

I got on the bus in one life and woke up in another.

Pilot Project - Final Report

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“The project made me feel really joyous and excited to help people realise how good it can be after a brain injury, with the right support. I’m glad my art made people realise how far I’ve come, how much my artwork has improved my life”.
(Grace Currie, Project Lead)

“Art is a place of radical possibility, in which anything can be imagined and then made real.”
(Abrahams and Bevan, 2023)

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Jeremy Turner and Chester University facilitated access to the exhibition space and helped with hanging the work. We are also grateful to those who took time to offer feedback on the exhibition, and on the film during its production.

Executive Summary

This pilot study was forged through the lived experience of artist Grace Currie. In 2010 Grace survived a serious road traffic accident which resulted in an Acquired Brain Injury. In the months and years of her recovery Grace has worked to become an accomplished artist, gaining a 1st class degree in fine art from Chester University and becoming a professional artist who regularly exhibits across the UK. She lives in her own home with her fiancé and cat and directs her own care on a daily basis. These are important biographical facts as the prognosis given by medical professionals following her injury could not be further from the life she currently lives. They foretold a list of things that Grace would never do. Grace's response....? To rip these up and live life fully. Art has played a central role in this.

Through art Grace has revealed her innermost thoughts, hopes and dreams. Crucially, these have been listened to and facilitated by her supportive family and professional team. What is clear is that visual expression has been a conduit to understanding. This project aimed to explore how Grace's experience could affect social care practice. Could social care professionals recognise the power of art as a means of expression in the practice? Could they incorporate visual art into their social work practice in assessment and ongoing work with clients?

This study approached these questions by engaging with groups of social work students in four UK locations. Through focus groups students were asked to engage with new material around the impact of visual arts in communication and to consider how this might be incorporated into their practice. Outcomes of focus groups were evaluated as was feedback to an exhibition produced by Grace at the end of the project. The power of her art in its communicative potential was considered.

Central elements of learning from this project are:

1. Visual art has the power to communicate emotions, desires, intentions when there is an attentive listener who is open to understanding the meaning behind the image.

2. Methods of communication are diverse. Non-verbal methods are valuable when words are not available or not enough.
3. Social work students would benefit from learning about diverse methods/non-verbal forms of communication during their training.
4. Social workers are open to embracing new approaches to communication in conducting assessments and in interaction with clients.

Chapter 1

Introduction, background, and project aims.

Introduction

In 2010 Grace Currie suffered a catastrophic acquired brain injury (ABI) as an outcome of a road traffic accident. Grace was 17. Her injury left her with interrelated disabilities and a neurodivergent view of the world. The prognosis of medical professionals was bleak. Grace and her family were told that she would never be able to work or live independently, would never give or receive emotion or affection, would never be able to be left alone and would be a passive recipient of care for the rest of her life. Ten years later, Grace graduated from Chester University with a First Class honours degree in Fine Art. She lives in her own home with her partner and cat. She works as an artist with an ever developing profile and catalogue of work she exhibits regularly around the UK. Grace receives support, but she is the architect of that support and of her life trajectory. Art has played a pivotal role in enabling Grace to achieve all that she has.

Grace has used her art to subvert received opinions and to make clear who she is and how she wants to live her life. She has mobilised her own challenges to in turn challenge the negative identities wrapped up in the disabling labels that have been applied to her. She has also used her artwork to articulate difficult emotions and through this to help her family and care team better understand how to meet her needs. Grace's art is an invitation to listen creatively and with an open mind to people with ABI.

This project was born out of Grace's personal experiences. It aims to consider how art can be used in developing understanding of ABI and to explore whether social workers might use visual expression as a tool in assessment and practice to enhance support for people with ABI and others. The project will support Grace's ongoing artistic practice as she continues to forge her identity through creative expression, leading to an exhibition of her work.

Background

Acquired Brain Injury

Acquired Brain Injury is the outcome of an accident or injury to the brain, which happens after birth and can result from a traumatic event such as a fall, accident or assault, or from a stroke or tumour. Injuries to the brain can be temporary or permanent and can differ in severity and impact. Conditions and outcomes affect every individual differently and are often subject to change over time. There are many, often described common outcomes, which can include fatigue, memory loss and difficulties in concentration, poor motivation, personality changes and impulsivity. However, it is important to note that these do not all apply to every individual with ABI or may do so in differing combinations with differing impact and severity. The adage that *'if you have met one person with ABI, you have met one person with ABI'* holds true. Moreover, a singular focus on deficit is overwhelmingly unhelpful. It can hold people in a place of lack and loss, and this is far from the experience of people with ABI given good support and opportunities to heal, grow and develop as individuals with their own choice and agency.

Art in communication

Art is well recognised as a powerful form of communication that can transcend barriers be they cultural, language based or cognitive. Art has the capacity to convey emotions, experiences, and perspectives that words can either fail to capture or can be unavailable to the narrator. Dewey referred to art as the *'most universal and freest form of communication, (1934)*.

The importance of adaptations in communication to enable the inclusion of people with ABI is well rehearsed in research (e.g. Kemp and Gregory 2024) and is enshrined in the UN Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). The Convention considers communication to be a core aspect of accessibility and requires state parties to *'take appropriate measures to ensure accessibility for persons with disabilities, and their right to freedom of expression and opinion (article 9)*.

Art is often used as a therapeutic tool to support people with ABI, and this is recognised as having a range of beneficial impacts. However, in the context of this work, art is not being thought of through the prism of therapy, but firstly, as an end in itself, as art practice developed and enacted by an accomplished and practicing artist. Secondly, art is considered here as a communicative tool in relaying issues that may be difficult to articulate when words are not enough or not available. Artistic methods, namely the construction of collages were used in research with young people with ABI to explore issues of identity following their injury. This method was successful in enabling participants to express their thoughts and ideas about how their injury had impacted on how they viewed themselves in the world (Dowling, 2009, Dowling et al. 2018)

It is clear that for Grace Currie (project lead) art has fulfilled a powerful role not just in her personal and professional development, but also as a way of saying who she is, what she wants and how she wants to be seen in the world. She has used it to dissolve a master identity of 'ABI survivor' and replace this identity with that of professional practicing artist and change maker. What is in question is not whether art can offer a conduit to communication, but whether social workers and allied professionals can adapt their perspective and practice to recognise the importance of visual expression as a communicative tool.

Mark making

The use of art as a tool in assessment and practice by social workers and allied professionals embraces the idea of *mark making* in communication. The term means the use of lines, strokes, marks and colours to express feelings visually without representational drawing. Through mark making practitioners can enter a state of creative flow, an intense concentration in creative activity, which however brief, can produce insight and offer new understandings that may not be available through other forms of interchange. This requires no particular artistic experience or ability. However, the product of a mark making exercise can result in the creation of a new artwork, which itself has aesthetic value, which can offer positive associations with the process (Challis 2014 *unpublished thesis*)

In light of the foregoing the aims and objectives of this pilot project are as follows:

Overall Aim

The overall aim of this project is to trial the efficacy of using arts-based practice combined with lived experience of ABI, expressed through artwork, to educate social workers about living with ABI and how to use arts-based practice to improve their support to others.

The **objectives** of the project are to:

- Build on existing body of artwork about experience and develop a solo exhibition that explores perceptions of ABI and life after ABI.
- Develop and deliver a series of focus groups with social work students using arts based practices to explore their understanding of life after ABI.
- Identify creative methods which can help professionals to support ABI survivors to assert their car and life needs.
- Assess the impact through concurrent independent evaluation.
- Produce the foundations to prepare a large scale project focused on training social workers and allied professionals in using arts-based methods to enhance their practice.

Summary

This chapter provided the background to this pilot project and introduced relevant issues, namely Acquired Brain Injury, art as communication and mark making. It then articulated the overall aims of the project and the objectives in place to attend to this aim. The next chapter will describe the methods used to address the aims and objectives of the study.

Chapter 2

Methods

This study adopted a range of bespoke qualitative methods. These can be divided into two key sections. Firstly, the development of the project lead's artistic practice and examination of how the artwork can educate people about ABI, and secondly, focus groups with social work students which considered their responses to ideas of using art in communication.

Ethical Framework

An ethical framework was developed at the outset of the project (see appendix 1). This is a set of principles and values that are used guide actions and decisions. The ethical framework was developed by the project evaluator and Grace Currie to ensure impartiality and accessibility. It has been used by the project team as a reference document and was introduced at the beginning of each of the focus groups to students. It was a resource to students and practitioners during focus groups as a guide to the values and actions that underpin this project.

Development of Artistic Practice

Grace has developed a body of work reflecting on her lived experience of life following ABI. She has met regularly with an art facilitator throughout the project to hone her ideas and develop her practice. Several key themes have emerged through this process, and these have led to the creation of a new body of work, which was exhibited during July 2024. Feedback on the exhibition was sought from two critical friends and from visitors to the week-long event.

Exhibition

Grace produced a series of new work for exhibition, which was held at the culmination of the project, which was hung at Contemporary Art Space, Chester and beautifully curated by Jackie Coyle, project administrator. Information about the wider project was made available to exhibition

visitors who were asked to complete short feedback forms which asked three questions. These were:

What did you learn from this exhibition?

How did the artwork make you feel?

In what way can art be used as a tool to communicate feelings/needs/desires?

Twenty-three people completed the feedback forms. Two critical friends also gave feedback on the exhibition.

Focus groups

A series of focus groups were held in four locations in England and were attended by final year social work students from the Universities of Chester, Keele, Birmingham City and Warwick. A total of 52 students attended the focus groups. As final year students the attendees were currently working in social care teams on placement and were able to draw on significant existing experience. Some of the students had experience of working with people with ABI, though not in bespoke settings rather in generic adult social care settings.

Focus Groups were developed by the project team. They adopted an iterative approach, thus responding to feedback from each session and making relevant adjustments to improve the subsequent sessions.

The following changes were made in response to feedback:

- It was reported that some participants were nervous about attending the focus group due to the art activities, they felt that they would have to be 'good at art', or in some way knowledgeable about art in order to take part. This of course, was not the case and thus how the focus groups were introduced was adapted to explain that artistic ability or knowledge were not prerequisites to attending.
- Additional content was added to the presentation to describe Acquired brain Injury in general in more detail. This came in response to students reported lack of basic knowledge of ABI.
- Additional content was added to the presentation about the range of agencies who support people with ABI.

- A new question was added to the questionnaires after the first focus group. This asked specifically whether participants would be confident in using creative methods in supporting people in communication; this came following the realisation amongst the project team that this specific question had been over looked.

By adopting an iterative approach, the project team were open to learning from focus groups and to honing and adapting what was delivered. This facilitated improvements as the project progressed and is in line with pilot work which rightly takes a developmental stance.

There were several elements to focus groups which are described discreetly below.

Response to artwork

Students were asked to give a title to the artwork below by placing post-it notes with their suggested title next to the artwork. The aim of this exercise was to help students to consider the power of the image in communicating a feeling and a message, and for them to understand how the title given to the image is important in contextualising it. The learning from this exercise was for students to see beyond the two dimensional image and to read more deeply what meaning it was conveying and how this might translate into a better understanding of the mind of the artist. Grace named this image **'Rage'** as it is a portrayal of her anger at her accident., this was not made known to students at the time of the exercise, so that they could offer their own interpretations.



'Rage'

Mark making

Students were provided with paper and chalk pastels and were asked to use these to visually represent their feelings in relation to a particular time in their lives. They were guided to represent their feelings on their first days as social work students and how they feel now in the present moment, towards the completion of their degrees. Students spent about 20 minutes on this activity. Subsequently a class wide discussion was held. Some students held up the pieces they had created and talked about what it meant to them, how the image could be interpreted. They also discussed the process of making their images, how they approached it, their expectations and how it made them feel.

Presentation

Grace, Lorraine and Sue delivered a presentation to the assembled Group. This was in several parts and included:

- General information about acquired brain injury.
- Grace's story.
- The use of visual methods in arts based communication.
- How Grace's art has been used in communication.
- What Grace's family and care team have learnt from her creative work.

The presentation included images of Grace's art which were discussed in detail (two examples are given below) and a short film '*Put away neatly*', which showed a piece of performance art that Grace devised and delivered at the HOME gallery in Manchester.

The images used in the presentation offered illustrative examples of how Grace's art had enabled her to say something that was difficult to put into words. One piece entitled *Octopus of Love* was a painting from a photograph of a family hug. It was the title Grace gave the piece that made people think about the possibility of oppressive love.



'Octopus of Love'



'Sexy Artist'

The 'Sexy Artist' was one of a series of paintings which gave voice to one of the ways in which Grace wanted to be viewed; that is as a sexual being, as someone who wanted to experience a relationship and intimacy. These paintings resulted in Grace being supported to join a dating agency, through which she met her partner of 4 years with whom she now shares her home and is engaged to be married. Students were told how Grace was listened to through her paintings and this explained how these painting gave deep insight into the power of the visual in communicating need. Grace used these pieces to represent herself as a sexual being, a direct challenge to the infantilisation and presumed asexuality of disabled people. Sex and disability can make people uncomfortable. Grace presents a loud and proud challenge to this in her series of larger than life portraits where she chooses to represent an important aspect of herself. Not a disabled artist, but a sexy artist – writing her own labels and rejecting those which others attempt to write for her.

The sexy artist series were large scale paintings. Size matters -making larger than life-sized artwork helped Grace to say '*I still exist, I take up space, listen! Look at me, see me*'.



Identity Series at the Hive Gallery, Shrewsbury 2021

Interaction with artwork

A full sized outline of a human body was pinned to the wall. Students were asked to interact with it by making marks or writing onto it. This was to encourage self-expression through art/mark making and to enable students to understand, through doing, the power of visual methods in communication.

Questionnaires

Students were asked to complete a questionnaire at the beginning and again at the end of the focus group. Data was entered into excel files and comparisons were made between responses given before and after the focus group. A total of 49 questionnaires were fully completed across the 4 sites. Three questionnaires were not included in analysis as they were only partially completed.

Group discussion

At the end of the presentation the following questions formed the basis of a group discussion.

- Did anything in the session convince you that creativity might be useful and if so, what?
- What in particular helped you to understand a little more about ABI from what you saw, heard and did?
- How do you imagine that you, as a social worker, might use creative methods with people with ABI, in a person-centred way?
- What advantages and disadvantages might there be using such methods?
- What changes would you suggest when this session is presented as a workshop.

Summary

This chapter has described the methods used in this project. These can be divided into two discrete sections. Those which are attentive to Grace's artistic practice as a tool to educate and in preparation for the exhibition and those to used evaluate the impact of focus groups on participants' knowledge and understanding of both ABI and the usefulness of creative methods in their SW practice. The next chapter reports on the project findings.



Labels

Grace collected and produced a series of labels that challenge the stereotypical ideas about disability. She discussed ideas around producing stickers that were challenging and controversial to make people think about their 'common sense' ideas about disability, in turn unseating many disabling patterns of thinking that still predominate.



Choice

Grace also explored themes of choice in her work. These ideas were drawn from the notion of people making decisions on her behalf and not crediting her with the capacity to make her own choices. This theme rehearses some of the ideas previously explored in her 'Put Away Neatly' work (see link in references).



She took this work further in a series of self-portraits which considered internal feelings and ideas around masking. Her message is that you can't guess or assume a person's needs by looking at them. The statement is - ask me, consult me, include me.



Exhibition

In her new work Grace has continued to examine identity and self-determination. These pieces depict elements of Grace's identity as a complex and independent person, with skills, determination, responsibilities and important relationships.

'Out of the Shadow' and 'The Graduate'

Together represent a part of Grace's journey of survival and recovery to unanticipated achievement as a Graduate with a 1st Class degree in Fine Art.



'The Graduate' and 'Out of the Shadow'

'Lovers'

Is a visual portrayal of the deep love between Grace and her partner Johnny depicted here in an embrace. It is as though they are the only two people in the world.

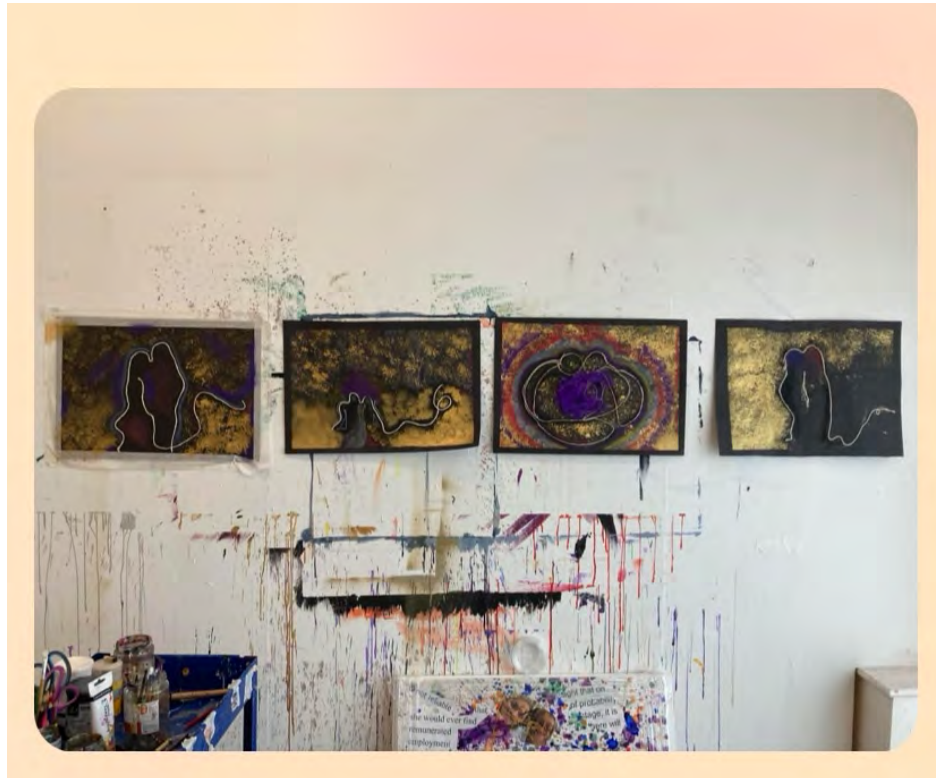


'Lovers'

Love

The theme of love and relationships was further developed in Grace's recent work. The four pieces together entitled, ***'The Epitome of Love'*** represent Grace and her partners relationship. The closeness and

intimacy of their connection is conveyed through the hushed atmosphere of these painting, the dark and sensual palate and the sense of privacy they convey. They offer a strong sense of something deeply personal.



'The Epitome of Love'

The piece below entitled ***'The Swimmers'***, is an ode to a weekly swim Grace has with her mum and a friend.



'The Swimmers'

Feedback from the exhibition

Visitors to the exhibition uniformly left positive feedback in response to the work; there were no negative comments. Some reported having gained an understanding of the strength and resilience apparent in the work, others noted the power of art in communicating complex emotions. Visitors responded with a range of emotions – one said they were ‘*amazed*’, another remarked that they felt ‘*grateful*’, while a third stated that they were ‘*intrigued*’, going on to comment that ‘***Rage*** hit me like a ton of bricks, so powerful!’. It was clear that the exhibition had provoked strong emotional reactions from the public. Visitors also reported a deepened understanding of the value of visual communication, one summed this up in saying, *art ‘can bridge natural barriers and open conversations about otherwise difficult concepts or thoughts’*.

Feedback from critical friends

Two critical friends offered comment on Grace’s work and artistic practice. Both were women who are themselves artists as well as curators/gallery directors. Both have known Grace for several years and were therefore able to draw on the context of her previous work and note growth and changes. Both ‘friends’ noted the development of themes within Grace’s work, in particular ideas around for example, identity, self, sexuality and independence. One ‘friend’ noted resonances with her own work and mentioned an interest in collaboration. Going further to propose that more collaborative work could lead to the development of new approaches, backed up by the suggestion that Grace explore the potential of an Arts Council ‘*Developing Your Own Practice*’ grant.

Friends noted relevant practices that facilitated growth in Grace’s work. In particular one friend highlighted the following:

‘Grace showed me her working memory folders and how she uses this as a model of best practice to keep track of her work due to her memory loss. This is an interesting example of how a disabled artist can make work informed by their impairment. But this also shows the depth of the development of her arts practice.’

One ‘friend’ who had curated a recent exhibition featuring Grace’s work, noted that there were elements of real success, for instance the growth in Grace’s profile as an artist through connections made, and the fact that the exhibition had presented a challenge to ideas about who can be an artist. This gallery regards challenging assumptions as central to their mission, therefore this offered a good synergy. Learning from the exhibition was that the use of audio buttons would have enabled further engagement amongst people who prefer to receive information in that way.

Both ‘friends’ reported growth in Grace’s work and saw opportunities for further development as an artist, both through collaborative enterprises and through entering work to mainstream collections such as the Royal Academy Summer Show and the National Portrait Gallery. Further, it was advised that Grace consider having her work catalogued in readiness for submission to other collections as she now has an extensive back catalogue.

Focus groups

Response to artwork

Students gave a range of titles to the artwork on display. These included, ‘sad’, vulnerable, explosion, anger, dramatic, emotive, powerful, hell, manic. What we see here is how this piece can communicate a variety of emotions. Without knowing what the artist named the piece, the image can be interpreted by the viewer in a variety of ways. It is filtered through their personal context and understanding and the name they offer reflects something of themselves in their reaction to it. When the actual name of the piece is made known – ‘Rage’, it takes on a different quality and we understand it more fully from the artists perspective.

In terms of communication the image takes on a dynamic quality. With a name it is more apparent what the artist is communicating, whereas the attribution of a name to the piece by the viewer enables an understanding of their perspective.

Mark Making

Examples of the work produced by students in their mark making session are presented and described below. Many students reported feeling concerned at the outset of this exercise, as they considered themselves not to be good at art or unused to working in a creative medium. Many were not confident in expressing themselves visually. However, many also reported surprising themselves at how they quickly they adapted to the task and also how much they enjoyed the activity. Participants reported that they were able to express their feelings about their journey as social work students through the images they created. Furthermore, they reported being able to depict emotions that were hard to put into words. Below are some examples accompanied by student's descriptions of their drawing.

Describing image 1, the student described how her eyes had been opened to so much of the world and the complexities of people's experiences through her studies. She said, *'I see more clearly now, and I also see the complexity of people's lives which I only glimpsed before'*.



Image 1

Image 2 represents ideas about society and people which were *'in a box'*, the course exploded the student's preconceptions and took her on an *'very up and down journey'*, to a place where she understood the world as *'dynamic and unpredictable'*.



Image 2

Another student created in image 3 represented their training as having made sense of complexity and created for them a route map and clear direction for the future.



Image 3

The student who created image 4 talked about their training as a spiral, which gradually unwound and revealed the multi-faceted realities of the social world. Their journey as a student was one of opening and recognising diversity of people's experiences.



Image 4

In image 5 the student divided their page into four sections to show the passage of time across the years of their study and to the future. The first year 2022 they said they felt like they were in *'the eye of a storm with so much going on and so much to learn'*, in 2024, they depict travelling through the eye of the storm in a tide of knowledge and learning. Looking ahead to 2025 there is some uncertainty as they show islands of knowledge and practice, but also some excitement, and further ahead to 2026 where there are integrated waves of knowledge and practice, a calmer time thus anticipated.



Image 5

Image 6 depicts the student at the beginning of a long road leading to an unknown destination, illustrated by a dense woodland; on the right hand side of the image is the student surrounded by the woodland but with a clearly lit path ahead of her. The imagery here speaks for itself and reveals the depth of this students journey through her studies.



Image 6

The examples above are among many that were created by students who took part in the project focus groups. They demonstrated that visual techniques may offer a conduit to self-expression that is perhaps more difficult to capture in words alone. Students who had been sceptical about the method reported a new understanding and appreciation of working in this way. Many thought that this would be a useful method to use in practice to help them gain a deeper understanding of their clients' thoughts and feelings during an assessment or in ongoing work with them,

Interaction with artwork

Students attending the focus groups interacted with the outline of a person which was pinned to the wall, they made marks on it to demonstrate various physical and emotional feelings. For instance, one student drew a dark red mark on one of the knees of the outline, she said this represented a long standing injury she had at her knee. Some students drew a heart on the chest of the image. Another represented her feelings by drawing tears onto the outline. These examples demonstrate how the students quickly understood the purpose of the exercise and were able to immediately use it as a tool to visually express themselves. Many commented that this could easily be translated into their practice.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires captured students' knowledge and understanding of ABI, approaches to assessment and support for someone with ABI and their confidence in using creative methods in communication. The before and after approach captured change as an outcome of attending the focus group and demonstrated growth in knowledge and understanding. Questions have been grouped into four themes and findings are reported below.

i) Professional knowledge of ABI

Students were asked to respond to a series of statements relating to professional knowledge of ABI. These statements were intended to ask students to think about who could be the best source of expert knowledge about the prognosis, outcomes and effect of ABI on

someone's life. The first statement asked students to consider whether they thought someone with ABI requires a specialist worker who has particular knowledge of ABI. Prior to the focus group most students agreed with this proposition, however, there was a shift in opinion following the focus group with fewer students in agreement and a considerable proportion moving to a position of disagreeing with the statement.

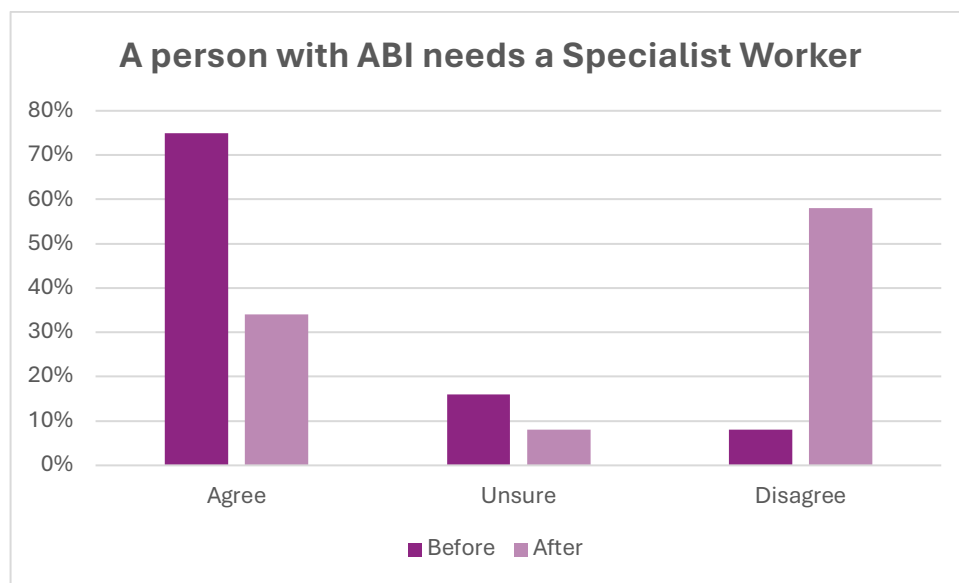


Figure 1

Findings demonstrated a unanimous shift after the workshop to agreeing with the statement that all social workers should understand ABI following their training. Many students reported that they had received no teaching or very limited teaching about ABI at this point in their course, which for most was near to completion.

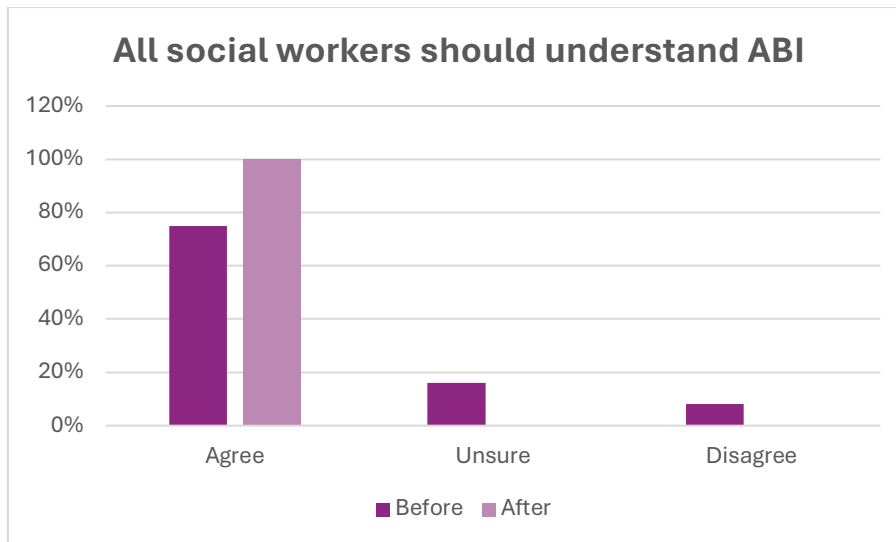


Figure 2

Students were asked for their opinion on whether medical doctors should be considered the experts in explaining how ABI affects someone’s life. Students moved from a position of agreement or uncertainty to a strong position of disagreement with this statement after the focus group.

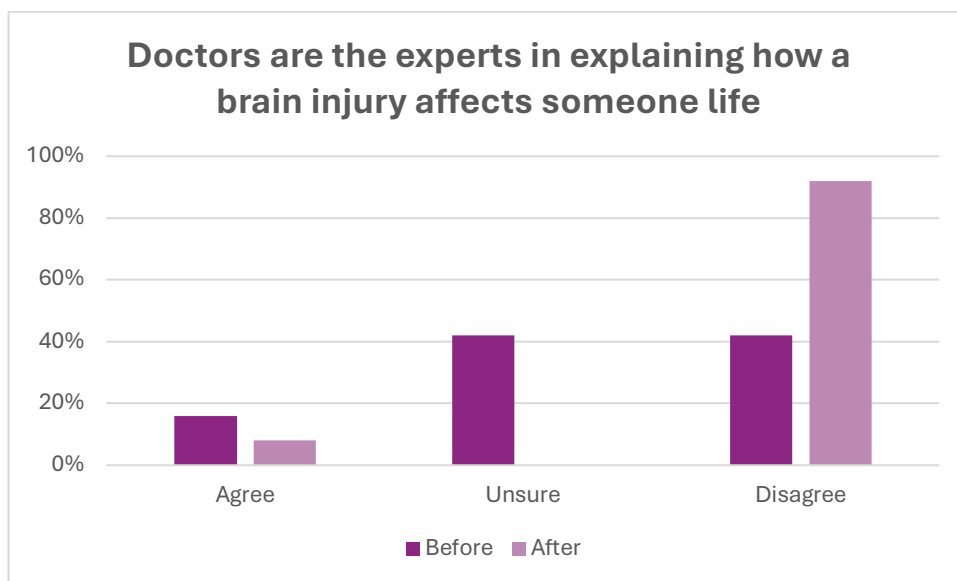


Figure 3

Whilst most students thought that the medical outlook should be informative to social workers in understanding and supporting someone with ABI, but that they should not be constrained by it, this became the unanimous opinion of participants following the focus group.

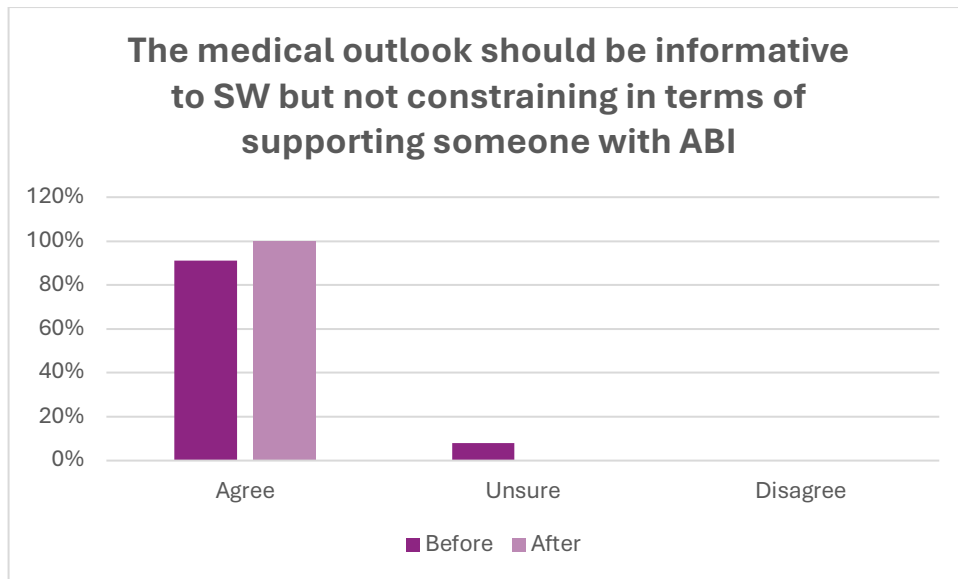


Figure 4

ii) the impact of brain injury

Students were asked to respond to the statement that all people with ABI have similar needs. There was a definitive difference to their thoughts before the focus group, where over 60% were in agreement with the statement and the remainder were unsure; compared to after the focus group where 100% of students disagreed with the statement.

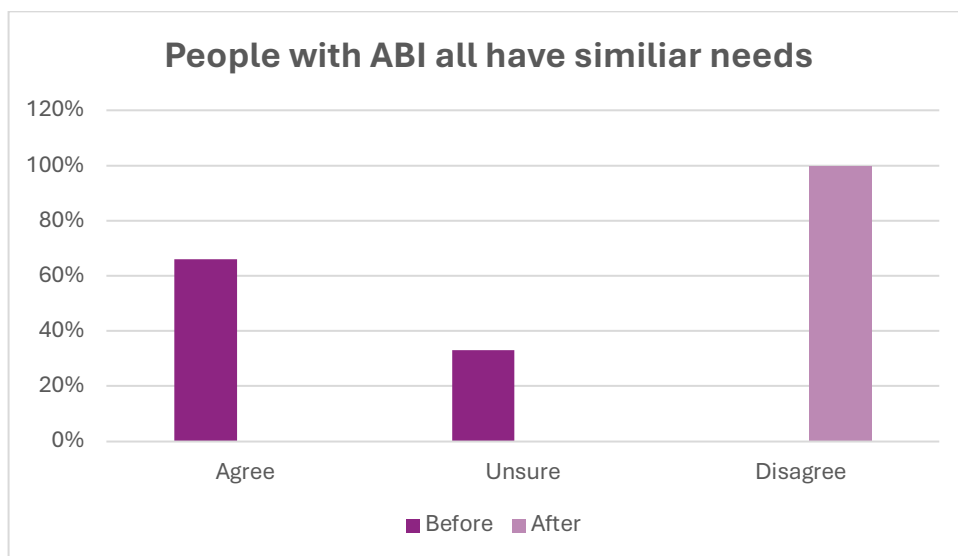


Figure 5

Although just over 80% of students agreed with the statement that ABI would affect everyone differently prior to the focus group, this moved to 100% after the focus group.

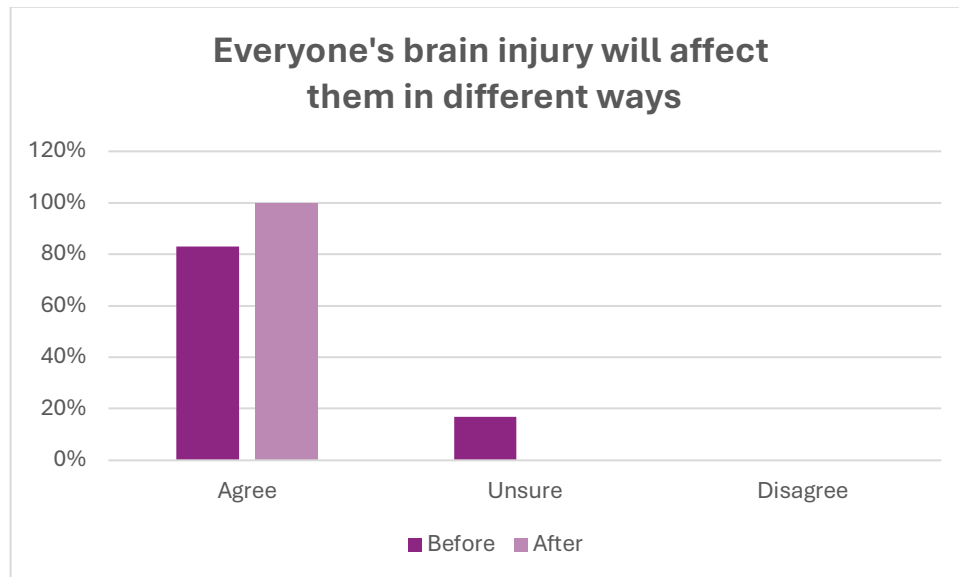


Figure 6

iii) a person's own understanding of ABI

Students were asked a series of questions about their view on the expertise of someone with ABI to understand and describe how their injury affected their lives and to be able to describe their own care needs. It was heartening to note that prior to the focus group most students reported their conviction that the person with ABI is best placed to describe how it affects their life and this rose to all of the students following the focus group.

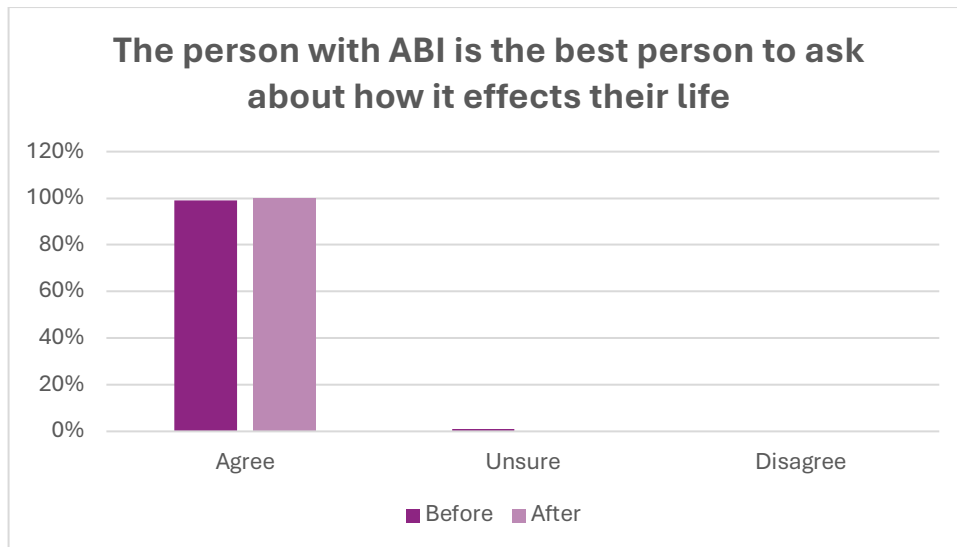


Figure 7

Over 60% of students thought that someone with ABI could describe their own care needs prior to the focus group, but this figure rose to 100% afterwards.

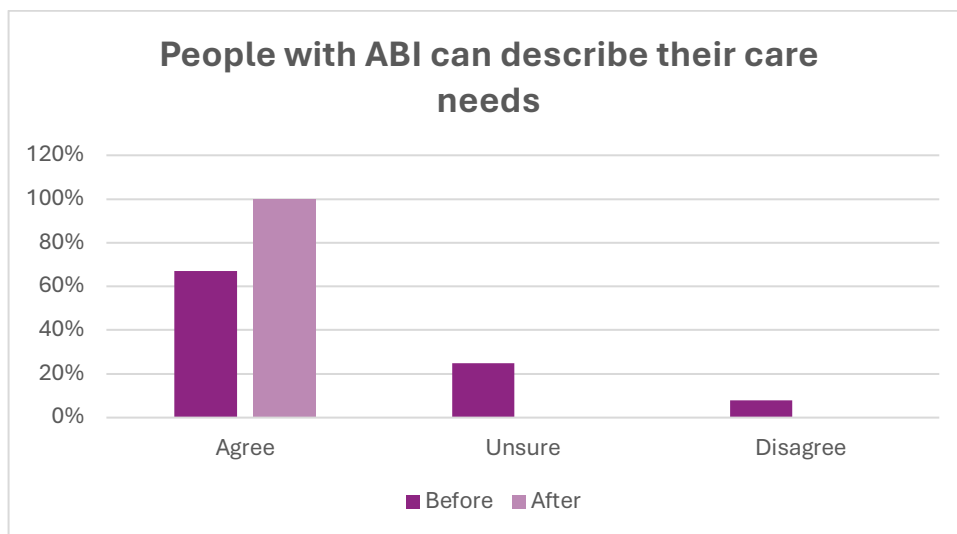


Figure 8

There was an even more marked difference in response to the subsequent statement that assessment information should come from the person themselves, with just over 40% in agreement with the statement prior before the focus group, the rest reporting uncertainty, whilst following the focus group 100% of participants agreed with this statement.

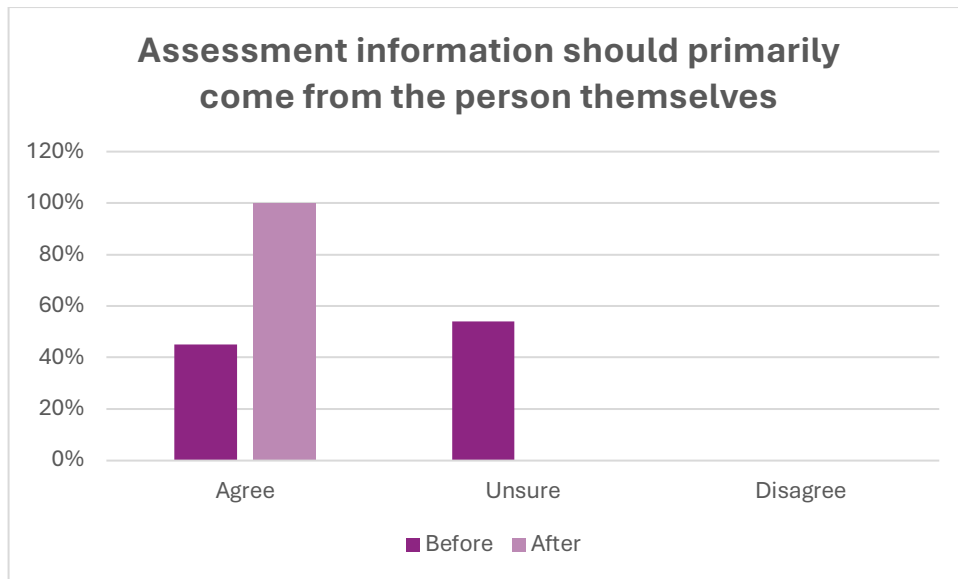


Figure 9

iv) use of creative methods in communication

Students were asked about their willingness to use creative methods in assessment of someone with ABI. Prior to the focus group over 40% said they would not consider this with 22% saying that they would use this approach, the remainder were unsure. Following the focus group 100% of students had moved to a position where they stated they would consider using creative methods in assessments.

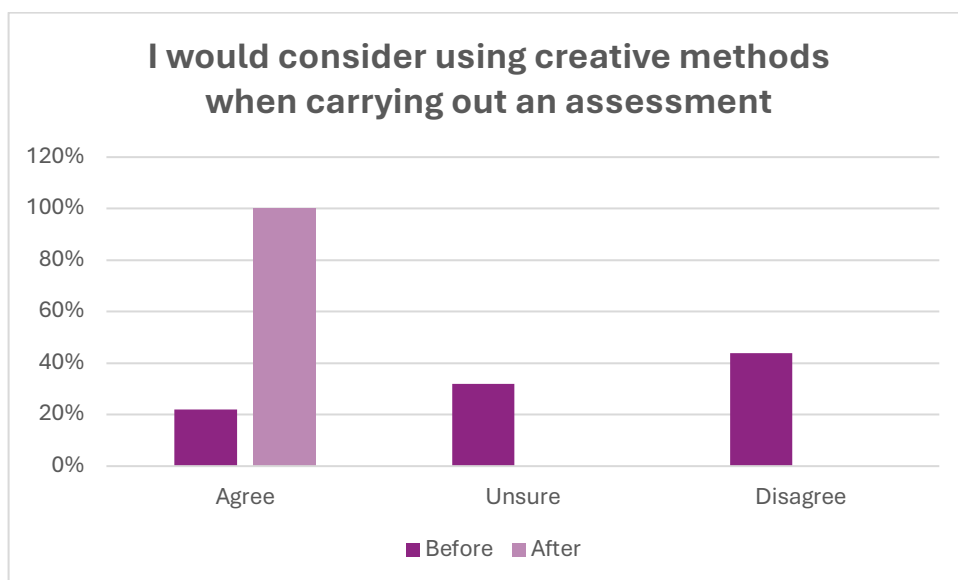


Figure 10

Group discussion

Focus group participants responded positively to the idea of using creative methods in their practice. They appreciated the freedom the method afforded people to express themselves, and how each person's individuality could be expressed. For instance, of the mark making exercise one student noted that – *'No picture is the same, all expressions and pictures are different'*. Others noted that even though they didn't see themselves as having any artistic talent, that they were able to take part and to use colour and marks to make their feelings apparent.

Students were overwhelmingly positive about the potential use of creative methods in their practice. One said;

'a lot of us don't know a lot about different communication techniques, if someone is non-verbal, whether that is because they have an inability to speak or because they just can't let that out, this would be amazing, and I will be taking it back to our team to tell them about it'.

Whilst another reported that they could see;

'how this would be useful in so many ways, both in finding out how people are feeling but also in giving them another way of expressing how they are feeling more than just asking questions and filling in forms.'

Students also reported a greater understanding of ABI through their attendance in the focus group. Whilst some of this information came to them through the learning available in the presentation, many commented on how meeting Grace and hearing directly from her about her experiences of using art to express her innermost feelings, had been transformational for them in terms of their understanding of ABI. Many said they appreciated and valued learning from someone with lived experience. One student reflected;

'it is very emotional, to hear Grace speak and to think about what she said about her life and relate that to the impact that we have as social workers on people's lives. We know that we have a great impact on people, what we do affects the outcomes that they can

achieve, but to see Grace, to see how she has developed and how she is living her life, that is what we want to see isn't it'.

Students reflected on their own practice in relation to what they had learnt. One volunteered that the session had made her feel;

'pretty ashamed of some of my support plans, not because I feel that I am a bad social worker, but I lack the time often to be able to sit there and be creative'.

However, they went on to note that the images that were created during the session;

'didn't take very long, that took like 10 minutes to do my piece of art, and it was good to let it out because I am stressed all the time, and doing the drawing really helped'.

A further student reflected on her own practice in the context of the focus group saying;

'so today makes me feel very sad because we don't get the opportunity to do that, honestly, it is encouraging as a worker to see and hear what is possible, but me and my colleague have just had a little tear over it as we just find it overwhelmingly sad that it isn't acceptable to be creative'.

These comments highlight some of the challenges faced by social work students, who although recognising the value of the method as a tool in communication, were reticent about how it could be introduced in practice. They initially mentioned time constraints but went on to identify how creative methods, or less conventional approaches could be viewed as a problem. One summed up this problem, saying;

'it's process over people, and it's just depressing to be honest.'

Another reported that the workshop had spurred her on to advocate for change stating;

'it makes me feel more motivated to try to change things, the system doesn't really work for any of the people who use it, it works for the people who administer it... but I think that you can do things in a different way.'

Students then could clearly see the advantages of using creative methods as a tool in communication, their concerns were more at a systems level as they highlighted the rigidity of the system in which they work and the difficulty in approaching things through the prism of creativity. Although, the challenge is present and substantial, there was also an evident optimism and the willingness to try something different and challenge received practice. As one student said;

‘We need to move with the times and do what is needed to help people to express themselves. The only way to do that is to put it onto the course, I would never have thought of getting any paints out with anyone and I would most definitely incorporate it into things that I carry around with me from now on.’

This strong endorsement of the method and the need for creative approaches to be taught during social work training was widely supported by students attending the course, one said;

‘I would love to see more emphasis on creative approaches, but this is the first time we have been introduced to these ideas and we are nearly at the end of our training. It needs to be brought in much earlier so that we can use it on placement and understand the value in real life settings.’

Students were also asked to offer feedback on the session more broadly in terms of what worked and what could be improved. Many participants talked about how Grace’s input to the session was the standout element of the focus group, and that this had made a substantial impact on their understanding both of ABI and of the value of creative communication tools.. Broadly feedback was extremely positive and encouraging. One student stated;

‘this has got to be the best training I have been on in years’,

and another said;

‘I really enjoyed it and found it so inspiring too. It’s something that will stay with me throughout my career’.

Summary

This chapter has described the findings drawn from data collected. Firstly, there is a brief description of the Ethical Framework which was developed to guide thinking and practice throughout the work. Secondly, this chapter reported on the artistic practice undertaken and the work developed for the concluding exhibition. Finally, this chapter reported on the range of findings drawn from the focus groups. The forthcoming chapter will discuss these findings considering the background and aims of the study.

Chapter 4

Discussion

This study was forged from both personal experience of ABI and a recognition of the value of visual art in communicating hopes, needs and desires. Artist and project lead, Grace Currie, drew on her own life story in the conception and delivery of this work. Her use of visual art as a means of expressing deep held emotion about her life, her hopes, her identity and about the life she wants to create following her own brain injury, is the key inspiration for this work.

The power of visual art

A central element of this project has been the ongoing development of Grace's art practice. New work produced during the project continued to explore personal issues. Key themes around identity were a focus. The work related this theme was expansive, with Grace representing markers of her own identity, how she sees herself and how she wants to be seen in the world. People with cognitive impairment are often subject to limiting social beliefs, with a focus on what people cannot do rather than on what they can do, described as a deficit focus. Indeed, ABI is often characterised as loss. Tyerman & Humphrey described it as '*one of the most devastating personal experiences imaginable*', (p12, 1984), and going on to highlight a range of deficit focused characteristics associated with ABI, described as '*catastrophic repercussions*'. Grace's art offers a strong challenge to this negative, deficit focused portrayal. Her art is the work of an independent thinker, a creator, an individual. Through this Grace is subverting dominant narratives and challenging what Gramsci termed '*common sense*' (1971: 422.) responses to social experiences.

The response to the artwork used in focus groups and displayed in the exhibition both from attendees and critical friends, attested to the power of the pieces. It was clear that the work had had a significant impact both on broadening perceptions of people with ABI and on the role of visual art in producing an emotional response amongst viewers, thereby being a

conduit to more deeply understanding the emotional landscape of the artist. Graces work has both a powerful aesthetic quality and a potent communicative and educational impact.

Speaking without words

The study drew attention to the diversity of modes of communication, moving away from narrow notions that speech/hearing = conversation, to embrace the breadth of ways of making your ideas known. Social workers who took part in the study, though largely open to the use of visual art in assessment and support, noted that the restrictive requirements of form filling and the need to gather standardised information in assessment and ongoing support, didn't easily accommodate 'alternative' forms of communication. Some volunteered that the narrowness of assessment based on form filling should be challenged systemically.

This study is attentive to the fact that the communicative potential of visual arts requires an open and receptive listener to be effective. That is, it underlines the interactive nature of communication. Visual representations of thoughts and feelings are made audible through the 'listener' who is willing and able to receive the message given. A receptive listener can facilitate a shared aim of enabling the realisation of the hopes, needs and desires communicated in the art. Using visual arts, as a tool in practice requires social workers to actively listen with a view to supporting their client to realise that which they have depicted.

Using more open and diverse forms of communication could facilitate greater understanding of people's needs and desires, as well as a greater likelihood that these may be enacted. Tailored, individualised support offers improved quality of life. Social workers however, in attesting to the fact that there was limited attention to non-verbal forms of communication in their studies, have highlighted the precedence given to speech and verbal language within their professional development. As noted in chapter 1, there is a requirement that this is addressed through international law and closer to home, evidence both in this study and elsewhere of the value of broad approaches to communication as a

foundation to offering the support that can leading a fulfilling and meaningful life.

Developing the conversation

Many students were initially reticent to engage with arts based communication. However, the mark making exercise that was part of focus groups gave students the chance to experience self-expression through visual methods and their early reluctance dissipated through the act of doing. Students soon recognised that not only was the process unthreatening but was both enjoyable and a viable tool for communication. Students were also very affected by encountering Grace's art and hearing from her the meaning behind some of her paintings. It was clear listening to Grace speak and seeing her paintings, that the visual messages had a power that would be challenging to express in words. Many students remarked that hearing directly from Grace was more impactful than anything else in the focus groups. Her input about her lived experience propelled the conversation exponentially.

The value of self-expression through the arts, its potential to enable people to be heard and understood, and for them to strive for the life they desire, became abundantly apparent through this pilot study and other work in the area. Students' ability to quickly adapt to the method and to recognise its value attests to their openness to broaden communication techniques in their social work practice. These factors offer a strong platform for the development of arts based practice as a routine element of social work training.

Key points of learning

1. Having an acquired brain injury does not mean that life is over, it is perhaps different, but can still be just as productive, engaged, creative and fulfilling if people are heard and given the support they need to live the life they want.
2. Visual art has the power to communicate emotions, desires, intentions when there is an attentive listener who is open to understanding the meaning behind the image.

3. Methods of communication are diverse. Non-verbal methods are valuable when words are not available or not enough.
4. Social work students would benefit from learning about diverse methods/non-verbal forms of communication during their training.
5. Social workers are open to embracing new approaches to communication in conducting assessments and in interaction with clients.

Outputs

A central output from this study was a film made during the project by team member Jill Impey, entitled '*Grace Currie - Work in Progress*' (digital video 20 mins, see link in references).

This short film documents the development of Grace's creative processes during this project. It includes reflections on visual and performance art works, the development of Grace's creative voice, and the invisible network of care, that enables her to live an increasingly independent life after brain injury.

Working with a creative enabler, Grace's artworks have prompted questions and challenged perceptions. In her own words and through her art she describes the process of a change of focus in her life, which has been an outcome of her work.

The film was circulated amongst the team for comment and changes were made in response to feedback. It was then sent to specialists working with people with Acquired Brain Injury and in Social Care delivery, with a view to further modification in response to feedback. However, comments returned were extremely positive, one said:

'This is a wonderful video, and it really does get the points across that Grace wanted. I can see this being a valuable tool for educating people about brain injury. The power of art and education around disability more widely.'

Whilst another commented:

‘This film illustrates what you can achieve when you start with the person, ask what it means to them and think about creating the conditions to make it happen. The right support can enhance opportunities rather than limiting them. In this case creative arts has been a vital element of self-discovery and purpose driving Graces understanding of herself and how she wants to interact with others’.

The film meets its objectives of facilitation greater understanding of ABI and depicting the use of creative methods to access authentic emotional expression and confidence in the efficacy of such methods to unlock meaning and agency for those who are otherwise may be unheard and overlooked. The film will become part of a tool-kit in educating social workers about ABI and alternative approaches to communication.

It partners this report in offering insight and understanding both into the work developed and produced by Grace and into how the training delivered in focus groups was received by social work students. The film reinforces the need for information to be communicated in a variety of formats to improve accessibility and reach. A link to the film is included in the references at the end of this report.

Reflections

The team reflected on their personal experience and development during and after the project. This self-reflection is valuable in the development of the present and any future work as recognition of the group capital brought to the project by the team.

Personal growth

Many of the team members commented on growth and development at a personal level as an outcome of their work on the project. Some noted the emergence of a new level of confidence, which was manifest in a growing ability to ‘*speak up*’ when the moment required it. Confidence also grew in individual’s presentation skills, through gaining experience and demonstrating a willingness to alter styles and modes of presentation in response to feedback. There was also a noted development in

understanding and empathy around ABI and the importance of creativity as an impactful means of self-expression.

Skills

Team members reflected on new skills they had gained during the project. These included their own listening skills and a willingness to learn openly from others with differing types of experience. There was a good spread of different skills amongst the team as well as skill sharing. This meant that the team were able to address the aims of the project effectively and to delegate tasks to those with the relevant skills and experience. Team members also reported the acquisition of new skills through doing the work. Existing skills grew and developed as the project progressed.

Teamwork

The team proved to be reliable, respectful, goal orientated and self-motivated in bringing this project to life and seeing it through to fruition. The ethical framework offered a guide to how they might work together, however, this appeared to be intuitive to the team whose bywords were commitment and cooperation. The value of the team was particularly in view when the exhibition was being arranged, hung and staffed. Time and resources for this were not fully accounted for in the project bid and costing, and so the event was produced on goodwill by team members. There is significant learning here for future work.

What we would do differently

Delivering the project and meeting the objectives set out in the proposal has revealed several areas where the level of time and input were not fully accounted for in the project bid. Producing the exhibition was one area mentioned above, but also the administration of the focus groups and recruitment of students required significant work, which was under costed. Time allocated to the project evaluation was also significantly less than required. In fact, all team members reported spending more time on the project than they had been allocated. This can be learnt from in preparing future bids.

In some instances, student attendance at focus groups was mandatory, in others it was voluntary, this led to a significant difference in uptake of the

training. In future work, should it involve training it is important that attendance is mandatory.

Foot fall at the exhibition was disappointing and described as disproportionate to the effort involved in setting it up. The learning from this is that additional publicity would be a propriety to raise awareness of future exhibitions with the aim of improving the number of visitors.

The importance of self-reflection

The learning from this project will help the team in the development of a funding bid to take this work forward. Self-reflection is an important element of pilot work, that goes beyond just trialling the training and reviewing outcomes, or consideration of artistic development, but also being mindful of growth within the team. This conscious reflective process facilitates real learning for both the team and those who engage with the work.

Concluding comments

This pilot study, building on existing research and practice, has demonstrated the impact and value of creative methods in communication. It is abundantly clear that communication using the visual arts offers an opportunity for people to express themselves more fully and thus to be able to be understood more readily.

It is the responsibility of those offering support to engage in the most effective forms of communication. Social workers, who hold an important role in the lives of people who use social care services, would benefit from routine training in alternative methods of communication, including that using the visual arts. This project recommends the development of such training. This would take the form of designing a module that can be added to the curriculum and routinely included in social work courses. Besides module development, the evidence from this pilot study would support the lobbying of social work course directors to include the training in their curriculum. Were this to be developed and disseminated nationally it would surely result in more cogent communication, leading to deeper understanding of people's needs and desires and ultimately strengthen the

delivery of bespoke, relevant and fulfilling care for people with ABI and others experiencing cognitive impairment.

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UN (2006) United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. UN, Geneva.

Film link '**Put Away Neatly**': <https://vimeo.com/727413031/e756dab577>

Project Outputs

Film '**Work In Progress**' <https://vimeo.com/999544981?share=copy>

Project team.

Grace Currie Artist and Project Lead

Lorraine Currie Social Worker and WMADASS Associate DoLS/MCA

Dr Sue Challis Artist and Researcher

Jamila Thomas Art Facilitator

Jackie Coyle Project Administrator

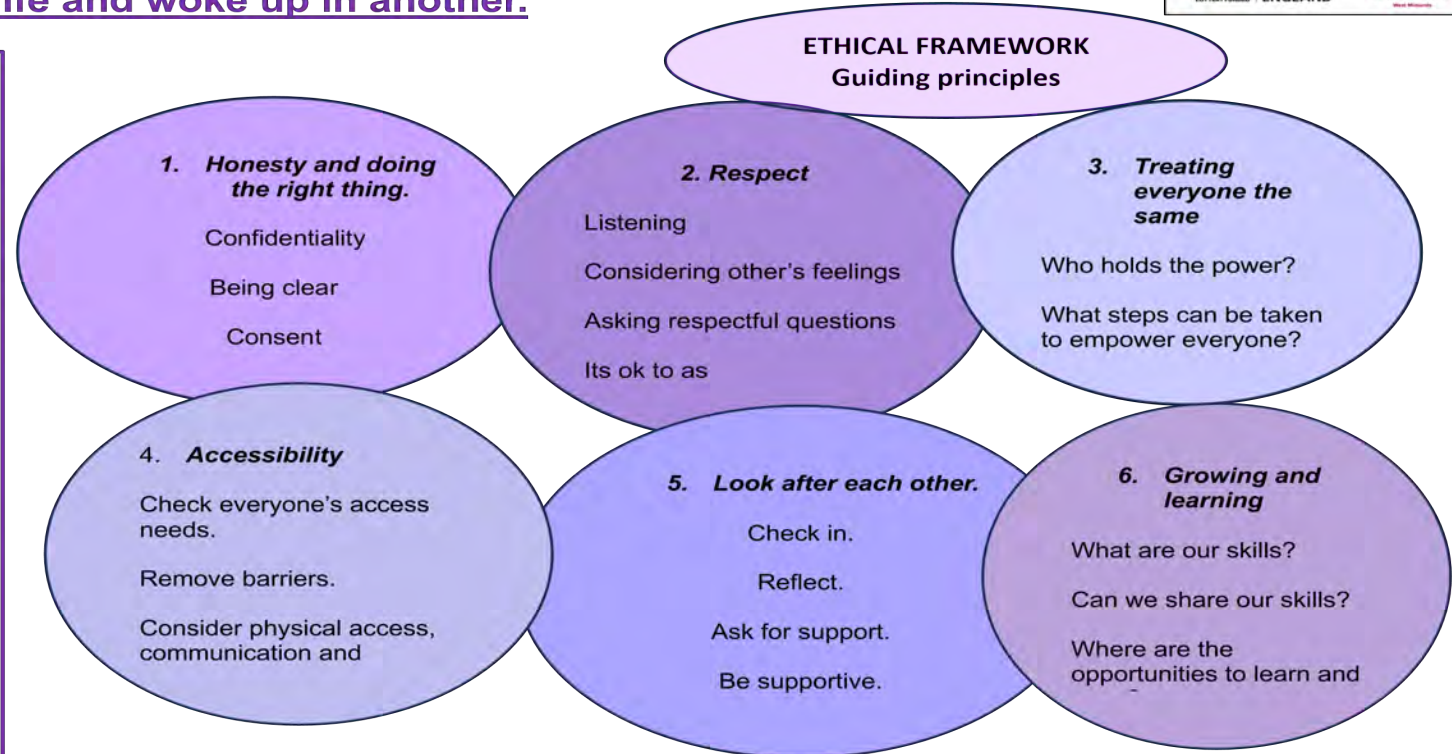
Jill Impey Film Maker

Dr Sandra Dowling Project evaluator and Report author

Appendices

Appendix 1 Ethical Framework

I got off the bus in one life and woke up in another.



What is an ethical framework?

An ethical framework is used to guide values, decisions and actions within the project.

How can we use the ethical framework?

When making decisions or doing something we can refer to the ethical framework. We can reflect on whether the decisions or actions meet the values and standards outlined in the framework. We can check to make sure that no one is being disadvantaged or left out due to our decisions or actions.

What are the main principles of the ethical framework?

The main principles are:

Honesty and doing the right thing.

Respect

Treating everyone the same

Accessibility

Look after each other.

Growing and learning

The detail and meaning of these main principles are in the graphic. The framework then suggests some useful questions to ask when deciding if what we do is alright.

Important questions to ask.

Who is in the 'space'? Is anyone being left out? How can we change that?

What are the barriers? Have everyone's ideas been heard? Have anyone's ideas not been taken seriously?

Is the environment safe and nurturing for everyone? Does everyone feel that they belong?

Does everyone feel that they can speak up?