives was affected, from the psychological strain of accessing the venue via public transport, to the physical pain experienced when attempting an art activity. It took time for me to understand the barriers to participation and appreciate the preferences of individuals in the group. I learnt to adapt the session and to curb my expectations, slowing down the pace of facilitation to one activity per session (with rest breaks) and providing alternative options for those who were not ready or able to take part in the planned sessions.

My first 'top tip' for undertaking arts-based research in an adult education framework is to prepare and plan, but be cognizant that when working with any community, individuals will have their own agendas and interests which will be shaped by personal histories and outside influences.

2. DO: set boundaries – establish why visual art is being created and how it will be used

Being invited to create visual art can hold multiple meanings for a participant. The women involved in my study indicated that in the past, they had been encouraged by support staff to use visual art to express emotions and to communicate that what could not be put easily into words. A number had tried art therapy sessions during their time in psychiatric institutions and understood the potential therapeutic release of this form of non-verbal communication. As the facilitator of the group, I was at pains to stress that the purpose of the art activity was to learn new techniques and 'play' with different media, in a relaxed space where we could enjoy the creative process. Through their engagement, I hoped to explore the relationship between arts-based adult learning and the perceived recovery process of young women who had experienced trauma and abuse. The purpose of the research was communicated to the participants during the course of the study. It was also stressed that the space was safe because it was in the charity building where staff were on hand, not because it was a safe space to discuss abuse histories, or disclose information that could be potentially triggering for others. This was an exploration of adult learning, not therapy.

To ensure the safety of the space, I utilized the approach used by the charity group worker, who told me that group rules were established at the beginning of any given project. These included respecting the opinions of others, being kind to one and other, valuing each other's personal space, and not sharing stories which could cause discomfort. Usually, this was written up on a flip-chart but I decided to create an art piece with the young women to capture the group rules in our first session together. We constructed a mural, using chalk pastels and sharpies (See Fig. 4). They were encouraged to doodle their names and free-draw patterns on a large sheet of paper, covering the table. The women were then asked to add group rules to the mural. This caused lots of laughter whilst the women sketched and discussed the group rules and created a lively atmosphere. I was instructed to draw some of the suggested imagery. The individuals in the group were sometimes unsure how to represent ideas but often forceful in their guidance. Once complete, the mural was pinned to the wall as a reminder of the group purpose and parameters. In interview, a member of staff commented that this was a clever and subtle way to involve the participants in establishing the rules of the group and ensure the space felt safe:

“It's been so cleverly done in art... I was watching their participation in that and their conversation, because it was involving art, [it] seemed to flow much easier than it would have if I was just having a conversation with them.”

In the one-on-one interview, the young women spoke of their relief in coming into the space to have fun, learn different art approaches and try new materials, rather than explicitly using art as part of the therapeutic process. It is interesting to note that some participants did use the visual techniques outside of the sessions, creating images and artworks to express how they felt about their lived experiences. These were sometimes shared with me at the beginning or end of our sessions, privately, so as not to upset or trigger other members of the group. Boundaries were understood and maintained throughout.

My second top tip is to communicate with the participants and ensure that boundaries are understood and respected. During the 6-month period, we discussed how the art would be created, how it would be used, who it was for and which audiences should be targeted. By doing so, the process felt participatory and empowering. The young women in the research understood what was being asked of them and how their involvement and creative expression helped me reflect on and capture their experiences.



Figure 4: Section of the group mural in chalk pastel and sharpies (Names obscured).

3. DO NOT: underestimate the time it takes to build rapport and trust

My third and final top tip links to the need to take time to build rapport and sustain relationships with vulnerable groups. The young women in my research did not bring in their personal artworks to show me at the beginning of the process. It took a number of weeks before trust was established, both to share artworks and to reveal aspects of their lives. For some, it took many weeks to even engage in the creative process. One young woman attended the group every week and most times, declined to take part in the activities offered. She sat in the same chair, joining in the conversations, sometimes laughing or joking, but wasn't willing to make art with the group. As the facilitator, this worried me, as I wanted to create an environment for active learning and hoped we would produce artworks for exhibition. When I encouraged her to participate, she replied, "I'll try it later" or "I'm not bothered" and did not engage. Over time, I realized that this was okay, as she was attending and contributing to discussions. At that point in her recovery, this was enough. I learnt to stop comparing her to the other more prolific members of the art group and slowly, she began to participate. In the autumn, following a summer of weekly meetings, the young woman brought in a sketchbook. She concealed the artwork from the other members of the group, motioning for me to view the book under the table. I understood why when I saw the content. Words and images related to her abuse were embedded on the pages. Some had been ripped, scribbled over, destroyed, others were perfect and crisp. In her interview, she explained that she knew her artwork could be triggering for others but wanted to show me she was using the materials and techniques. It had taken over two months for this young woman to trust me enough to share her artwork and reveal glimpses of her past.

A final example I'd like to share is a difficult one, but I am including it for a reason. We had an incident of self-harm during one of the art sessions, where a participant went to the bathroom and cut herself badly with a razor blade. She was taken to the hospital to get the wound treated and as a result she was off for a number of weeks. When she returned, she was welcomed back to the group and I began setting up an art activity, that involved cutting thick paper with sharp blades. When I placed the knife on the table, I hesitated in front of the individual who had just got out of hospital. The group began to laugh and the young woman quipped, "Ha, you better not put that in front of me, you won't know what I'll do with it!" at which the group exploded with laughter. I

was shocked by this and felt vulnerable as the facilitator. I asked, "Are we doing this? Are we laughing about this, is this okay?" The young women assured me it was fine and an important thing to speak about in the group. For the rest of the session we created artworks and the young women led discussions about self-harm as a coping mechanism. Two things came from this experience for me. The first was that through the provision of an informal learning space, where art materials and free expression were encouraged, a positive healing environment was created. The young women seemed to value the opportunity to talk openly about self-harm as they worked with the art materials. It created a space for the feminist ideal of co-learning and collaboration. The second realization was the shifting relationships between those in the group and with me as facilitator. I was learning and growing along with the participants. One commented in the interview that I had shown trust in supplying the young women with blades and treated them as adults who could learn to use sharp tools for creativity and expression. This was important in the development of our relationship, as the following quote illustrates:

"I think it's erm... with the self-harm thing, it's just nice to be trusted with kinda objects, rather than people be like, oh, you can't touch that, you can't touch this. You may cut yourself, you know?"

The relationships and rapport between myself and the adult learners continued to grow. At the end of the process, once artworks had been produced and interviews had taken place, we came together to exhibit. The young women chose to speak at the opening of the exhibition. They presented images from the sessions, detailed how the research process felt and how the opportunity for adult learning had impacted on their recovery. They spoke about the importance of being involved in an academic research and the pride they had in showing other survivors that they could produce such powerful images and artworks. It was humbling and gratifying to hear them speak with confidence and authority.

My third and final top tip therefore is to build time into the research process to allow relationships to develop and trust to grow between the participants and facilitator. Art-making is an activity which makes us vulnerable to criticism. We all carry the fear of 'getting it wrong'. The space has to be welcoming and relaxed; relationships supportive and encouraging. Most importantly, the facilitator must allow participants to engage at a level and pace which is comfortable and sustainable.

And so this concludes my top tips for this work, I hope they are useful. No doubt

more will transpire as I continue to write up my PhD findings and analyze the data. For now, the take home message when undertaking arts-based research, or other arts-based engagement, with vulnerable groups is to try to have fun, allow yourself to laugh and don't expect anything to go quite as planned. As John Law (2004) observes, research is often messy and complex. Add to the mix visual art, learning and recovery, and it can be very messy indeed! Enjoy the process and where possible, share the mess. Together we can establish how to best use arts-based research approaches to engage the most vulnerable of groups.

Although my experience is based on my academic research, these top tips can be applied by anybody who is interested in organizing an arts-based workshop, a community project or a small group activity.

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