

Case Study

St George's Bristol: The Dunkirk Miracle



Age-Friendly

The Dunkirk Miracle explored two imagined stories of the Dunkirk Evacuation, told through the eyes of a 9 year old British girl (at home in England), and a French soldier (fighting at the Front). The project brought together two distinct and disparate groups; one of Secondary school students, and another of older people from their local community. Participants spent two days together, working with storyteller Michael Loader, musicians Tom Veck and James Watts, Jo Summers from Bristol MShed and SMRT lead teacher John Hare, during which they;

- visited MShed to explore the history of wartime Bristol, looking at wartime objects and artefacts and listening to the memories of older participants
- listened to the story fragments, before having the opportunity to formulate their own endings working collaboratively in mixed groups
- wrote and rehearsed a song to be included in their final performance, again working inter-generationally

A final performance was then delivered at school to an audience of their peers and invited guests. This was then evaluated by the Education team from St George's Bristol.

How did it aim to reach or have relevance to older audiences? What impact did you want it to have on the size or profile of your visitor base?

The ages of our older participants ranged from late 50s to 70+, so participants identified with the idea of wartime Britain in an interesting variety of ways, some had direct childhood memories, but others grew up in the 50s and 60s when the world was a very different place. We hoped that providing older participants (whatever their own experience, lived or otherwise) with an opportunity to discuss their thoughts and feelings around war (particularly the Dunkirk Evacuation) with young people aged 11-13, would be an interesting exercise for both groups. We also hoped that working in this way might encourage participants from both demographics to consider attending future events at St George's Bristol.

What tools did you use to measure this impact? What key indicator did you use to measure this impact?

Our evaluators attended the final performance and gathered first hand testimony from all participants about their experiences of working together. This was the key indicator we used to measure the impact of our work.

What other objectives were you hoping to achieve?

To be honest, we weren't really sure, but this was what the participants told us...

"Good to be able to join in with younger people"

"We also learnt about the history, post war Britain was so close, we didn't learn about it, our parents didn't talk about it"

"This gave us insight into and a connection to, heritage that was too fresh when we were young"

"Keen to get more involved by supporting the school and supporting school shows and productions. Previously hesitant about attending, but now would come"

Were there opportunities for this activity to be intergenerational/include family members?

Not on this occasion although this may be a possible extension in future. In this situation, it seemed quite positive that none of the participants were related to each other. Some of the older people lead quite isolated lives, and many of the young people may not have chosen to engage with their own grandparents or extended family in this way, yet by coming together as strangers, there was a level of 'neutrality' and 'equality' that actually seemed to benefit the creative process and allow the team to bond in a very natural and organic way. Once both groups had relaxed in each other's company there was a strong sense of mutual respect and support.

"Easier to talk to strangers than family"

"Young people talk more to elders"

What worked well, what challenges did you face?

Bringing together the two groups of different ages worked really well, despite both sides initial apprehension. Bringing together a large number of partner organisations is always a big challenge. Communication can be tricky and logistics are always far more complex than you think they will be at the planning stage!

What have been the most important things you have learned?

Participants of different ages have a lot to offer each other. They can work together and achieve brilliant results, they just need support, time and space to get to know and understand each other.

What will you do differently next time?

Allow the project more space to breathe. Day two particularly was crammed full of activity and would have benefitted from longer sessions plus a few more well placed breaks.

Top Tips for engaging older audiences:

- Don't be afraid to bring young and old together, if well planned and supported this can work brilliantly well.
- If you think you have allowed enough time for all of the activities you have planned, add some more. Don't over plan, allow each part of your work space to breathe.
- Ask people what they would like to do, and really listen to the answers. Then try and make it happen.

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