



Creativity, connection and wellbeing: Executive Summary of an Evaluation of Discovery College arts courses

Emma Insley
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Discovery College arts courses in numbers

Discovery College provides a range of free courses in East Sussex to help young people deal with mental health challenges. Creative courses have been delivered in partnership with Culture Shift and a range of other arts organisations. Each course is co-produced with mental health practitioners, artists and young people with lived-experience of mental health challenges.

126 Young people supported

19 Courses evaluated

144 Course places filled

"It helped me realise that other people were feeling the same as me and loved listening and playing music as much as I do."

MUSIC SPEAKS PARTICIPANT



of young people felt supported and valued through their course

Course locations in East Sussex



49% Had a meaningful increase in wellbeing (using Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale)



1.4 Statistically significant 14-point increase in wellbeing



85% Felt the course helped them to get on and work with other young people



63% Felt more connected to others



61% Felt more confident



73% Achieved the goal that they set for themselves



"It helped me to be more myself, talk to people and make new friends."

DISCOVERY COLLEGE PARTICIPANT

INTRODUCTION

About Discovery College arts courses

Discovery College arts courses are free, informal courses for young people aged 12-20 that are delivered after school/college within community and cultural venues across East Sussex. Arts Council England is the primary funder of the arts courses, which are run as **part of a broader offer of free courses run by Discovery College**, all with the aim of supporting young people to deal with mental health challenges they may be experiencing.

Courses are created and delivered using Discovery College's **unique co-production approach**, where a mental health practitioner, creative practitioner and young person with lived experience of mental health challenges work together to plan and deliver the course. The arts courses cover topics such as **photography, music, street art, digital skills, creative writing, drawing, painting and animation** and are currently delivered in St. Leonards, Hastings, Bexhill, Eastbourne, Newhaven and Lewes.

About the evaluation

This executive summary highlights the key findings about the Discovery College arts courses, from the independent evaluation report of the wider Discovery Arts programme, undertaken by Insley Consulting, through a mixed-methods approach:

- **Pre- and post-course (distance travelled) survey**, including the Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale.
- **Young people's journal**, completed by participants during their course.
- **Observations by facilitators** of the outcomes achieved by participants.
- **Interviews** with three young people who attended the courses and four parents, as well as informal discussions with eight young people.
- **Six focus groups**, conducted with creative and mental health practitioners who co-facilitated the courses.

Courses, participants and attendance

- **19** Discovery College arts courses were evaluated, running between September 2020 and February 2023.
- **14** artists from **11** different arts organisations were involved as co-facilitators.
- **126** young people took part, filling **144** participant places, an **average of 7.6** participants per course. **18** young people were returning attendees.
- **73%** of participants had low mental wellbeing before participating in a course.
- **18** facilitators were trained in co-production.

FINDINGS

Young people's satisfaction

Young people welcomed the opportunity to participate in a creative course where they could meet people with similar creative interests and have fun. **89% of young people felt supported and valued within their course.** Although satisfaction was high, some young people, parents and practitioners said that they **wanted courses to run for longer than eight weeks.**

Furthermore, **attendance was lower than facilitators would have liked**, at an average of 58% (4.5 people per session). This is likely linked to participants' fluctuating mental wellbeing, as well as the pandemic and the practicalities of attending courses in a different area after school.

Outcomes achieved

Young people experience increased subjective mental and emotional wellbeing

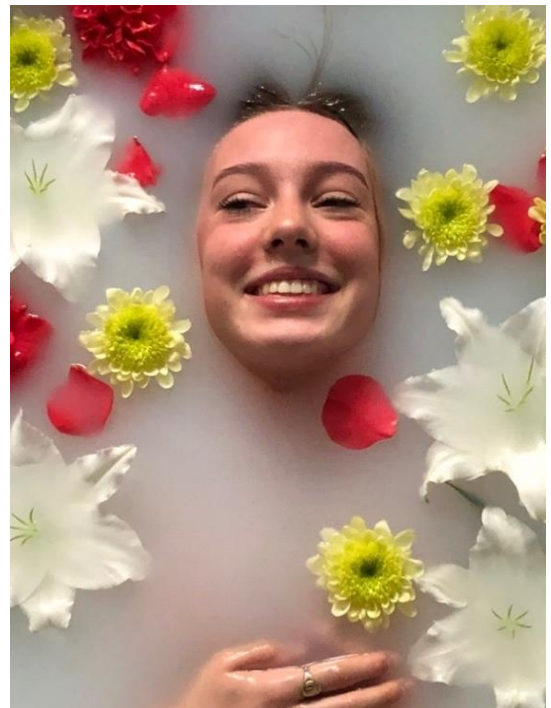
Of the 47 Discovery College arts participants who completed both pre- and post-course (distance travelled) surveys, **49% reported a meaningfully positive increase in their subjective wellbeing** (of two points or more).

*“It brings out the positivity in yourself and you can become who you’re supposed to be.”
(Music Speaks course participant)*

Courses are reaching the right people - 72.3% of participants had low wellbeing before the course, which reduced to 53.2% of participants by the end of the eight-week course, a reduction of 19.1%. The mean average increase in wellbeing was 1.40 points (from 20.6 to 22), **a statistically significant increase¹.**

Young people have increased skills at expressing feelings and managing their mental health

Qualitative responses showed that engaging in creative activities allowed **young people and facilitators to work side-by-side in a relaxed way.** This helped the participants feel comfortable to express themselves without fear of judgement from others, and **87% of young people were observed sharing thoughts about a subject.** Most of the participants were also able to open-



¹ Using the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test at a 95% confidence level.

up about what was going on in their lives – **81% were observed expressing their feelings in a positive way.**

“[My daughter] felt free for the first time. It’s probably the first space outside of the house that she’s felt like she can be her.” (Parent of Discovering Our Best Selves course participant)

Analysis of the participants’ journals indicates that **many of the young people acquired new skills to manage their wellbeing and mental health**, from seeking support from other people, to engaging in self-care activities.

Young people are less socially isolated and more connected with their peers



One of the first challenges for many of the young people participating in the art courses was being able to work in a group. However, with time and the facilitators’ gentle and gradual approach to working together, **82% of participants were observed working as part of a group** and **85% reported the course helped them to get on and work with other people.**

Additionally, **over half (63%) of the young people reported feeling more connected to others**, with several participants describing finding common ground through having similar creative interests. This paved the way to **sharing more of themselves, including the mental health challenges they were experiencing.**

“I have met people with the same struggles who want to listen to my interests or have similar ones.” (Tech Tasters course participant)

Young people have increased creative skills

Most (86%) of the participants were observed as gaining or increasing a creative skill, including photography, music, creative writing, street art, journaling and web design. Several participants also reported seeing a **connection between learning creative skills and improving their personal skills and their ability to manage their wellbeing.**

“It helped me realise that other people were feeling the same as me and loved listening and playing music as much as I do.” (Music Speaks participant)

82% were observed as working as part of a group to contribute to the creation of collective artwork, which was an important part of helping them to feel connected to others. Despite participants reporting a high ability to use creativity to feel good before the course, **34% of participants (14 out of 41) reported an increase in using creativity to feel good** after the course.

Young people feel more resilient

Despite facilitators frequently observing young people as lacking in confidence in early sessions, the supportive and creative set-up of the courses meant that they felt more at ease as time went on, with **61% of participants reporting an increase in confidence after the course.** This was the self-reported distance-travelled outcome with the biggest average increase, from an average of 2.63 (out of 5) before the course to 3.84 after, an increase of 1.21 points.

The non-judgemental environment created by the facilitators allowed participants to relax and let down their guard, and the creative activities helped them to build trust in themselves and others. This meant that, as time went on, many of them found it easier to share their work and open-up to the group, with **half (51%) of them reporting feeling more comfortable being their true selves at the end of the course.**

“It helped me to be more myself, talk to people, and make friends.” (Web Design participant)

Additionally, **the majority (86%) of young people were observed as trying something new** in sessions, with some developing new hobbies and interests as a result.

Young people have achieved what they wanted from the course

Young people were asked, in their journals, to identify a goal that they would like to achieve through the course and to reflect at the end of the programme on whether they had achieved it. The **goals described broadly fell into three categories: developing creative skills, finding their own voice and connecting with others.** In the 36 complete journals received, **the majority (72%) of participants achieved the goal they had set for themselves.**



“[I learnt] how to better include myself in the activities. Improving my ability to talk to new people. Becoming more confident. Sharing more of my ideas. Speaking more.” (Composite quotes)

The importance of co-production

Courses were co-produced by a mental health practitioner, creative practitioner and a Peer Mentor with lived experience of mental health challenges. This helped to:

- **Create a supportive, relaxed and inclusive environment** with freedom from academic judgement, where **89% of young people felt supported and valued**.
- **Provide an opportunity for participants to meet peers, who are relatable role models** of recovery from mental health challenges.
- **Allow time for individual support** that is sensitive to participants' needs.
- **Provide the freedom, flexibility and openness to feedback within sessions**, which allowed participants to choose what they wanted to do.

The importance of space

Creative practitioners involved in facilitation and parents generally felt that **running the courses outside of the school environment, in cultural or community venues, made an important contribution** to the ability of young people to express themselves. However, Telling Your Story courses (part of the Discovery Arts wider programme), which are run within schools, had a higher attendance rate and slightly higher increase in mental wellbeing – this points towards the possibility that running courses in schools using the same non-academic and flexible approach through co-production may lead to better attendance without hindering outcomes.



The importance of creativity

Qualitative research found that **creativity made an important contribution to the self-reported and observed outcomes** achieved by young people, by supporting:

- **Engagement with peers** in a safe way.
- **Expression of feelings** in an indirect and safe way.
- **Enjoyment of group experiences** – the first time in a while for many young people.

- **Stress and anxiety reduction.**
- **The development of confidence**, a sense of purpose and meaning.
- **Learning and the use of people’s existing strengths** and creative talents in a safe, relaxed and non-academic way.

CONCLUSIONS

The evaluation has found that young people participating in Discovery College arts courses:

- Reported a **statistically significant increase in their mental wellbeing.**
- Reported **increases in feeling connected to others, confidence and feeling comfortable being their true selves.**
- **Learned creative skills** that were central to them feeling relaxed in the course and in groups, and connecting with others.
- **Developed new strategies to manage their mental health** through creativity, with many reporting using them at home after the course.
- **Achieved the goals that they set themselves**, which included being more creative, connecting with others and finding their voice.

The research also supports that:

- **The courses worked well with a non-academic approach in any setting.**
- **Creativity and co-production played an important contribution to the observed outcomes achieved by young people.**

“Now I can talk to people ... All kinds of stuff comes to me that I wouldn't have been able to do four years ago” (Web Design participant)

Because a significant proportion of participants were receiving mental wellbeing support through CAMHS or other agencies, we **cannot attribute the observed change in all participants directly to Discovery College arts courses.** However, there is good qualitative evidence to show that courses **made an important contribution to the recorded outcomes.**

The evaluation also found that there were **two unintended consequences:**

- **Raised aspirations in some young people** – Anecdotal evidence points towards the courses raising aspirations and facilitating future learning and work opportunities within some participants.
- **Some distress caused by the short duration of the courses** – This was reported by some young people as courses were coming to an end, as well as a few parents and facilitators.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Going forward, consideration should be made to making the following developments to the Discovery College arts courses, as well as to the wider Discovery College programme:

- **Strengthening digital systems** for Discovery College to be able to monitor quantitative data such as attendance, survey response rates and feedback.
- **Continue to embed creativity in the Discovery College offer** and **continue to adopt the co-production approach**, as both make an important contribution to change in wellbeing and mental health of participants.
- **Continue to strengthen the co-production approach**, to support peer confidence and allow more time for the co-facilitation team to get to know each other, plan and reflect.
- **Pilot running Discovery College courses for 12 weeks** to see if this has a greater impact on participants' wellbeing and outcomes achieved and ensure that participants and parents continue to be signposted to future courses.
- **Promote the course more widely** through schools, partners and social media, to increase the number of participants, aiming for 10-12 per course.
- **Experiment with different approaches to when and where courses are run** and monitor if this has an impact on attendance rates.
- **Continue with face-to-face courses, whilst also offering participants online courses** as an alternative, so that young people have choice.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Emma Insley is the Director of Insley Consulting and helps third sector organisations to make a sustained impact. She brings data and stories of change to life and helps clients to think strategically about how to focus on the things that make the biggest difference to increase their impact.

Emma is a former CEO of two charities. She has written numerous Evaluations, including for FareShare UK, Parkinson's UK, MS Society, Young Lives vs Cancer, Surfers Against Sewage and Depaul UK. She lives in Battle in East Sussex.