

*WP Puppet Theatre
Evaluation of VIEW from the Inside Program, January-June 2022*

Centre Team

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Introduction

The Sheridan Centre for Elder Research (CER) was contracted to provide evaluative support for WP Puppet Theatre (WPPT) located in Calgary, Alberta. Between January and June 2022, members of the CER team worked with WPPT to collect data from participants attending three cohorts of interventions sessions.

Older adults, even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, were already at an elevated risk for social isolation. Through self-expression and creativity, WPPT provides a potential opportunity for individuals to overcome social connection difficulties experienced in these uncertain times. There is a growing literature showing the benefits of the arts for the cognitive, social, and emotional well-being of older adults and those who care for them. In this project we sought to provide objective evidence of the potential benefits of the WPPT VIEW from the Inside program. We collected data from the participants and the program through observation and questionnaires. This collaboration between CER and WPPT also provided an opportunity to gather data around the potential benefits derived from virtual delivery of this program.

Method

Data Collection

Observational data. Data were collected during three cohorts of 8-week WPPT VIEW from the Inside program sessions. Cohort 1 (Alberta recruitment, February-March 2022), Cohorts 2 (Ontario recruitment, April-May 2022) and Cohort 3 (Alberta recruitment; April-May 2022). Note that one combined session 6 was held for Cohorts 2 and 3. Session observations were collected via a standard template, and included any comments made in the Zoom chatbox. Observed behaviours of and comments by participants, as well as comments by the program facilitators, were noted.

Participant questionnaires.

Pre-intervention questionnaire. An 18-item SurveyMonkey questionnaire was created for participants. The questionnaire collected basic demographic data (8 questions; age, identified gender, physical and mental health) and solicited information about participant expectations for the program and experience with art-making (10 questions).

Post-intervention questionnaire. A 19-item SurveyMonkey questionnaire was created for participants. The questionnaire collected basic demographic data (3 questions; current physical and mental health) and solicited feedback on the program (16 questions).

Focus group and interview.

Five participants completed a follow-up focus group ($n = 4$) or interview ($n = 1$) in which the researcher led them through a series of questions related to program delivery, self-perceived benefits of participation, and potential modifications to the program.

Data Analysis

All quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data was conducted using Microsoft Excel. Thematic analysis was conducted by the principal investigator, through identifying and coding specific themes in the participant responses and in the observations.

Results

Participant Characteristics

Twenty-six individuals enrolled in the program, 10 in Cohort 1, six in Cohort 2, and 10 in Cohort 3. Nine participants completed Cohort 1, five participants completed Cohort 2, and three participants completed Cohort 3. Data from these 17 participants (*Mage* = 68 years, *SD* = 9 years, range = 55-85 years, 88% self-identified as women) will be shared here. Please note that participants from two retirement communities in Alberta had originally joined Cohort 3. Unfortunately, due to the ongoing pandemic and challenges with technology, the four participants were not able to continue with the program. Working with this population during the pandemic posed a unique challenge to the program facilitator, who had to rely on staff to help connect these participants to the VIEW from the Inside program sessions. It is disappointing that they were not able to continue with the program, as they may indeed benefit from the opportunity to engage in the arts and to connect socially with others during these difficult times.

Attendance at sessions by the 17 included participants was 94%. Forty-one percent of participants were married/in a common law partnership, 18% were divorced, 18% were widowed, and 23% were single. Participants were almost evenly split between living alone/in a retirement complex (53%) and living with a spouse/common-law partner or family member (47%). All but two participants had completed some level of post-secondary education. The majority (71%) of participants rated themselves in excellent or very good physical health, while 59% of participants rated themselves in excellent or very good mental health. Specific medical conditions experienced by these participants including hearing loss, arthritis, blindness

Roughly half (53%) of the participants had taken part in a visual art-making program before. Only two (10%) had taken part in a puppet-making program before- one participants was teaching

themselves how to build a stop-motion puppet, and a second had taken wooden puppet-carving lessons for a year). The majority of participants (65%) either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: “I have a talent for making art/I am artistic”, 88% either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: “I am a creative person”, 71% either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: “People around me often say that I am artistic”, 76% either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: “People around me often say that I am creative”, and 88% either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement “Making and/or enjoying art is an important aspect of my life with many positive outcomes”.

Goals for the program. Participants were asked to comment on their potential goals for taking part in this program. The most common goals for participants entering the VIEW from the Inside program were to feel more confidence in their art-making and creativity abilities, learn from other participants, and feel more socially engaged overall. The majority of participants (88%) either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that they wanted to have a better general understanding about puppet-making. Open-ended responses related to reasons for joining included social connection (P10: “interest in puppet making, and also to see how this can help my perspective on life and people, and to socialise even if remotely.”), introspection (P12: “opportunity to reflect about life's meaning and purpose in a creative way”), mental health (P14: “I was excited to join because art calms my stress and boosts my mood”), and building on professional skills (P2: “I saw the program and thought it would be a good fit for me, as I work as a therapeutic arts practitioner and would like to experience a program like this from the client side.”).

Participant Observations

Participants were observed to be generally engaged in the program sessions, with connections being formed both amongst themselves and with the program facilitators. Participants shared about their own personal preferences (e.g., favourite park to visit, current reading material) and chose different

words (e.g., colour, weather), to describe how they were feeling on a specific day. The facilitators used a number of unique methods to help participants get to know one another, including moving into breakout rooms for smaller conversations, and introducing one another to the group. Participants were also encouraged to comment on and critique different types of art forms (e.g., portrait) as a way of learning how to discuss and describe shapes, colours, and evoked emotions.

Participant Feedback

Post-intervention questionnaire. Overall enjoyment of the program, rated on a scale of 0-10, was 8.4 (*SDev* = 1.9, *range* = 4-10). Tying back to the pre-intervention questionnaire, 94% of participants either strongly agreed or agreed that the program gave them a better general understanding of puppet making. Participants were asked to comment on their originally-stated goals for the program; 81% of participants either strongly agreed or agreed that they now feel more confidence in their art-making and creativity abilities, 88% of participants either strongly agreed or agreed that they had learned from other participants, and 67% of participants either strongly agreed or agreed that they felt more socially engaged overall. When asked to comment on their experience with the program facilitator, 94% of participants either strongly agreed or agreed that they communicated well with them, and 88% of participants either strongly agreed or agreed that the facilitator provided helpful feedback to them.

Benefits from program participation related to gaining insight into oneself and one's own abilities (e.g., P12: "Deeper understanding about how to 'find myself' after a long successful career."), improvements to mental health and wellbeing (e.g., P3: "This program came to me shortly after I was hospitalized for 10 weeks in a mental health unit due to a sudden and severe mental health crisis unlike anything I had ever experienced. The program contributed to my healing every bit as much as the cognitive behavior therapy that was part of my recovery strategy."), and social connection (e.g., P11: "I

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enjoyed meeting the participants and sharing our feelings and realizing you are not alone in your personal struggles”). Seventy-five percent of participants said that engaging in the program increased their desire to engage in the arts going forward (e.g., P7: “Confidence in my identity as an artist”; P14: “I found my creative side”, P16: “Gained knowledge in creating”). Eighty-eight percent of participants said that their puppet skills had increased since the start of the program (e.g., P1: “I had never made a puppet before, so all my learning was from the ground up”, P8: “Never thought of myself using Puppets as a form of my artistic expression.”, P13: “Helped to build courage and making the video was a great experience.”).

One unique aspect of the VIEW from the Inside program is the opportunity for participants to display their masks and share a brief description of the finished product/experience with their peers. This allows them to develop their videography and dramatic skills. As one participant indicated: “I am so proud of the mask that I created and the video that I made to share my artist statement.” (P3). Seventy-three percent of participants said that their dramatic skills had increased since the start of the program (P6: “I’ve never performed with puppets before. It was fun!!”, P14: “my skills have increased by learning ffrom [sic] others”, P4: “I had never performed before. Seeing others performances increased my awareness of the variety of ways the creative process can be expressed.”).

It was clear that the high quality of facilitation during the program helped participants connect with the facilitators, and improved the overall experience of the program. Ninety-four percent of participants reported that the facilitator had supported their creative personal development (P1: “she also took time to answer all my questions and concerns, artistically, or otherwise”, P14: “the facillatators [sic] were very knowledgeable and thought us some skills and ideas”, P8: “By setting challenges, clearly outlying expectations and supporting individual needs of participants.”). All of the participants said that they would recommend this program to a friend (P3: “I have!!! Many times!!!”, P10: “If I feel the friend

needs it”, P12: “My friends are curious about my mask and enjoy it when I send pictures of it.”). There were numerous expressions of gratitude towards the facilitators for offering this program (P3: “I am incredibly grateful for this experience! Thank you!”, P8: “Thank you for offering this program. I am glad that it was both financially and accessible to us.”, P13: “Thanks to the facilitators for taking on this journey.”, P14: “Very patient and accepting and nonjudgemental. They always made us feel like we did a great job”).

Feedback about potential modifications to the program included longer sessions (e.g., 90 or 120 minutes), hosting a follow-up session a few weeks after the program ends, and auditory descriptions during the performances to help individuals who may be experiencing vision loss.

Focus group and interview.

A 90-minute focus group was held with four participants, three from Cohort 2 and one from Cohort 1. A separate interview was held with a fifth participant (from Cohort 2) who had been unavailable to attend the focus group.

Feedback from these sessions reinforced the findings from the questionnaire; participants were grateful for the opportunity to take part in the VIEW from the Inside program, and discovered more about themselves through their participation in the program (e.g., P8: “I can’t even explain it, but it was a mental spark for me”, P14: “I feel empowered by doing this program, get me outside of my comfort zone”).

Participants indicated that longer sessions would have been preferred, and would have given them more time to spend in smaller groups in the breakout rooms. One participant also indicated that longer sessions would have helped in terms of viewing the pre-recorded videos, they would have wanted to have more time to pause the video and have discussion before moving on. Participants also suggested holding two sessions per week in order to build rapport and help improve connections between

participants. The perception of an abrupt ending after the eight session ended could be mitigated by having follow-up sessions 1 or 2 months after the last session, and an “alumni group” that would meet monthly or bimonthly on an ongoing basis. One participant described herself and her fellow attendees as “ships passing in the night” (P8), and the other participants agreed that more time together would have been appreciated and could have contributed to their learning and self-expression: “For my masks I got inspiration from the other people in the class” (P14).

The participants responded positively to the news that the WP Puppet Theatre may consider expanding program facilitation to helping professions in the future. A number of participants emphasized the mental health impact of the program on themselves (P14: “for me it calmed me down and helped with my stress a lot”, P13: “having to look at your inner self, pick what was important and leave what was stressing you out”, P11: “I felt more relaxed, I just felt really good [after the session was over]”) and that they felt other participants might benefit from the input of trained mental health professionals, in particular. The reminiscence inherent in creating the masks was also emphasized, along with the considerations not only of the past but of the future selves: “I had a lot more time on my hands to think about what I really want to do with the future. I needed a path to going forward that was more formal, more structured” (P13).

Conclusions

Data collected virtually and through questionnaires and focus group/ interview opportunities with WP Puppet Theatre VIEW from the Inside program participants indicated numerous positive benefits of the experience for older adult participants.

Virtual delivery of the program via Zoom was feasible and proved to be very successful, with some participants indicating that it helped them attend all of the sessions because they could easily “go” to their next event simply by moving from one Zoom session to another. The key recommendation emerging from this work would be to continue offering this program virtually, extending the length of individual sessions, and considering holding more sessions/follow-up sessions, as these were an excellent opportunity to create social connections, learn more about oneself, and push one’s own creative boundaries. It was clear that this program was highly beneficial for participants, and the virtual modality meant that participants could join from all over the country. It may be beneficial for WP Puppet Theatre to continue offering this program online even as Canada begins to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, so that more older Canadians have access to this unique form of creativity and self-expression.