

Together While Apart: The Creative Doodle Book and Inclusive Online Arts during Covid-19



Introduction

The Creative Doodle Book is a hands-on resource that uses open and playful tasks to encourage creativity, mindfulness and positive reflectivity. In 2020-21, during the lockdowns and social distancing enforced by Covid-19, the Creative Doodle Book was used as the basis for online workshops with community groups and arts organisations from across the UK.

During 'normal' times, the arts have a vital role in supporting wellbeing through providing opportunities for positive creative expression as we make theatre, music and art together. During Covid-times, it became even more vital to find ways for people – particularly if marginalized or vulnerable – to express themselves through creative contexts.

Such expression provides a form of agency in circumstances that were alienating and isolating.

The Creative Doodle Book has been one response to this challenge, providing a model for inclusive online community arts during social distancing.

This document presents the story of the Creative Doodle Book and the Covid experiences of the groups we worked with. It presents some of our research insights about working online; about inclusive practice; the relationship between creativity and wellbeing; and the role of the arts in enabling creative expression.

Matthew Reason
York St John University
September 2021

Themes

As part of the Creative Doodle Book project we conducted interviews with both practitioners and participants. From these conversations a number of key themes emerged. This document will present the following themes, primarily through the voices of the people we worked with.



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The Creative Doodle Book in numbers:

- ★ Over 70 creative tasks.
- ★ 3,500 books distributed to arts organisations, community groups, schools and other partners.
- ★ Delivered workshops for 31 partners across the UK.
- ★ Run over 115 Creative Doodle Book workshops.

*'I loved it.
I loved every minute of it.
And I'm like, why can't we do
this every week.'*

Laura Bassenger, Starlight Arts

*'Every time we did it, it created
quite a magical feeling in the
room actually.'*

Stacey Sampson,
Under the Stars



Online Delivery

During the lockdowns and social distancing enforced by Covid-19, community arts organisations had to dramatically adjust their activity. Recognising the value of their support to their members, the majority shifted to online delivery.

In doing so there were challenges around access, skills and the impact of digital poverty. Almost universally, however, the organisations we worked with responded rapidly and creatively.



'We went onto Skype three weeks before anything was announced here. Our last session was a practice so that everyone could understand how to connect to Skype. We were all in the same room, doing this Skype.'

Hannah Facey, Act Up!

The Creative Doodle Book sought to model a form of inclusive online practice. In doing so we were interested in the accessibility and inclusivity gains of online delivery.

Through talking to participating companies a number of significant gains were identified. These included the practical reduction in the need to travel and therefore at times a lower barrier to attendance. Other digital gains included:

Development of new skills and digital confidence

'Just learning the skills of using the technology, I think has been really empowering for some people.'

Joshua Green, The Lawnmowers

Wider horizons and ease of digital collaborations

'Zoom enabled us to forge relationships with artists and our company that we might not have been able to otherwise. We've been able to bring in artists in a unique way.'

Alice Linnane, Square Pegs Arts

Inclusivity gains

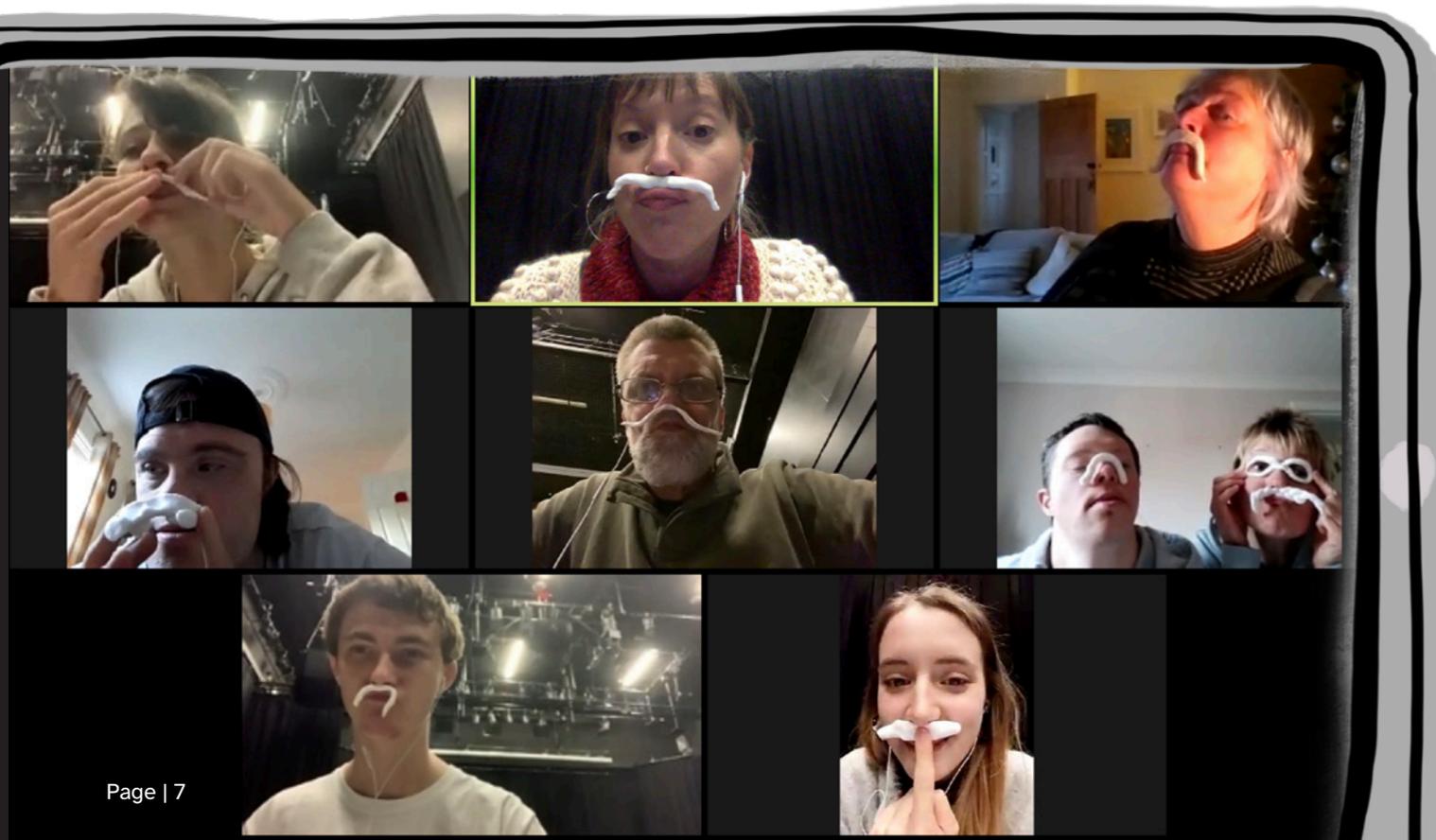
'There was a lot of members that actually, I think, came into their own online because it felt a lot safer. And there's a few that I would say, volunteered a lot more for the group.'

Jess Robson, Fuse Theatre

Confidance

'There a sort of equity with Zoom. Everyone's got their own space, no one's comparing themselves to anyone else. You know, they're able to have their privacy and their art time and creativity in a really private way. And then they get to share it in this really nice, communal way.'

Jo Frater, Confidance



Square Pegs Arts

'I think it's really interesting to have a mix of something that's very physical and tangible. Something in your hands that you use every week. But also there's a social element, there's somebody talking you through exercises, or there's someone facilitating your experience of that object. Our company really loved getting it in the post and loved having this thing that was theirs and that they could use and that felt like a really good starting point for creativity.'

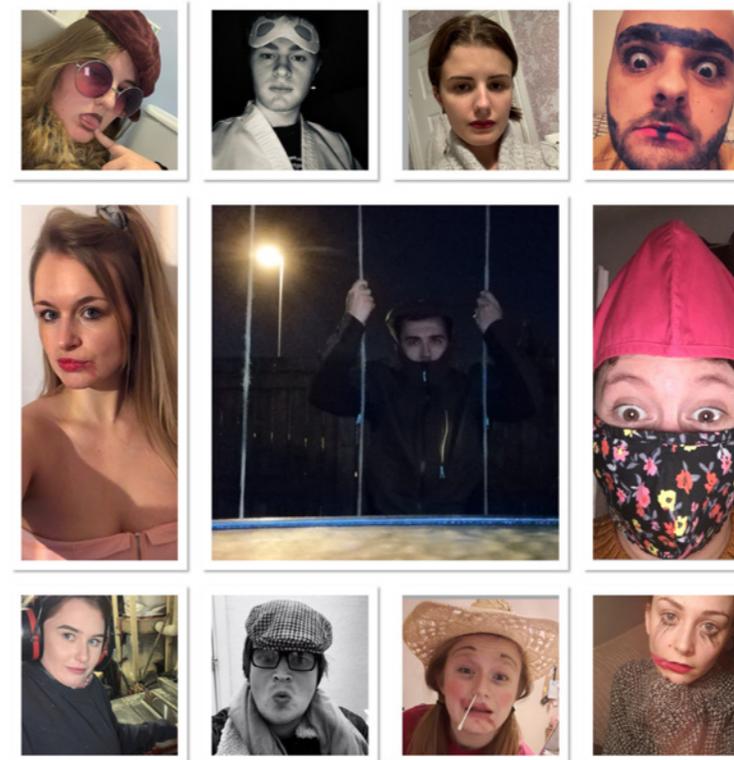
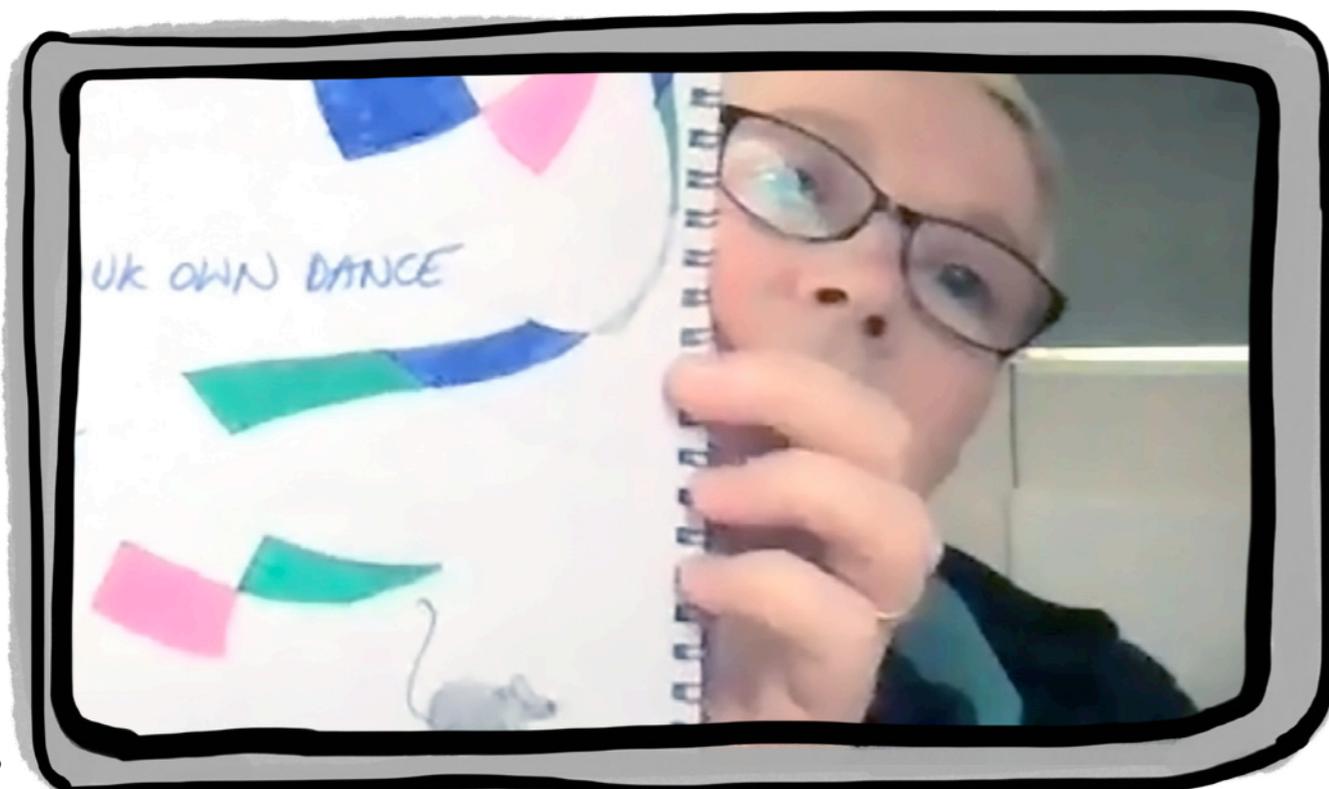
Alice Linnane, Square Pegs Arts



Lyra

'We have a sense that there's a rich engagement happening with the Doodle Book. It's a rich, authentic engagement, that's not perhaps happening in the young people's lives at this time. It's being together in a group, doing something together, enjoying it. And that's a precious moment to feel online that is not always happening.'

Dawn Hartley, Lyra



In on the Act

'I think that out of everything that I've done on Zoom over the last seven, eight months, that's probably been the best. I think because there's space for the participants to go off and do something and not feel the need to facilitate and fill the entire time. That there's time and space for practice, that's been a bit of a revelation actually.'

Tina Shuker, In on the Act

Open Tasks

We are all creative, but sometimes we need a little help to make the first step. The Creative Doodle Book presents a series of playful tasks or instructions designed to help people do, think and reflect in creative manners.

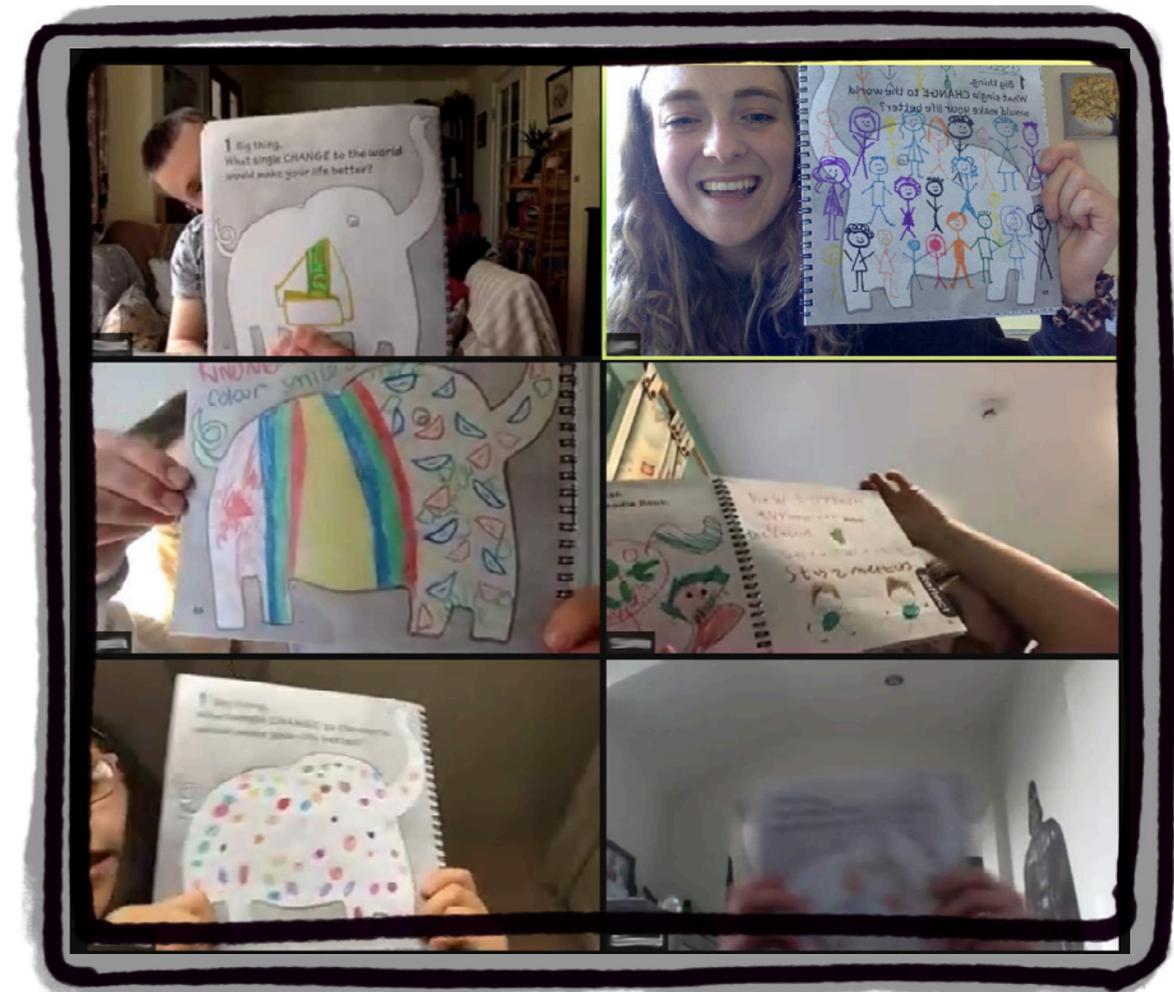
We describe these tasks as 'open', in that there are no right or wrong ways of responding, and that they can be done multiple times with multiple different responses.

Moreover the tasks are open in that they can be completed by different people with different skills or abilities or experiences at whatever level or manner is appropriate.

In this way the Creative Doodle Book and the open tasks are akin to universal design, which aims to construct environments or resources that can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people, regardless of age or ability.

This section presents examples of this through the perceptions of the companies we worked with.

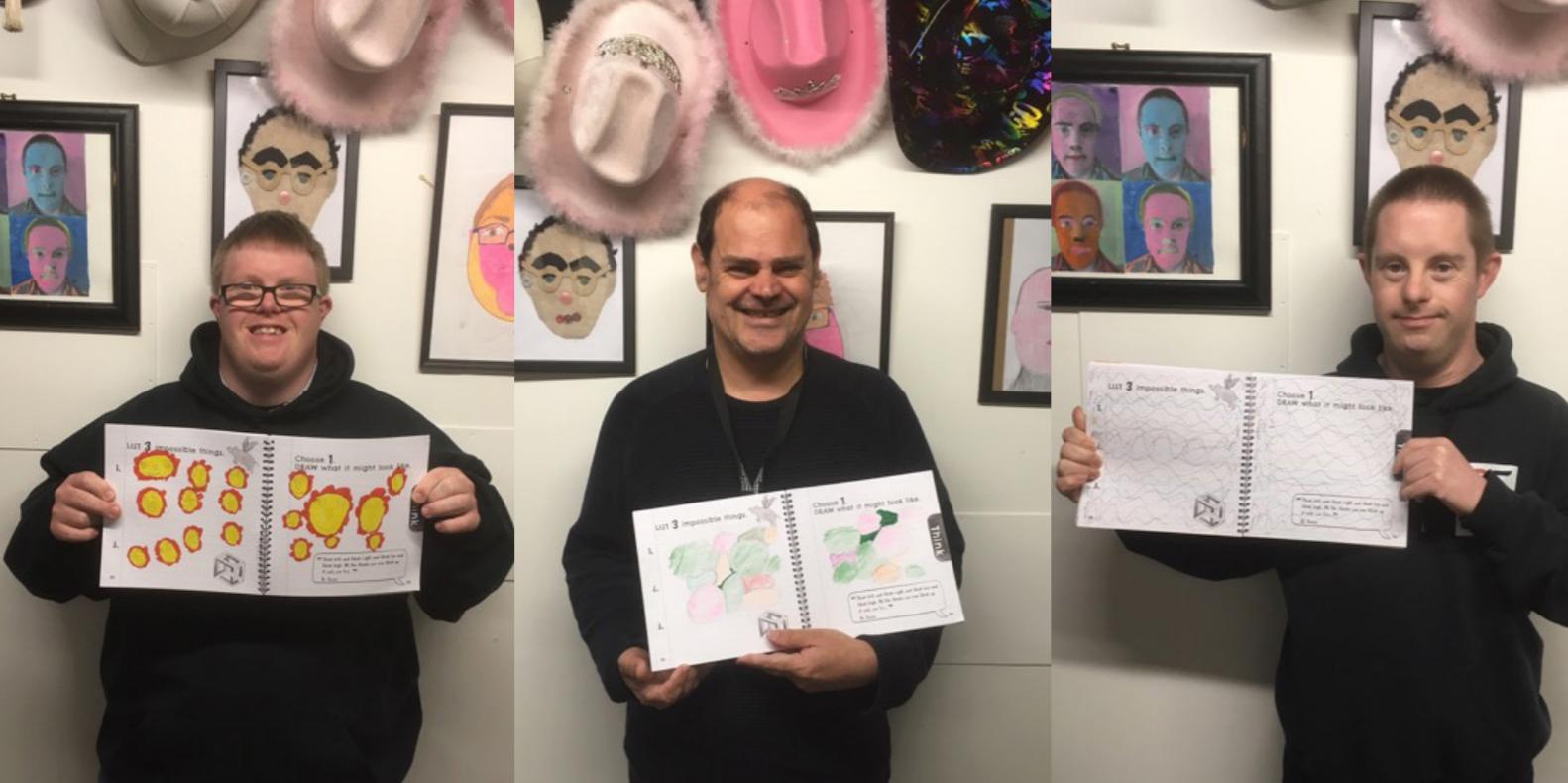
'So I think what is really useful about the book is it can be pitched at any level.'
Tina Shuker, Into the Sky



Fuse Theatre

'Everything was based on how you saw that page, or you saw that picture. And instead of us leading something, it enabled their imaginations to completely be whatever that was, and there was no right or wrong.'

Jenna Howlett, Fuse Theatre



About Face

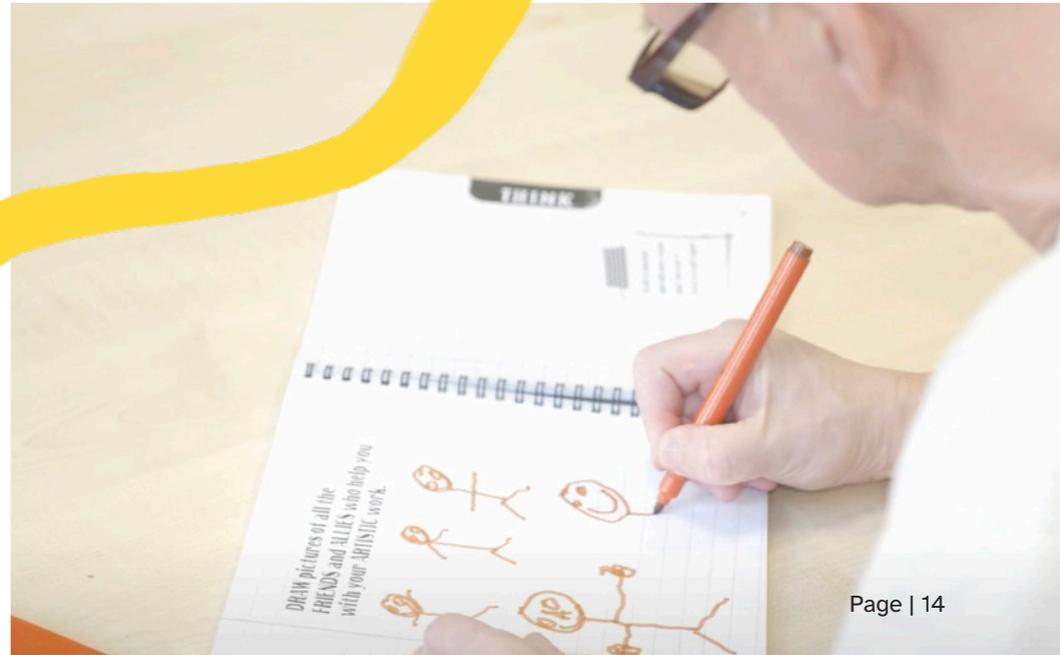
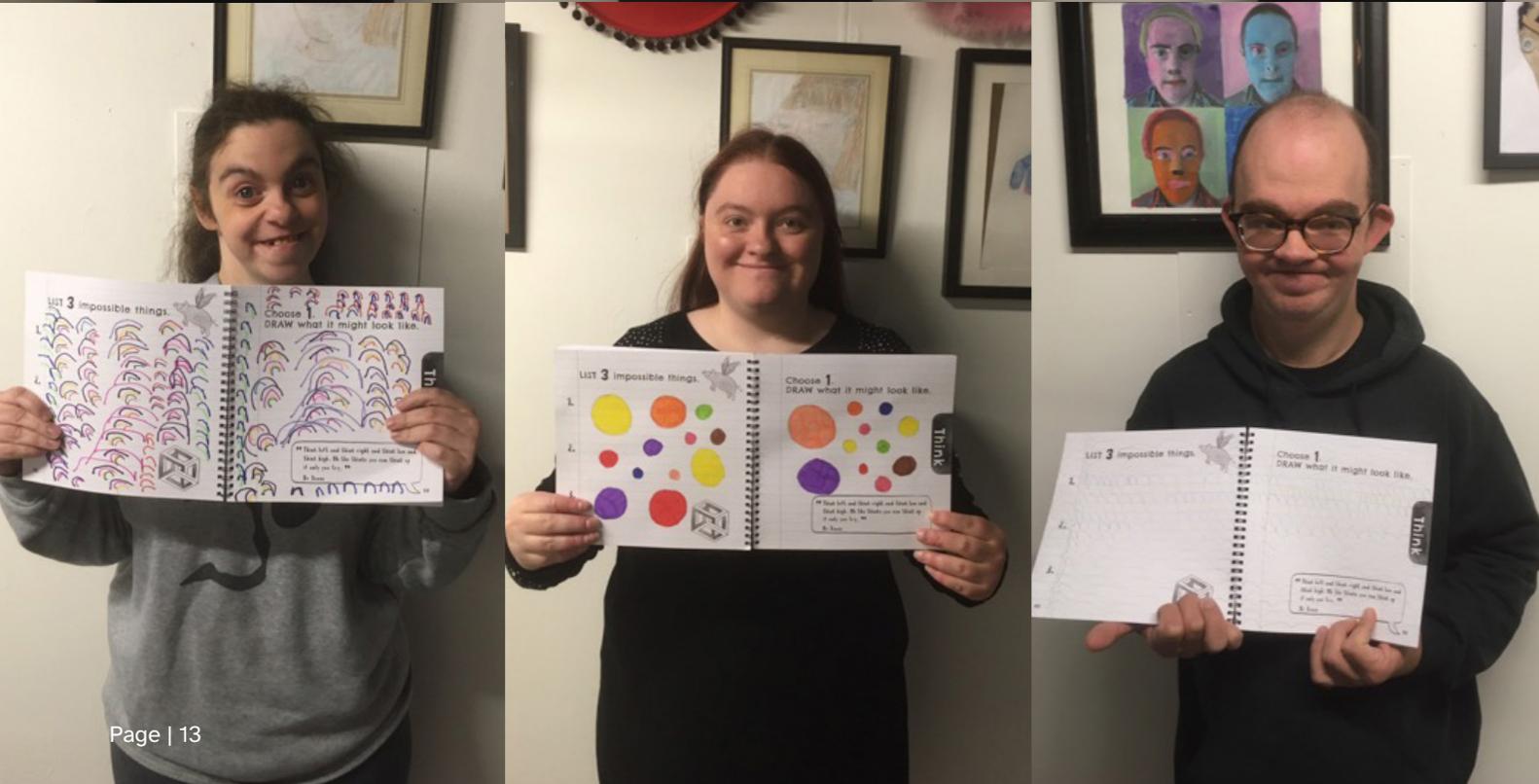
'I like the sort of open endedness of it.'

I like that it gives you a starting point.

It can lead to all sorts of things, which is quite unexpected.

It feels that it's just an opportunity to be creative, therefore, it's open to anybody.'

Jess McKenzie, About Face



Joy of Calmness

The very concept of doodling is calming.

It is about allowing your mind to drift.

About day dreaming and not worrying about outcomes.

Doodling is about process and not product.

We found this relaxed, calm, doodly way of being was something really appreciated and frequently commented on by participating groups and facilitators. Perhaps particularly during Covid-19 the Doodle Book offered a place for release and relaxation - although the secret joy and benefit of calmness is something well worth remembering in all scenarios.

I think you can kind of throw everything at a session sometimes if you feel if it is running away from you. And I thought this had moments of stillness and quiet that were kind of the antithesis of my work and I'm definitely going to bring that in. Because it was really great.'

Imogen Barton-Wells, Proud and Loud Arts

'On our Zooms at the moment we don't have quiet time. There's always something going on. There's always me encouraging people in the background kind of chattering away. And the fact that they got that quiet time, but were actually still with other people, I think they've really benefited from it.'

Hannah Thompson, AA Media

'Working on something online but in a spacious way: reducing that overwhelming intensity of being staring at a screen.'

Joshua Green, The Lawnmowers

'With the Creative Doodle Book there is something about the quietness of working [that] allows people a bit more space.'

Jo Frater, Confidance



From Creativity to Wellbeing

Few people involved in the arts need to be told that there is a relationship between creative expression and wellbeing. It is something that we see in our daily experiences and that we recognise in our own engagement in creative practice.

The Creative Doodle Book project adds to this growing evidence of the relationship between participatory arts, health and wellbeing. Some of these are direct and immediate, the simple positive mental health value of doing something with other people should never be underestimated. If that activity is rewarding, distracting, empowering, reinvigorating, then all the better.

We also gathered many comments about the impact of the process on confidence, on sense of self, on ability to deal with stress or to process complex emotions.

During Covid-19 these wellbeing benefits of creative expression were enhanced, as people lost some of their regular activities and normal outlets for expression. The Creative Doodle Book process provided an inclusive and gentle reaffirmation of the direct journey from creativity to wellbeing.

'It has some quite challenging concepts, that force you to reflect on your situation, reflect on who you are, maybe on what your identity is. But I think it's positive because it's not getting you to reflect on negative aspects of your life, it's always a positive thing.'

I think within mental health, often people get locked in cycles of sort of negative thinking about themselves and their situations. So to encourage them to reflect on something more positive and optimistic, can be really refreshing.'

Robert Bennett, Brighter Futures



'It made me reflect on the past year, but it made me feel confident about the future. It just made me feel more comfy about the way ahead. And more confident about myself as well. It brought me out of myself again. Because with isolation I found it really hard.'

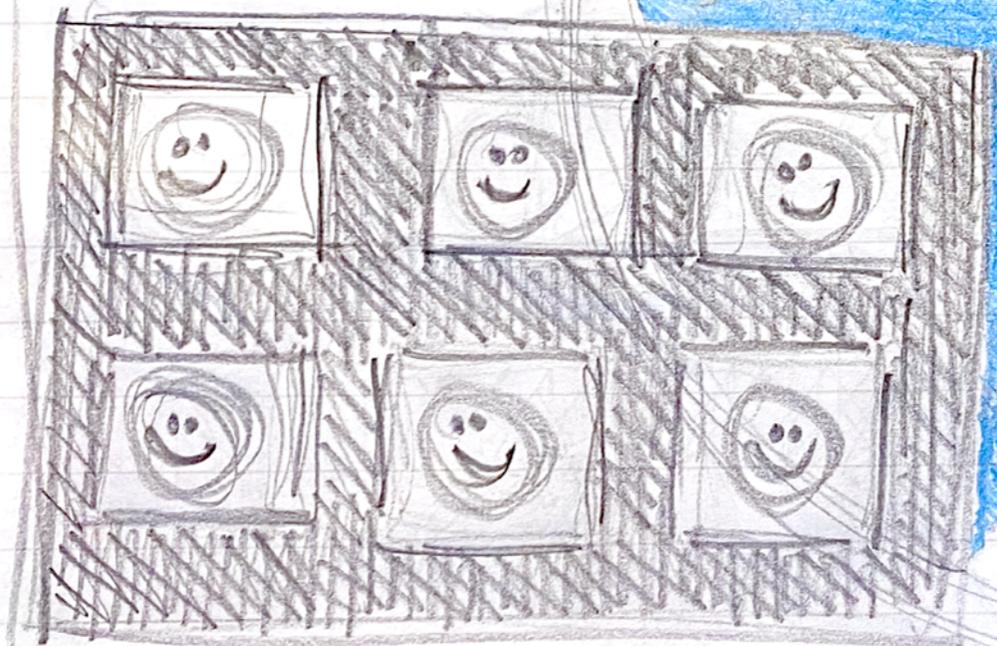
Luke, member. Our Lives Our Ways

Yes manifesto.

LIST 5 things to say 'YES' to in your life.

MANIFESTO:
a list of rules and beliefs that help you make decisions.

1.



2.

3.

4.

5.



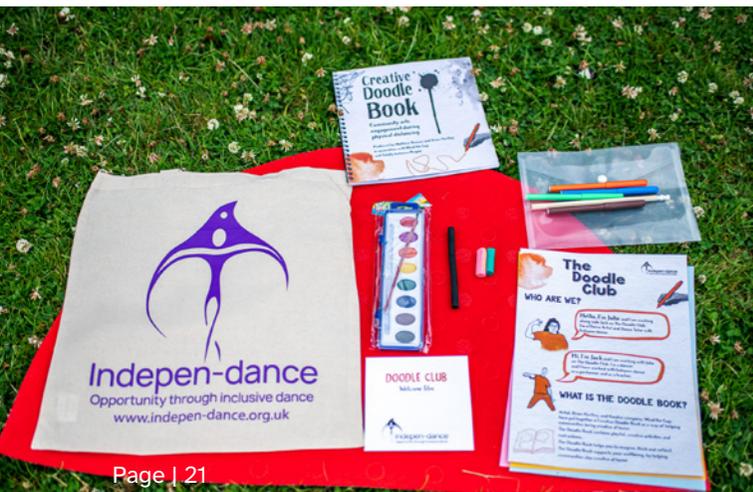
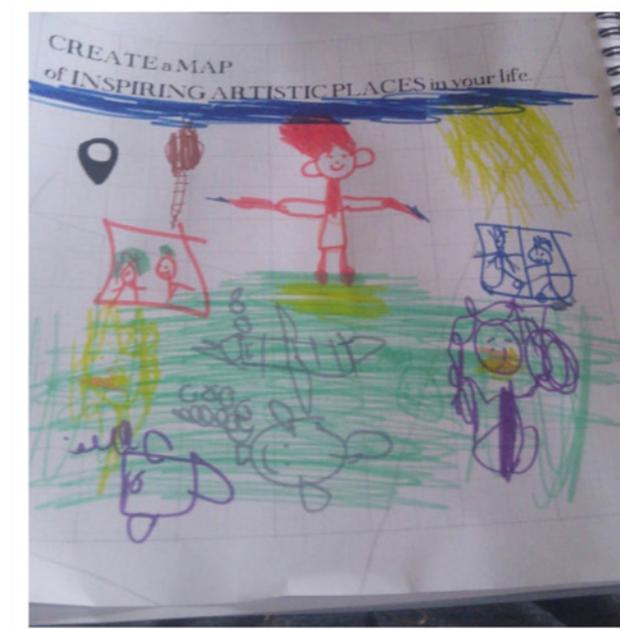
I say 'YES' to being curious about everything.

- ① Love ② Exciting Jobs ③ Friends ④ Travelling ⑤ Creativity.

Indepen-dance

'Working with the Doodle Book has been really enjoyable. There's been quite a lot of creative tasks, and it's helped me to use my imagination, and think outside the box. And what I also like about it is that it's made me less stressful, it's helped me to clear everything out of my mind and just focus on one thing.'

Dylan, project participant, Indepen-dance





From this list create a MAP.

Cross the Sky

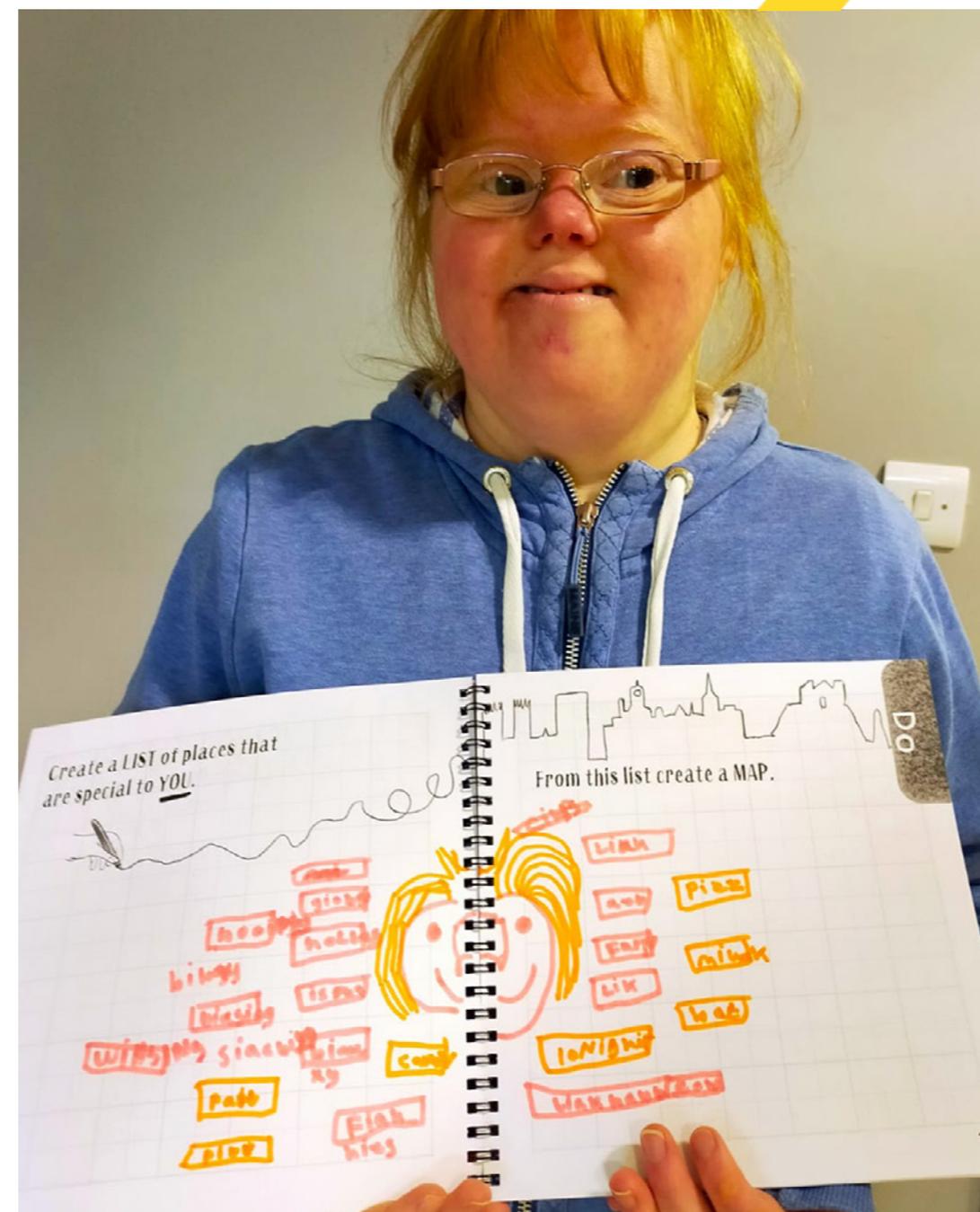
'It's a shared experience in isolation. I think that is the thing that has been key to a lot of the Zoom stuff that we've been doing. Doing it together completely adds value to each other's work, to your own work and having a laugh and connecting to people. Things like the Creative Doodle Book have been amazing, really valuable for that.'

Becky Newbould,
Cross the Sky

Under the Stars

'Our group can be quite inward looking. There's a lot of members of our group who have mental health, and struggle emotionally. Connecting them to things that aren't just the sometimes tough things that are going on inside them is really, really valuable. We really took the ideas of this book and used them and for us that opened up our space, looking at our surroundings differently. So the whole process encouraged us to look outward.'

Stacy Sampson, Under the Stars



Voice and Self Advocacy

Many people's experiences of Covid-19 have been that of personal restriction and lack of control. This has been doubly the case for people who are clinically vulnerable, including many seniors and disabled people. Indeed, during the pandemic disabled people have been simultaneously informed they are vulnerable, that they needed to shield or isolate for their own good, and at once been largely ignored and invisible with public discourses.

'There is a real narrative where my company members are told all the time by the world around them that they are vulnerable and they need looking after. And that they don't understand, or things aren't for them. It's a very patronising world that neurodivergent people live in.'

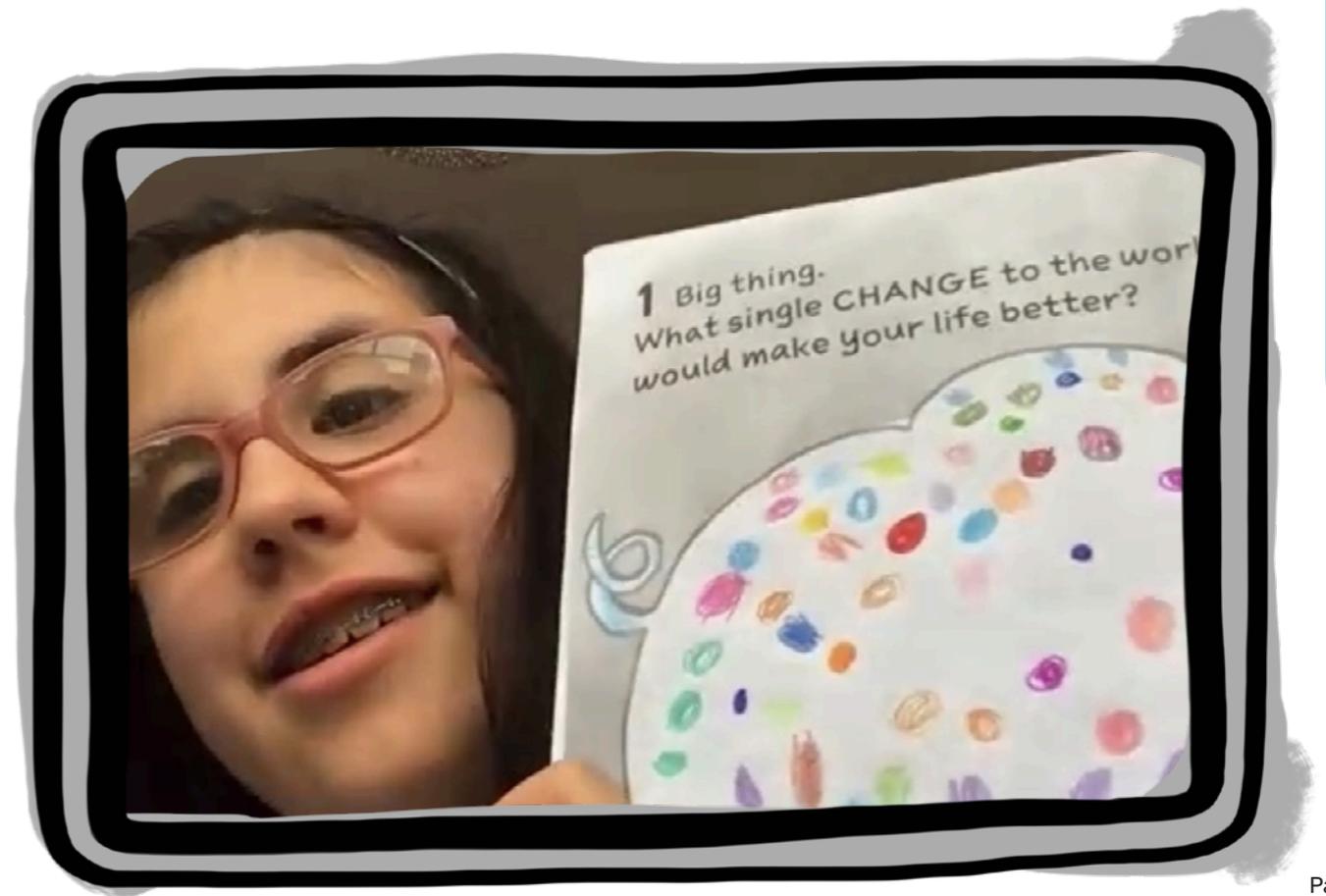
Alice Linnane, Square Pegs Arts

The open, creative and playful tasks within the Creative Doodle Book offered a space for reflective consideration, for engaging with big questions and having difficult conversations in a safe and engaging manner. The value of these conversations, and the value of having a voice, should not be underestimated. It provides an emotional outlet and sense of agency that supports wellbeing in all sorts of important ways.

Fuse Theatre

'I think creativity comes with having your own voice and being heard. I think a space for creativity during lockdown had a huge impact. Knowing for that hour and a half you are able to have your voice and be creative with other people.'

Jenna Howlett, Fuse Theatre



BUDs Theatre

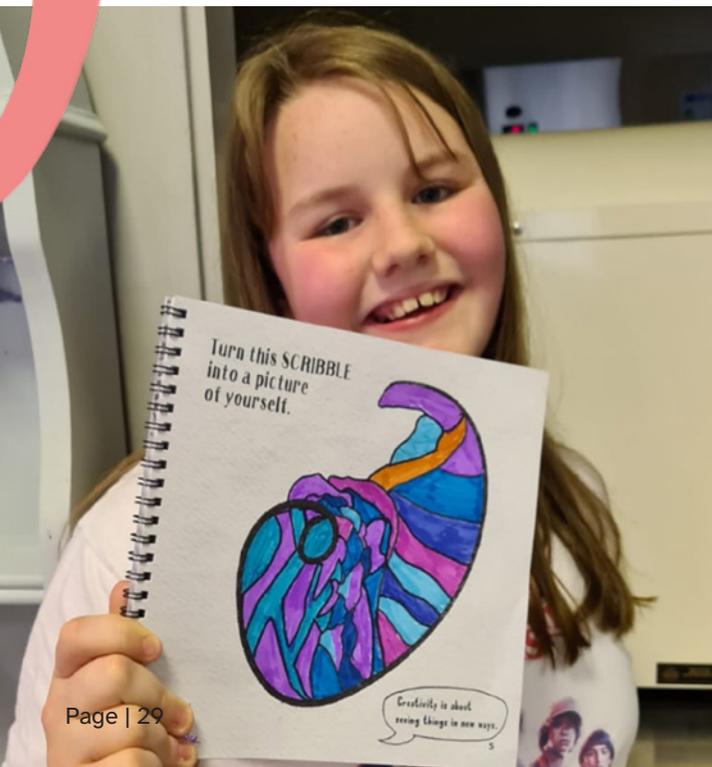
'Each week we've had quite big conversations about different things and it's only now having used the Doodle Book that we've been able to achieve such in-depth conversations and learning with the children. For us to be able to create this space for them to be able to talk about those issues was really, really important and really special as a facilitator because I never thought that would happen.'

Katie Mahon, BUDs

Starlight Arts

'The space it gave them to be able to express themselves and how they were feeling at that time or what had been going on now. And just that calm, downtime, that many of them don't get in their chaotic lives. It was just a really empowering, positive experience for them.'

Laura Bassenger, Starlight Arts



We also used the Creative Doodle Book in SEND departments in a number of schools, where it supported student's confidence and self-expression.

'The huge thing that we all noticed was a couple of students that didn't normally have a voice found their voice, and were eager to show their work, to explain their work, to express what they saw. The learners just got carried away. You could have given them chocolate all day long and it wouldn't have given them that same feeling.'

Michelle Webster, Shipley College



'They were playing, like going through a journey, but in a playful way, rather than in a serious way.'

Janet Vinci,
Beechcliffe School



'So for me, it was almost like having a conversation with the students. It was a supplementary way of communicating or an alternative way of communicating in some cases.'

Steven Redfearn,
Brigshaw School



Supporting Practitioners

A great pleasure of the Creative Doodle Book was working with so many excellent practitioners and arts organisations. We hoped the project would also provide new skills and approaches that might be welcomed and adopted. The resilience and adaptability of arts and community organisations during Covid-19 was tremendous, and this work needs properly recognising and supporting to ensure it continues into the future.

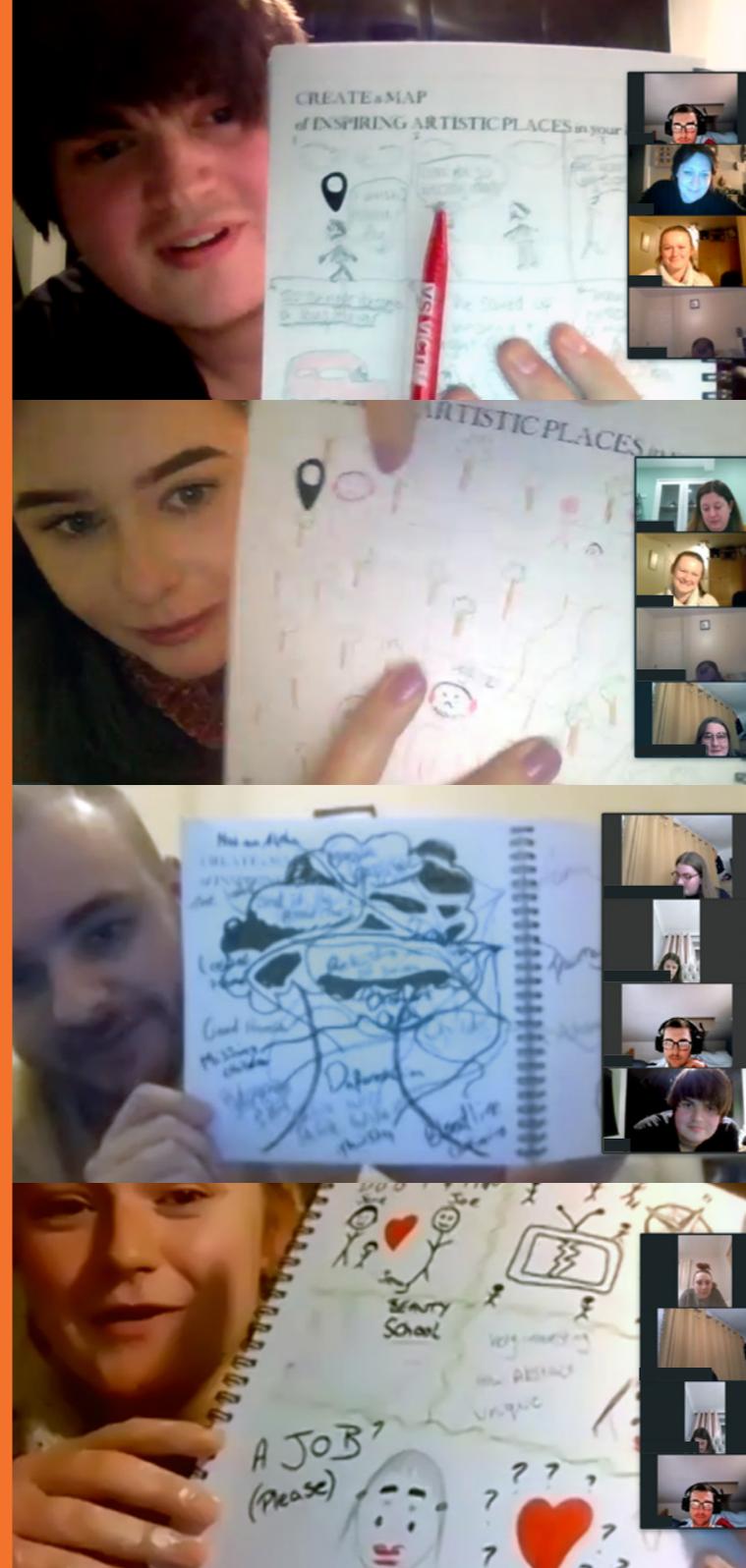
'I think it helped change the way we see the world a little, seeing it with fresh eyes. I think refreshing is a good word to describe it for us.'

Paul Birch, Out of Character



'It landed on our doorsteps at a great time. It can really enhance our practice and find new ways of how we can support our members. I think it is bringing positivity for sure, when it has been quite dark and challenging times.'

Claire Reda, Indepen-dance



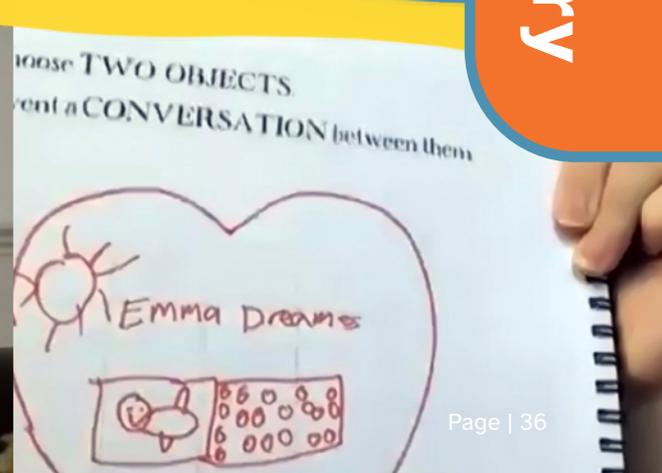
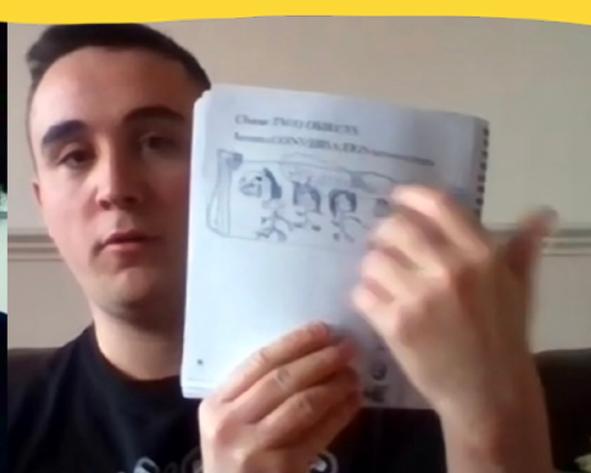
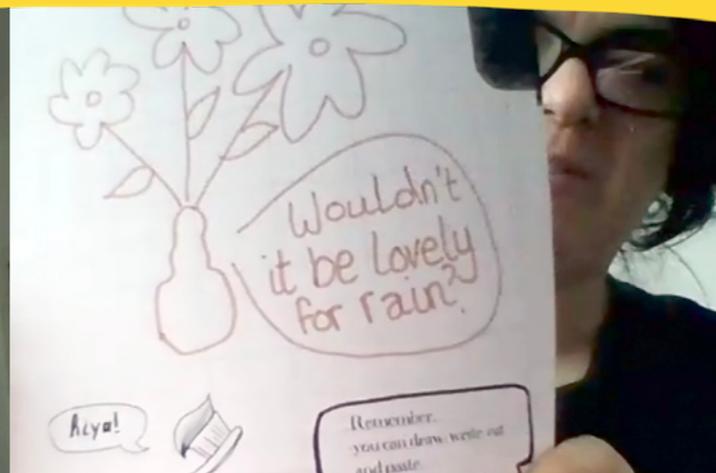
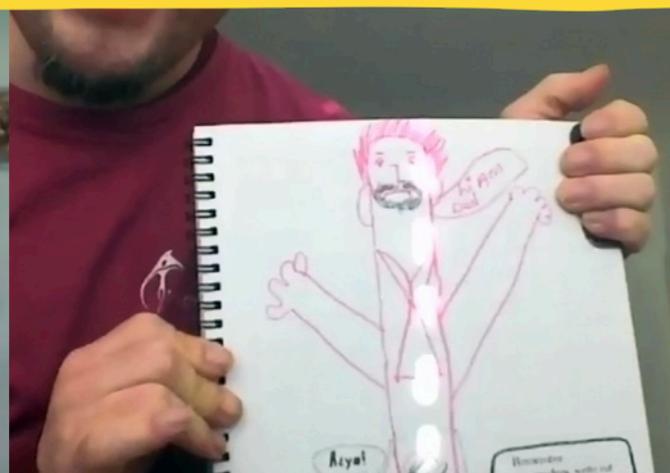
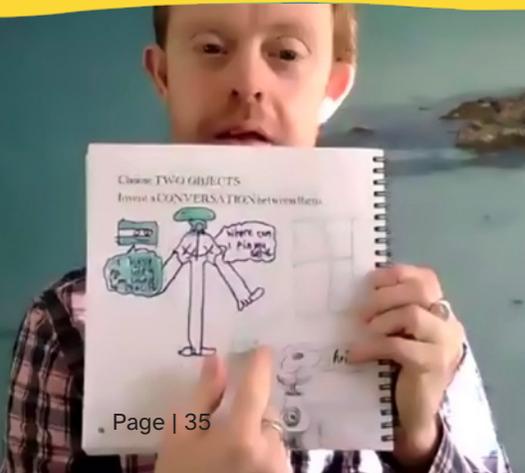
In on the Act

'I certainly will be taking stuff forward into the studio when we return to in-person work, as an alternative to the ways that we have been working in the past. So for a practitioner that's been doing it for 25 years, it certainly invigorated me, which I just wasn't expecting from an online project.'

Tina Shuker, In on the Act

Top Tips for Online Delivery

1. A shared physical resource such as the Creative Doodle Book can enhance the feeling of working together while physically apart and online.
2. Process is key. It isn't about the end product, it's about the joy of being creative together.
3. An online space can feel very busy, so allowing moments of quiet is really useful.
4. An online space is potentially very equitable. Once technology and support is in place it can offer a safe, accessible and inclusive forum.



Covid, Creativity & Connections

Vicky Ackroyd, Totally Inclusive People

The Creative Doodle Book began its life as a theatre maker's tool at Mind the Gap; a way to support artists with learning disabilities to reflect on their work. When Covid hit and the world shut down it felt sensible to adapt this resource and broaden it out as an opportunity to stay creative while working from home. We weren't alone, across the country, and perhaps the world, a multitude of arts practitioners swiftly converted their 'in-the-room' sessions into online models.

When we received funding from UKRI to work with the Creative Doodle Book with companies across the UK I was given the task of devising the accompanying online workshops. These focused on the visual arts and were designed to work for broad and diverse groups of people.

I learned that creativity isn't about talent, ability or even activity, it's about curiosity and connection and kindness. There was always some laughter in the sessions, and always some peace. Through our little Zoom boxes we managed to feel connected and safe. It has been an absolute pleasure to be a part of this project, and I'm extremely grateful to have been involved. At a time when so much felt uncertain, the Creative Doodle Book was a place of reassurance and comfort for all of us.

As a participatory practice-research project, the Creative Doodle Book drew upon the skills and engagement of a large number of individuals and organisations. The initial Doodle Book was developed in a collaborative process with artists from Mind the Gap and designed in partnership with Brian Hartley. The project team for the work presented here included Vicky Ackroyd, Lisa Debney, Deborah Dickinson and Brian Hartley and was delivered in partnership with Mind the Gap and Totally Inclusive People.

We would also like to thank all the groups and participants who took part in the project. Including:

- | | | |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| AA Media | About Face | Act Up! Newham |
| Beechcliffe School | Bradford People First | Bradford Youth Services |
| Brighter Futures | Brigshaw High School | BUDs Theatre |
| Cafe West | Carers Leeds | Confidance |
| Cross the Sky | Flow | Fuse Theatre |
| Indepen-dance | Into the Sky | Leeds Care Delivery Service |
| The Lawnmowers | Lyra | Mesh Dance |
| North Lanarkshire Council | Notting Hill Genesis | Out of Character |
| Our Lives Our Ways | Pitlochry Festival Theatre | Proud and Loud Arts |
| Purple Patch Arts | Red Cross Refugee Group | ShIPLEY College |
| Starlight Arts | Square Pegs Arts | Theatre Royal Wakefield |
| Under the Stars | | |



Mind the Gap Theatre Company and York St John University developed the Creative Doodle Book as a resource to encourage positive creative expression through arts-based activities. In 2020-21 the project was funded by UKRI as part of the rapid response scheme to Covid-19.

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Matthew Reason, 2021.

Design: Brian Hartley

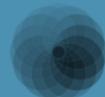


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TOTALLY INCLUSIVE PEOPLE