

Winter and Spring Schools Cultural Heritage & Wellbeing. The added value of an international training programme on Creative Health for professionals

Bart De Nil

The history

The Winter and Spring Schools for Cultural Heritage and Wellbeing came about as a recognition of the need for professional development for archive professionals working in cultural heritage. Since many archivists entered the profession trained as record managers they lacked the skills and competencies to develop educational resources for schools. In 2014, working with Andrew Payne, the head of the Education and Outreach department at The National Archives in London, we organised a five day international summer school in a very small town on the Belgium-Dutch border for archivists who wanted to learn to develop educational resources. We didn't know if anyone would turn up, but the places sold out instantly with archivists coming from Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland and Denmark. This was the start of a successful series of international winter and spring schools aimed at supporting archivists, education officers and keepers of special collections in their professional development. They also became the basis for a training programme on Cultural Heritage and Creative Health.

In the same period that I was working with archivists on education and outreach I became increasingly invested in the deployment of cultural heritage for wellbeing and health. I developed specific training trajectories on heritage and dementia, autism-friendly museums and using museum objects for wellbeing activities. I simultaneously set up with various partners from the cultural heritage and health care sector a programme called Heritage Collections, Health and Wellbeing. Central to this programme were long-term outreach projects that focused on the use of heritage collections to improve the wellbeing and health of people and communities, and on measuring and evaluating the realised impact. It felt an obvious next step to use the Winter and Spring schools to share this knowledge and expertise in an international context. So, for the fifth edition in Antwerp in 2019 the focus shifted from education to health and wellbeing. We used the same model as the previous Winter and Spring Schools where the participants were guided in developing an offer for communities ranging from people with dementia in a residential setting to working with communities around mental health issues. Again, this formula worked and moving forward I decided to broaden the scope to a training course for professionals working in museums, archives or libraries who want to develop wellbeing programmes. For this I teamed up in 2020 with Dr Guislain Museum, a museum on the history of psychiatry in Belgium. Together we organised editions in 2020 in Newcastle with Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums and in 2022 a spring school in Swansea with the National Waterfront Museum. In 2023 we organised a series in three European cities with a rich textile heritage: Ghent, Leeds, and Tilburg. Each edition had a specific focus (communities, co-creation and making), however the common thread was art-based wellbeing activities using textile heritage. For this series Thomas Kador from UCL Arts & Sciences gave an introductory talk that connected the specific focus with Creative Health.

All the editions brought together participants from 18 countries from all over the world with backgrounds ranging from museum, archives, library and heritage professionals, academics, students, health and care professionals, artists, civil servants and community workers.

The legacy

There is an interesting legacy of experience and knowledge on different levels that came out of this long-term training event.

Teaching model

We started from a traditional approach where we trained cultural heritage professionals to use their collections in a different context. In the first editions archivists were guided, in a very structured way, to develop in groups a specific educational resource for students. Hands-on workshops and exercises introduced them to the skills and methods that can be used in the development of their resources. Staying with this model when we broadened our scope to wellbeing outcomes enabled us to keep the structured in-depth training. Participants could therefore learn a specific skill or method rather than just listen to specialists speaking about their work or best practices, as is often the case. Also, it kept the focus on using cultural heritage in an instrumental way, as assets that can be used to improve the wellbeing of individuals and communities. This was important especially for archive or museum professionals who wanted to hold on to the intrinsic value of cultural heritage, and letting go of this was sometimes a challenge.

International

A key benefit of the Winter and Spring Schools is undoubtedly the international context in which the participants work together and share ideas. It starts with the location which for most of the participants was alien to their own country and work environment. Just being somewhere for a week abroad immersed and focused with other like-minded professionals is enriching. It sharpens your mind when you engage in a discussion with a professional from a different country. It is also an eyeopener from the perspective of learning about Creative Health. Museum, archive or library professionals from different countries work in similar ways when it comes to their core business, but when it comes to using their assets if they want to tackle societal challenges then they are bound by different societal, economic, cultural or political contexts. For example, social prescription is seen by some cultural professionals from countries with a strong and well-funded health and social care system as a model designed to patch-up a failing health care system. Or when professionals discuss in a group assignment the different choices, they should offer the target group, a group member from Syria simply intervened with: *'where I live and work people don't have choices'*.

Diversity

We have always strived to make the group of participants as diverse as possible. Not only from different parts of the heritage sector, but also health practitioners, artists, students and academics. We found that this eclectic mix of professional and personal backgrounds made it a much more interesting experience for the

participants. Particularly the participants with a health or care background or community workers made a great difference, they always offered the insights and knowledge that cultural professionals often lack. However, it must be said that different backgrounds sometimes can create tensions and conflict. In particular, when theory meets practice. Sometimes students or academics entered discussions or exercises with a theoretical mindset about how things work and are pulled back by practitioners who know from experience that things work differently in practice.

Different ways of working

The red thread through the Winter and Spring Schools is how heritage professionals explored how they can use their collections for community participation and outreach and collaborate with other societal partners. Connecting to the emerging 'new' field of Creative Health made the participants reflect about different ways of working and learn how this 'wellbeing turn' happens differently in other countries. From the feedback we received from participants we know that the Winter and Spring Schools not only gave them new insights, knowledge and skills but also has made them change the way they approach their work.

The future

After ten years and ten editions of this training event we felt that it was time to rethink the structure and scope. When we changed our focus to wellbeing the term 'Creative Health', instigated by the All Party Parliamentary Group for Arts, Health and Wellbeing's Creative Health Inquiry Report in 2017, was beginning to be used more broadly. Since then, we have tried to cover different aspects related to how cultural heritage can be embedded in public health using non-medical activities. From 2025 we will be joined by TOON, a new organisation funded by the Flemish government that has a service role around heritage, care and wellbeing in Flanders and Brussels. One of the goals of this organisation is introduce knowledge and expertise through continuing professional development in close co-operation with the care sector.

The next editions from 2025 and onwards are going to be based on the knowledge about Creative Health in relation to cultural heritage, so that participants can reflect on what Creative Health can mean for their own practice and develop something during the training that is tailored to their context. This combined with hands-on basic skills training connected to measuring and evaluating the effects of wellbeing activities or the design of activities, and specific cultural heritage-based methods such as object handling, object storytelling or digital storytelling. We will use a transversal concept, such as 'place' that can relate to other concepts like social infrastructure, places of care, placemaking, asset-based approach, green spaces of care, etc., as an overarching theme. But, if the past ten years have taught us anything, it is that our training event has to start from the premise that cultural heritage and culture in general must be seen as instrumental in helping to tackle health inequalities and inequities. That is why the upcoming editions will be focused on vulnerable groups who could benefit the most from cultural heritage-based wellbeing activities.

Bart De Nil is a PhD researcher between UCL Arts & Sciences and Information Studies, investigating public libraries as social infrastructure for Creative Health. For the past decade he has been leading developments in culturally mediated wellbeing in Flanders, Belgium and internationally. He has published several books and articles on different topics related to culture, health and wellbeing.

Image credit

Image 1: Participants at Leeds Workshop. Image courtesy of the author.

