

Art Exhibition on Mental Health and Creative Arts

On the World Mental Health Day 2018 (10th October, 6-8pm), I organised an event at the Institute of Development Studies around mental health and creativity, in partnership with the IDS Wellbeing Group.

The event took the shape of an art exhibition, temporarily transforming one of our large meeting room (the Convening Space) into an art gallery. It showed the works of art of IDS staff and students who are involved creative activities in their free time (drawing, painting, music, poetry, collages, jewellery making, origami).

Idea and objective:

I had this idea about a year before while discussing mental health-related experiences and personal coping strategies with friends/colleagues. I realised that a lot of people seemed to engage in arts and crafts in their free time to deal with mental struggles, like I did. I thought this deserved to be shared and explored further in an event so I started testing my idea to a few people and was widely encouraged to go ahead.

This was the opportunity for IDS staff and students to show the institute and its people a little bit more about themselves than usual and especially how their art helps you live a good life, at an emotional and psychological level. Whether their art helps them express complex feelings, or the practice itself soothes them, this sharing event was aiming at starting a conversation on the importance of caring for one's mental wellness at work and outside. It challenged the rigid perspective that working at university is a mechanical non-creative activity and encouraged people to view their colleagues as complex human beings with sometimes invisible struggles that are actually very common but stigmatised.



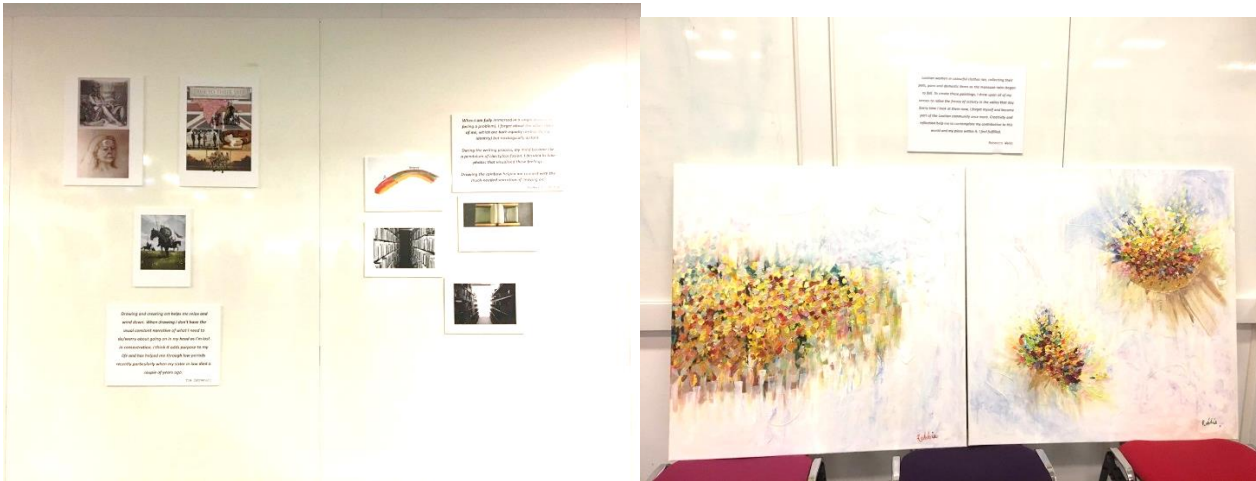
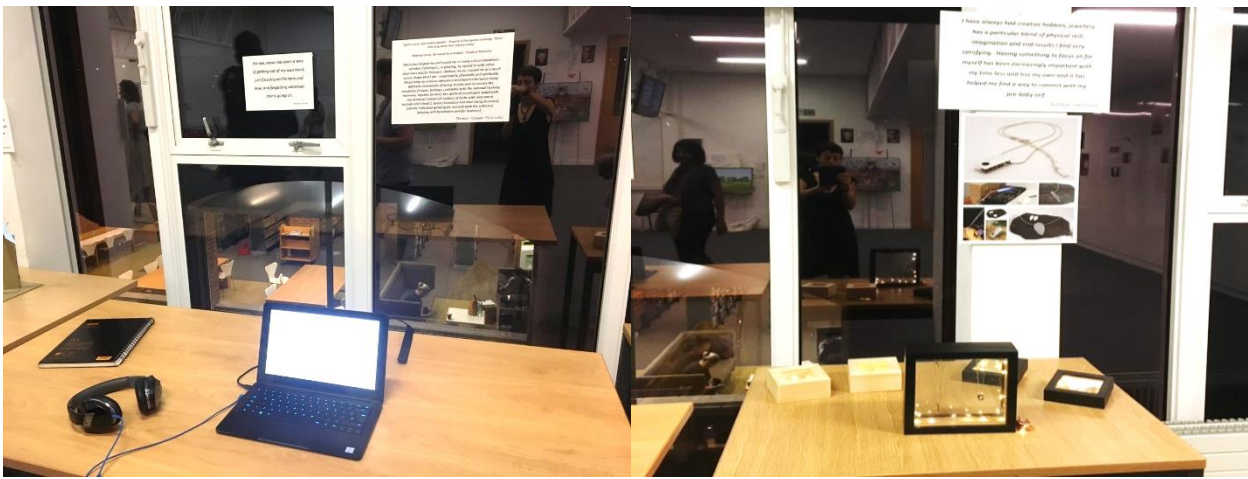


Photo credits: Hadeer ElShafie-Annalena Oppel-Sophie Valeix

Making it happen:

I started organising about a month ahead of the event, but more time would have been useful.

I had to think and write a proposal that included objectives, schedule, budget and a visual presentation of how art would be exhibited in the room. I had to apply for funding for drinks and nibbles and printing of some art creations and vignettes (the latter were for artists to explain how their art related to their mental health). After discussing with the PhD convenor at IDS, we decided that it could be funded by our PhD budget as a doctoral-led event. I was granted 400 pounds (I was awaiting quotes for buffet and printing at the moment I applied for funding) but ended up spending 250 pounds.

I had to recruit and manage artists volunteering to exhibit their art, which revealed the most challenging. I pinned flyers/posters on the walls of our department to recruit and advertise for the event itself. From this, a lot of people contacted me to volunteer. Coordinating with the communication team to send out emails to all members had proven a challenge and as a result, I had to deal with too many volunteers (which in itself was a sign of wide existing interest for my event, so it was rather a good thing).

I had to promptly answer volunteers' questions all along and collect documents from them in order to have a uniform contribution from them all. I had to be very clear in what I wanted from them through emails as I was not able to meet them all in person until the day.

I had to get members of the Wellbeing Group put together a presentation of their activities in 5-10 minutes and follow up with them to make sure they were working on it and had decided who was going to present

it. I also had to write a 15 minute speech for me to introduce the event and share my motivations and personal experiences. I wanted to do this to add some depth to what could be shared during this exhibition. Indeed, since I encouraged the artists to only share what they felt open about or to show their work anonymously, I wanted that at least someone talked very openly and crudely about mental health issues (not just with hints) to break the stigma around it, which I myself felt comfortable with doing. I was a little scared of sharing very personal details with my colleagues but pushed myself and did not regret it at all.

I had to spend a couple of hours checking everything was on track and dealing with unexpected issues every night for about 4 days before the event.

I also had to delegate some tasks like for example a PhD colleague and friend was in charge of putting together the buffet after I had bought all the nibbles while I would organise the artists.

Feedback:

To my surprise, some people wrote to me emails ahead of the day to express their interest and gratitude for organising this event, mainly expressing the fact that they could not make it but would have loved to.

I received a lot of very positive oral and written feedback and comments from artists themselves and attendees during and after the event. I had set up a board on which attendees could leave anonymous post it notes during the exhibition and it worked well. Below are some of the messages from this board:

'A wonderful initiative, moving, and provoking much reflection leading I hope to insight and understanding.'

'Wonderful evening, two really great presentations and so moving and enlightening to see colleagues and peers wall.'

'Wonderful examples of how art can be used in so many different formats to keep us sane and improve wellbeing in increasingly challenging times for our mental health'

'Great way to make mental health more visible and to raise awareness. Really liked having the artists say something about their art – happens rarely!'

'Made my day from a miserable, lonely, to a sociable, sharable one.'

Reflections:

In retrospect, organising this event was challenging and demanded perseverance, very good organisation and decision-making skills, and a lot of time aside of on-going studies/work. But it revealed very uplifting as I felt empowered to make a difference on a topic I care about so I'm very happy for having done it. I also felt it was liberating since, through this event, experiencing mental health problems turned my own feelings of shame and weakness into being valued and feeling strong (especially when people thanked me for openly talking about mental health issues, which rarely happens in the university context).