

Case
study 3

CREATIVE
PEOPLE
AND
PLACES

Touch, connection and creativity

Case Study written by [Kathryn Welch](#)

Creative People and Places in Lockdown: responses and learning

Creative People and Places in Lockdown: responses and learning is a short series of Case Studies that explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on CPP projects and how they responded. Each of the five Case Studies will explore a different theme and we will publish an accompanying reflective blog on our website, www.creativepeopleplaces.org, in December 2020.

Of all the restrictions COVID-19 has imposed on our lives, loss of touch and physical contact came up again and again in interviews with CPP Places. There was talk of the big, fundamental moments in life, such as hugging a grandchild or the traditional last washing of bodies so important in Muslim funeral rites. But we missed small moments of touch too - helping a neighbour over the road, a touch of the arm in conversation, the reassuring contact of sitting side by side with a friend. In conversation with CPP Places and some of the artists and communities they support, we've been exploring the role of creativity in supporting, overcoming and capturing this profound experience of 2020.

1 Creativity helps us find new ways of showing kindness to others

In this context of distance and disconnect from one another, Places noted the desire for making connections in other ways. At a community and neighbourhood level, people used creativity to find moments of real connection with those around them, and to demonstrate their love and care for one another. In Rotherham, CPP Flux Launched Sparks of Joy - a process for people to nominate their neighbours for a short one-off performance on their street - such as a brass band, community choir or circus:

“We put a post out through all the Facebook groups - we explained what Sparks of Joy was going to be about. And we got inundated. We might’ve gone too far. It’s ridiculous. But it’s incredible. And people have come back and nominated each other. No one’s got their hand up and gone, I need it”

Jude, Flux (Rotherham)

Despite the very real problems people were facing - with jobs, housing and food, as well as with health - the community absolutely recognised the need to find alternative ways to build a sense of connection to one another, and the role that creativity can play in overcoming physical distance:

“There is a head teacher who leads on creativity. We had a call with her and she’s like, there’s a bridge across our primary school so that the kids are safe over a road. Why don’t we put the kids on there, they can sing a song, and parents can stand in the park. And it’s a simple idea where people can feel safe, but spread some positivity with each other”

Jude, Flux (Rotherham)

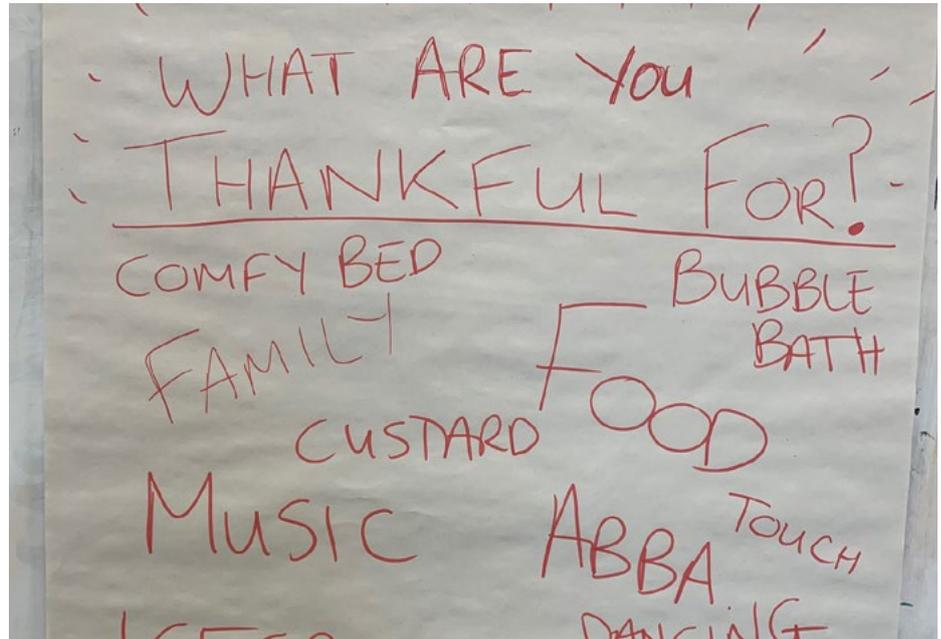


Creative project wearing PPE with SENSE, Rotherham

2 Communities used creativity to find new ways to mark - and record - key moments

Although COVID restrictions have impacted us all throughout the year, the physical distancing restrictions feel particularly acute at key moments in life - births, deaths, weddings and religious occasions. Rooted in a diverse community with a large muslim population, Revoluton Arts in Luton have been considering the impact of this lack of touch throughout Ramandan, as part of a [Wellcome Collection-funded project](#) on touch. To capture the experience of local people observing Ramadan in lockdown conditions, Revoluton Arts created [Ramadan in Lockdown Luton](#): a crowdsourced film compiled from video footage submitted by members of the community, telling their stories through the lens of touch:

“[Before COVID] I often regularly would go to [the] Ramadan tent, and be around muslims from all walks of life, and break our fasts together. It was such a community driven thing. It’s such a special thing, that coming together, which is something we can’t do. And you feel that energy, that warmth, you feel that spirituality. That just doesn’t really seem to feel that visceral in the same way that it normally would”



Creative project wearing PPE with SENSE, Rotherham

“It’s been cooking lots of meals by myself, and times like this when I would look to my mum - to share her recipes and help her and see how she cooks recipes, I’m Googling to see how to make recipes that give me comfort and remind me of home”.

“I’ve been doing this thing where I’ll call home, and at the stroke of sunset, I’ll call my family via Facetime or Whatsapp call, and we’ll break fast together. Although I can’t touch them through the screen, I can at least still see them and hear them - and that means something, it’s better than nothing”.

Here, storytelling gave people an outlet to share their stories, and a means to shine a light on their experiences. The film itself also plays an important archiving role, in capturing a community observing Ramandan through a very particular moment in history:

“It’s the most beautiful archive record reflection of where we’ve just been, you know, from a different creative cultural lens”

[Jenny, Revoluton Arts \(Luton\)](#)

As part of the Touch study, Revoluton Arts and Wellcome Collection co-commissioned award-winning playwright and actor, Sudha Bhuchar, to explore the theme of touch with people in Bury Park. Speaking on BBC Radio 4’s new series the Anatomy of Touch, Sudha noted:

“What was lovely is that I was able to talk to an array of people - very much interested in people of faith, and that whole thing about religion and touch. Through personal stories it’s a chronicle of our times - touch in the time of COVID, if you like”

[Sudha](#)

3 Cooking emerged as an important shared sensory experience

Reflecting on her own family experience of touch, Sudha said:

“My mother was quite shy, she wasn’t a very tactile person. She showed her love in other ways, [such as] through food”

The role of food and cooking as an important tool in creating moments of togetherness through lockdown was common to many conversations with CPP Places. HOME Slough embraced cooking as a really inclusive creative tool - one that can be particularly effective in connecting with people who might not consider themselves traditionally artistic or creative.

“A project that we co-created with our Slough-based community is called Global Cooking Theatre. Every week we bring in a member of our community that comes from a specific culture, and they cook a meal that reminds them of their childhood. We have between 12-20 people on Zoom, and they all spend an hour or so cooking the meal, then after they finish the chef comes back wearing cultural clothes that remind them of their culture, childhood or their other home, and for an hour they share a meal and the stories of that person”

Saad, HOME Slough

Here, cooking provided a moment and an opportunity for people to come together, and to take part in a creative activity that felt side by side with one another. Cooking was an area where people felt confident

to come forward to share their skills and recipes, and one in which a wide array of people could join in and enjoy. For both the participants and chefs of Global Cooking Theatre, though, equally important was the space the project created to talk, share and discuss issues:

“People enjoy the cooking, they enjoy the food, but it’s the conversation - having a moment that you share an experience with people - that is the nearest to what you used to do when we weren’t in confinement. Touch is missing - and that’s important - but people were also missing the shared experience, and the space to have conversations and a space to have a shared purpose - and that’s what Global Cooking Theatre has been able to bring”

Saad, HOME Slough



Global Cooking Theatre food, Home Slough

4 Connection with one another has been vital in light of the Black Lives Matter movement

Lockdown, of course, hasn't been the only notable event of 2020. The Black Lives Matters movement - triggered by the killing of George Floyd in May, shaped the urgency of need for this kind of connection and conversation across communities. This was a key factor for many Places in considering the role of creativity in supporting their communities:

“To be recognised to be seen through a story, I think, is one of the most important things. I mean, what we've seen in the last six months with the Black Lives Matters movement, the toppling of the Colston statue, the pickets outside the art gallery, actually, that's our community saying, listen, see us hear us, we have a stake in our own cultural landscape, and in our storytelling. And actually, we're just going yeah man, you do. And we're listening”

Jenny, Revoluton Arts (Luton)

“We were facing a lot of people who were losing their confidence quite a lot. And the turning point was all the issues that Black Lives Matters brought in, where today it is very difficult to have any discussions about race, about culture, about any of those things which touch

us personally. It's very difficult to have those discussions within the community in a way that doesn't create divide. So we wanted to use cooking and food to bring in those discussions in a way that would increase the confidence of our community”

Saad, HOME Slough

5 For Deaf people, connection through storytelling has been really important

For Creative Black Country, a series of projects led by Deaf creatives brought a different perspective to this need for connection through storytelling. Rinkoo Barpaga, a Deaf stand-up comedian and theatremaker produced a series of [Deaf Stories from the Black Country](#). Rinkoo's project invited Deaf people to share their experience of lockdown, about growing up in the region, their families and their lives, and the particular impact of physical isolation for Deaf people.

“I want to re-engage Deaf people in the Black Country with arts and share the strong traditions of story-telling that are at the heart of Deaf culture. Deaf people tell stories of everyday life with creativity and rich detail”

Rinkoo, [Deaf Stories from the Black Country](#), supported by Creative Black Country

Rinkoo's call out created a rich series of video stories, which highlight the impact of lockdown on Deaf people, and also illustrate the importance of storytelling as a means of outlet, communication and connection:

“Sign language is a beautiful, rich language, meant for 3D, not 2D. Unfortunately, lockdown has meant that we've had to use sign language through screens. 2D was our only option. This was very challenging. It was a huge relief to finally use sign language properly again, and I desperately needed it. Once the pub closed, we all went out and stood under a street light and carried on chatting for hours! That's what the Deaf community is all about”

Sean, [Deaf Stories from the Black Country](#)



Image from 'Made in India' by Rinkoo Barpaga

6 Bringing people back together in person isn't straightforward

Hard as it's been to be physically separate from one another, the continuing restrictions of life under COVID mean that - in many cases - even when we can be together in person, touch is difficult, limited, or missing. In Rotherham, a creative session for a group of disabled adults - run in partnership with SENSE - was profoundly affected by the restrictions to touch:

“We had this [idea that] we’re going to run to this tight timetable - and [it went] out the window. The reality for people with additional needs is that they have not been in contact with many people. They are having to have PPE put on them and not everyone likes it - they don’t like the feel, they don’t like the sound. But it was the only way we could do something that they could do. The artist was really, really good at engaging with the group, she was very prepared. But I just don’t think we realised the time and the energy [we’d need to put] into keeping people safe”

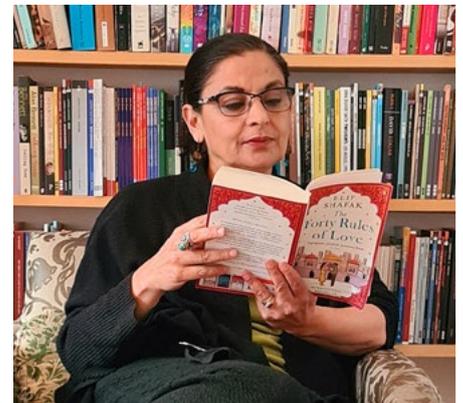
Jude, Flux (Rotherham)



The Touch Commission, Revoluton

7 Conclusion: The role of creativity in times of physical isolation

Touch is a fundamental part of how we relate to one another, how we show our love and care, and how we mark the key moments of life. Deprived of it, communities have used creativity in two ways. Creative moments have enabled us to find connection to our neighbours, to feel part of a community, and to support deep, nourishing conversation. At the same time, creative tools have been an important way for communities to make their voice heard, to share their experience, and to capture for posterity this very distinctive moment in time. Communities all across England have recognised the role of art and creativity in sharing moments of joy, kindness and solidarity with one another, and have harnessed the power of creativity to help maintain and build community bonds through lockdown.



Sudha Bhuchar - commissioned artist, Revoluton

This Case Study was commissioned as part of the Creative People and Places National Peer Learning and Communications programme.

All Creative People and Places (CPP) projects work together as a network and participate in the National Peer Learning & Communications Programme (NPL&C), funded by Arts Council England since 2013. Shaped by the needs and aspirations of the network, the NPL&C programme aims to share learning that comes out of all CPP projects throughout the network, and works in tandem with Arts Council England to share CPP learning both within the arts and cultural sector and beyond.

Arts Council England's Creative People and Places programme (CPP) is about more people taking the lead in choosing, creating and taking part in arts and culture experiences in the places where they live. There are 33 projects, each located in a place where people are least likely to engage with arts and culture. Arts Council England have committed £108 million to the programme so far, covering 33 Projects, 33 Places, 30 consortia and 45 local authorities. Since 2013, there have been 4.5 million engagements with the CPP programme¹ and 86% of people who participate in CPP² weren't previously engaging regularly with arts and culture³.

www.creativepeopleplaces.org.uk

www.artscouncil.org.uk/creative-people-and-places/creative-people-and-places-projects

¹ This only includes physical engagements - previous figures may also include digital engagements. Figure subject to change as data validation is still ongoing.

² Calculated by The Audience Agency using postcode data for 2017-19.

³ As classified by The Audience Agency's [Audience Spectrum](#) segmentation system.



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