



Home And Away

Written by Isobel Murdoch, January 2023

Will taking part in arts for wellbeing initiatives from home go on growing now that Covid has retreated? Could this open up more opportunities for older people who may have limited mobility or access to transport, or who have lost confidence to go out? Is it a positive and sustainable change? Or do arts for wellbeing have a greater impact in person? These are some of the questions I've been asking myself recently as I continue to develop Medley, the online arts for wellbeing initiative I set up in 2020.

Medley works in different ways – I produce themed Creative Ideas, combining music, art and nature (<https://medley.live/creative-ideas/>) which are used mainly by care homes; I run occasional online workshops; I write a regular blog; and I run two ongoing Facebook groups, one on overall wellbeing and one on art for mental health. Perhaps the main focus though is my art for wellbeing projects (<https://medley.live/community-sessions/>). I've now run 6 of these, the most recent being an Animals A-Z Art for Wellbeing Challenge. Participants receive regular emails with art activity ideas and example images, take part from home in their own time, and can share artwork in a private project Facebook group. They are open to all ages, but a significant proportion of participants are older.

Yes, digital exclusion is a major issue as practitioners try to engage older people online here and now, although literacy is growing. But looking even to the near future, as slightly younger generations already familiar with technology age, this will change. Remote and online events will become all the more viable.

As I develop Medley, I see more and more how a large part of arts for wellbeing's impact is all about community, not just creativity. And you could say that this is where remote projects fall down. Yet many participants seem happy to share artwork and thoughts and feelings either in Facebook groups or during a Zoom or Teams workshop. They may even feel more free and less inhibited than in person.

Flexibility is one real positive. The freedom to complete an activity in your own time helps people whose health is uncertain from day to day, or who have caring commitments. Even if the activity is a live workshop at a set time, there's no need to travel there. This is obviously important for people who are housebound or bedbound, or the many more older people who are no longer able to drive or to manage public transport.

As Medley moves into its third year, I would particularly like to focus on reaching more housebound and bedbound people, for whom this remote model could open up new possibilities and hold ajar doors which might have seemed closed to them. So far I haven't found any organisations or networks specifically focusing on reaching people in this situation. Although, as most people who are housebound or bedbound will have a health condition, physical disability or mental health issues – in many cases connected to older age and frailty - organisations for these conditions, or for older people, could be an alternative (but less direct) way to reach them. Generally, I would really welcome more networks (informal or formal) linking arts for wellbeing practitioners with support groups or organisations interested in trying arts for wellbeing.

Covid lockdowns may have propelled us all into more remote ways of working and creating, but I feel technology is really levelling the playing field for many people. It's all to explore.

Isobel Murdoch runs Medley, an online arts for wellbeing initiative
(<https://medley.live>)

