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2

Together while apart: interrogating togetherness in the context of COVID-19 and online community arts practice

Matthew Reason

This chapter interrogates the meanings and experiences of 'togetherness', specifically in the context of the COVID-prompted expansion in the online delivery of community arts practice. It frames the simultaneous loss and pursuit of togetherness as a key territory of the pandemic, something that occurred at both community and individual levels, became problematically politicised and yet was also genuinely desired. The utilisation of online community practice to instil a sense of togetherness, wellbeing and resilience has the potential to be a lasting legacy of COVID-19. The objective of this chapter is to think through virtual togetherness, developing a critical framework to help us better evaluate experiences of being together while apart.

'Together' and 'togetherness' are ordinary, everyday words. They lack a specific underpinning conceptual framework, although this chapter will draw on cognate areas – most specifically Victor and Edith Turner's concept of *communitas* (1969) – in order to allow us to think into them more critically. They are also indisputably loaded with positive connotations and, perhaps as a consequence, are particularly prone to hijacking in a way that can feel hollow or even pernicious. As this chapter will discuss, during the pandemic phrases such as 'we're all in this together' sought to actively conceal inequalities and stark societal divisions that COVID-19 highlighted. Given these characteristics, togetherness often risks becoming an empty signifier: under-theorised at the same time it is over-utilised.

This chapter is interested in what we can learn – both retrospectively and in terms of future thinking – from the COVID-19 prompted emphasis on experiences of togetherness while physically

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and socially apart. Specifically, it examines what produces authentic and meaningful experiences of togetherness within online community arts practice. It will use as a key case study the Creative Doodle Book (CDB) project, which between November 2020 and June 2021 delivered online arts workshops with partners across the UK, in contexts including learning disabilities, mental health, care homes and young people.[1] The chapter focuses on the work undertaken in the context of learning disabilities, which is where the CDB had its conceptual origins and where questions of inclusive online practice have significant future-oriented relevance. The insights from this project will be used to develop a more constructive understanding of togetherness. Drawing on this material, the chapter will reflect on how these will support the development of authentic forms of togetherness in future online community arts practice. Discussion considers insights from the CDB project in the context of ideas of *communitas* and selfhood, also drawing in reflection on the concepts of togetherness and inclusivity.

The Creative Doodle Book and community arts

'Community arts' describes a broad range of participatory arts practices which Owen Kelly (1984) identifies as emerging from the 1960s onwards. Orientated around an ethos of cultural democratisation, community arts seek to bring to life Beuys' famous dictum that 'everybody is an artist'. The movement sees arts practice as a process through which opportunities for voice and expression can be facilitated for marginalised individuals and communities (Bishop, 2012: 177).

Within this framework, togetherness is a recurring if largely unexpressed component of community arts, which values the experience of being with other people as we make theatre, music and art *together*. Ideas of togetherness are accessible and immediately meaningful in a manner that aligns with a participatory ethos of community practice. Such togetherness was presumed to be in-person because, until fairly recently, nothing else was possible and nothing else was practised. While not entirely non-existent prior to 2020, online community arts was previously rare, largely dismissed and certainly seen as a distant second best – perhaps precisely because it

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ran counter to ideas of togetherness. COVID-19 prompted a rapid and radical shift to online delivery (CHWA, 2021).

The CDB project was both an example of this shift to online community arts practice and an investigation into its consequences. The Book was originally produced a year prior to COVID-19, through a collaborative research process with learning disabled artists at Mind the Gap, a learning disability performance company and training academy based in Bradford (UK). It was inspired by the work of people such as Keri Smith (*Wreck this Journal* 2013) and Julia Cameron (*The Artist's Way* 1992) and designed to employ playful tasks to help support reflective thinking within creative practice. When Mind the Gap had to send all their artists and academy members home in March 2020, the Doodle Book was immediately recognised as a providing a unique resource that would provide a structure for working remotely and online (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2 for example pages from the book).

Originally conceived for in-person practice, a core element of the CDB is that it is, put simply, a physical but extremely portable resource. As a physical object that could be easily posted to participants' homes, the books lent themselves particularly well to creative adaptation in response to COVID-19. They provided a physical tangibility that rooted online practice. That everybody, while engaging remotely, had the same tangible object in their hands produced experiences of connection that had strong

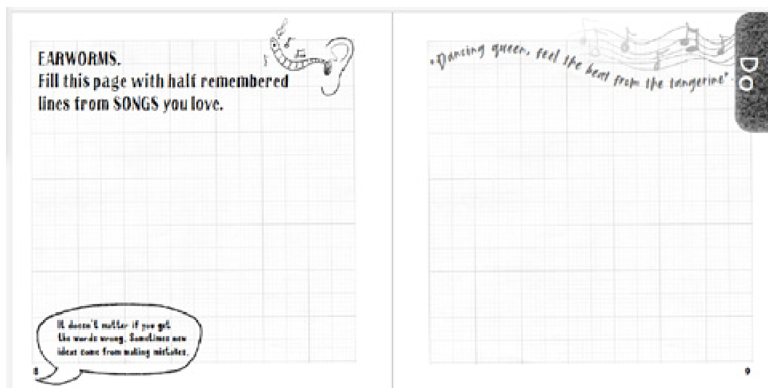

Figure 2.1 'Earworms', page from Creative Doodle Book

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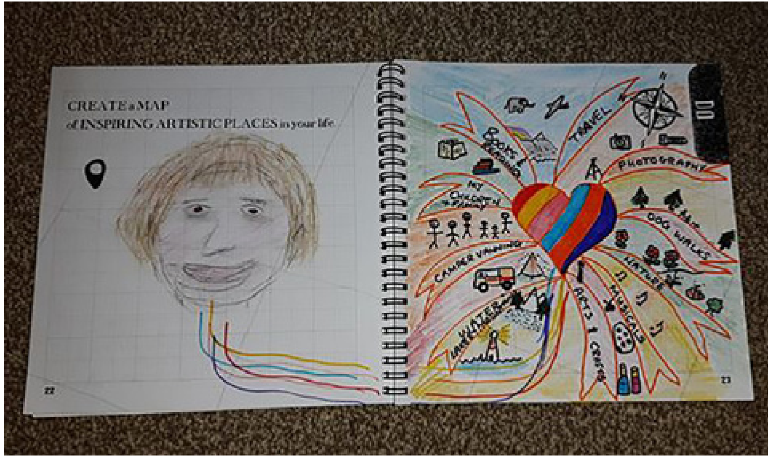

Figure 2.2 'Inspiring places', completed page from Confidance, inclusive dance company

resonance during COVID-19. The implications of this, for ideas of togetherness within online 'spaces', will be returned to in more detail later in this chapter.

From its starting point with Mind the Gap, funding from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) as part of the rapid response scheme to COVID-19 enabled the CDB project to expand to work across the UK with 31 different partners, predominantly consisting of learning disability art organisations but also schools, care homes and mental health groups. A recurring feature for these organisations was the rapidity of the shift from in-person to online delivery, typically starting from the point of zero prior experience. As Laura Bassanger of disability arts organisation Starlight Arts put it: 'Prior to this [online delivery] never existed in our minds, because it was face-to-face and that's it' or Imogen Barton-Wells of Manchester-based disability-led theatre company Proud and Loud Arts, 'We quickly moved online, which is something we've never done before […] I think maybe we had a week break, and then move into Zoom sessions.' One of the questions or consequences therefore became what does it mean for community arts participants to be together within online practice and in a virtual space? What forms or practices of online engagement 'work' in developing meaningful experiences of togetherness?

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In conjunction with its partners, the project delivered online workshops based around the CDB. These were designed by inclusive arts practitioners Vicky Ackroyd and Lisa Debney, with a focus on creative processes and inclusivity. With the shared tasks within the Doodle Book as a starting point, a recurring feature of the workshops was a period where participants would remain connected online but would be occupied in individually responding to a page, often in silence. Then the group would come together again to share their responses. In her reflection on the project, lead facilitator Vicky Ackroyd noted:

> I learned that creativity isn't about talent, ability or event 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.

This evocation of the particular experiences of connection through 'Zoom boxes' will be returned again in this chapter. The discussion presented here, draws upon reflections and observations from the CDB project, including feedback from the participants and expert interviews with lead practitioners from all the partner organisations. The evidence it presents is based upon insights from relational practice, practitioner knowledge gained through the accumulation of small, fragmentary, ephemeral moments of intersubjectivity. Across many professions COVID-19 produced multiple instances where experienced practitioners had to creatively adapt years of experience to new circumstances. Through its interviews with community arts practitioners, the CDB was able to capture this (re)learning as it happened, as new knowledge about facilitating togetherness through online practice was made and recognised in the moment. This chapter seeks to place this knowledge within appropriate theoretical frameworks in order to formulate a nuanced understanding of togetherness within online community arts. It is important to retain the learning here that can guide future practice, particularly about the gains of online creative practice when working with underserved communities and individuals. For a fuller discussion of the methodology, and questions on online inclusivity in relation to the CDB, see Reason (2023).

The next section will examine how togetherness become contested territory through the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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This will establish the need for a more nuanced understanding of togetherness that can withstand political grandstanding or empty appropriation.

Togetherness and COVID-19

One consequence of the pandemic was a radical disruption to the ways in which people engaged with other people. The lockdowns and social distancing measures eradicated hugs and handshakes, erected invisible 2 metre personal bubbles around individuals and forced schools and workplaces to shift online whenever possible. All manner of activities – weddings, funerals, theatre, sports – had to find different ways to construct shared experiences. In this context it is unsurprising that a discourse of togetherness became a recurring motif of the pandemic occurring across government, education, health, business and the arts to describe attempts to create a sense of community and combat fears of what was often described as a loneliness epidemic.

However, while togetherness might largely be considered an apolitical and interpersonal social good, it certainly was not unproblematic and uncontested. As a response to the isolation and dislocation of social distancing, the desire for togetherness while apart was utilised in ground-up initiatives but also co-opted by government and commodified by corporations. We can see this even within the phrase that forms the title for this chapter, variations of 'together while apart' were a recurring hashtag on social media used by arts projects or other community initiatives but also by corporate accounts and within advertising. Francesca Sobande (2020) describes this in terms of 'commodified notions of connectivity, care and community' in a time of crisis. Looking at the UK alone, Sobande identifies 'we're all in this together' videos and marketing campaigns from brands including Asda, M&S, Fitbit, Disney and more, all seeking to present themselves as 'essential, ethical and invested in people'. For Sobande these campaigns are 'platitudes' that mask underlying inequalities and deny lived realities. Moreover, 'not everyone feels part of a collective experience or a "we" during this crisis, and the intense social isolation that many people are contending with, of course, cannot be solved by the slogans of brands'.

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This dynamic is even more loaded when ideas of togetherness were employed as a rhetorical device within government narratives and public health campaigns. Calls upon togetherness were used to justify lockdown restrictions and social and economic hardships in many different countries. 'We are all in this Together' was the title of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' declaration of a public health emergency in April 2023 (Guterres, 2020). The phrase was also evoked by US Chief Medical Advisor Dr Anthony Fauci, while UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's rhetoric often evoked descriptions of togetherness, such as his 22 September 2020 Downing Street address, which included the line 'We pulled together in a spirit of national sacrifice and community' (Johnson, 2020).

Such claims, of course, are rhetorical devices that call for sacrifices while concealing the unequal impacts and suffering that resulted from COVID-19. With hindsight such governmental assertions can only be read through a lens of irony – something dramatically underlined as the very next sentence in Johnson's address is 'We followed the guidance to the letter' (Johnson, 2020). We now know exactly how untrue this statement was as concerned the behaviour of the Prime Minister himself, rendering all claims to national unity and togetherness viscerally objectionable.

Perhaps one outcome of the pandemic is that the duplicitous use of discourses of togetherness produced greater popular awareness of underpinning inequalities. As Ryan Nolan writes in a paper subtitled 'COVID-19 and the lie of solidarity', 'The pandemic has unmasked the hidden systems of inequality that are lost in the mundanity of everyday life […] It seems that we may all be in this together, but it is a simple fact that the most vulnerable groups will carry the burden of damage caused by the virus' (2021: 102). Rather than some early rhetoric about COVID-19 being a great leveller, the dominant understanding would now align with that asserted in a letter to the *Canadian Journal of Health* which describes the pandemic as a 'symptom of deeper societal inequalities' (Ali et al., 2020).

This disjuncture between a rhetoric of togetherness and meaningful action is something that with hindsight we can see as a recurring feature of responses to the pandemic. It is present, for example, in the tidal wave of criticism of perhaps the very first high-profile pandemic social meme – Gal Gadot's co-ordination of celebrities and musicians joining together to sing John Lennon's 'Imagine' over Instagram. Gadot captioned the original March 2020 post,

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'We are in this together, we will get through it together', prompting almost immediate condemnation for its failure to recognise the very different material living conditions with which people were experiencing that first lockdown. Another and more nuanced example is the Clap for Our Carers social movement, first initiated by Annemarie Plas in the UK, which saw neighbours standing on their doorsteps on Thursday evenings in 2020 applauding, banging pans or cheering in support for health service and other key workers. Speaking of my own experience, within the moment there were elements of shared experience here, a feeling of togetherness both along individual streets and of a dispersed national collective experience. I remember calling my parents, in lockdown several hundred miles away, who had been outside their own house, banging their own pans, at the same time as me. That kind of sense of connection is real and was experienced multiple times across the country. However, the movement suffered from increasing ambivalence, alongside critiques that it was purely performative with no substantial impact (Wood and Skeggs, 2022). Sarah Spellman goes further, describing it in terms of a laudatory othering that reproduced inequalities while acting as a substitute for action (2021). A more forgiving reading of Clap for Our Carers is presented by Sam Mackay, who parallels it directly with participatory art practices and analyses it in terms of its sonic politics. Mackay recognises that for many people the movement was simultaneously both an 'inclusive act of solidarity' and an empty gesture that provided 'a smokescreen for government incompetence and underfunding'. Mackay suggests that many people maintained both these contradictory perspectives internally at the same time, with the event also oscillating between constructing an impossibly broad and therefore inevitably safe national consensus and providing multiple ways for autonomy 'through which participants could question the boundaries and possibilities of public sounding' (2021). This vital aspect of autonomy within experiences of togetherness is something that I will return to later in this chapter.

As with the governmental and corporate claiming of togetherness, the Clap for Our Carers phenomenon points to how even 'ground up' social movements can fall into a trap whereby claims of togetherness are perceived as gestural rather than enactive of real change. We might, therefore, be justifiably sceptical and cautious of rhetoric of togetherness. In particular it is necessary to consider in

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whose interests such claims are being made: who benefits?; what are the motivations?

This focus of this chapter, of course, is togetherness within online community arts. But this cannot be divorced from wider discourses. Nor are the community arts immune to the use of aspirational claims as a form of rhetoric. We are all aware of the manner in which complex relational concepts become reduced to formulaic or almost rote assertions – of bringing people together, of empowerment or cultural democracy, of safe spaces, of giving voice and more. The community arts are no stranger to simplifying and overclaiming impacts (see, for example, Clift, 2020). The response, and the focus of the next step of this chapter, should be the careful consideration of the relational processes by which effective and affective experiences of togetherness are produced.

Creative Doodle Book and experiences of togetherness

The concept of togetherness was explicitly present within the design of the CDB project, which, as noted above, identified the centrality of togetherness to community arts practice and the challenge presented to this by the sudden shift to online delivery. It set out to explore how the community arts might produce similar experiences of togetherness while physically apart, particularly in the context of working with marginalised individuals and in an inclusive manner. Interim reflections and reports often used the title 'together while apart', unconsciously echoing the recurring public discourse. The purpose of this section is to go beyond the rhetoric and interrogate the practice and experience of togetherness. With the key frameworks for the project being community arts, online delivery and inclusive practice, the following discussion explores togetherness in terms of ideas of communitas and selfhood.

Communitas

A core utility of community arts is that of people doing something that is valued and absorbing with and alongside other people – which for this chapter we are describing as an experience of togetherness.

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Throughout the CDB project participants reported experiencing something productive and rewarding through their online engagement, such as comments from Dawn Hartley, of Scottish children's arts company 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.

This evocation of 'doing something together' is at once commonplace and powerful. In seeking to conceptualise its significance, the community arts have frequently drawn upon the writings of Victor Turner and Edith Turner, particular the concept of communitas. While a community might primarily be defined in terms of a geographic area of common living, rooted within social space, communitas describes a modality of social relationships. It is often summarised as unstructured and liminal, at once in and out of time, in which people are engaging with each other equally (Turner, 1969).

The appeal of the concept of communitas to the community arts movement is clear, as arts encounters can similarly be described as creating liminal moments in and out of time, moments which almost by their nature cannot last but are fissures in or transformation of established ways of being and living. There is an alignment here with Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of a 'microtopia', describing how participatory arts constructs a temporary community, brought together through an intersubjective experience (2002: 13). Part of Bourriaud's objective is to assert the value of such encounters and connections, produced through participatory art, even thought they might be temporary, fleeting, liminal. There is at once an implicit lesson here about overclaiming – within the community arts there is often a desire to reach for language of the 'transformational' – and awareness of the sheer systemic stuckness of the world in which small moments of freedom and beauty are valuable neither despite nor because of their fleetingness. It is for this reason that elsewhere I've turned to Bourriaud's concept to describe the value and inherent humanness of fragile and fleeting moments of connection (Reason, 2022).

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In the context of COVID-19, the Clap for Our Carers social movement discussed above can be analysed within the framework of creating a microtopia, temporarily disrupting and reshaping the public realm. However, the critiques of the Clap for Our Carers phenomenon – tokenistic, unchanging of underlying inequalities – are also the frequent critique of participatory arts. That is, they produce liminal experiences that feel good, genuinely and legitimately, but which are palliative to enduring status quo relationships rather than productive of lasting change. Perhaps similar things could be said of the idea of communitas. These questions are larger than this chapter and indeed go to the heart of any participatory practice, both in the context of the pandemic and beyond (see, for example, Bishop, 2012; Matarasso, 1997). While not productive of answers, their reflective consideration does heighten our ability to analyse the operations of togetherness and nuanced qualities of engagement.

The community and participatory arts, one could argue, have generations of experience in generating experiences of communitas within physical spaces. With the CDB we were looking to create a kind of communitas, while also learning and experimenting with how to do so operating online. One distinctive feature of the CDB was that the virtual workshops and physically dispersed participants were all working from the same tangible object that they held in their hands. Alice Linnane, of young people's learning disability arts company Square Pegs Arts, reflected on the impact of this, noting it was 'really interesting to have a mix of something that's very physical and tangible. Something in your hands that you use every week.' Hannah Thompson of York-based Accessible Arts and Media also noted how the shared physical book produced a shared experience while apart:

> With the doodle book, they all had the same thing. And they were all excited. 'How did you get yours in the post? Did you get yours?' And they were actually helping each other a lot more than they would normally. Like when we got to the pages, and we held up the doodle books to the camera so that everyone could see what they've done. And that was a really, really big thing for people. So I think they were doing things differently. But actually, they were doing it together. And they really like happy showing each other and their creations.

Here it is worth noting that echo of the value of 'doing it together', and in particular doing things that are valued and which feel productive.

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The CDB operated by bringing people together in two different kinds of non-traditional spaces. One of these was the virtual space of the 'Zoom room', which has its own particular affordances and limitations. However, with the CDB project this online space was always accompanied by the physical and distributed space of the page within the Doodle Book itself. As highlighted in the introduction to this chapter, the utilisation of these two spaces in parallel was a key dynamic of the project, with participants able to be together (working at the same time, on the same page) while also working apart and with agency. Several of the partner organisations noticed that this produced a different way of working together to their normal online practice, one that slowed things down and brought a kind of calmness. Imogen Barton-Wells, of Proud and Loud Arts, for example noted that:

> I think you can kind of throw everything at a session sometimes if you feel 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.

Similarly, Hannah Thompson of AA Media, commented:

> 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.

The quality here – of being companionably present with other people – is a particularly powerful kind of togetherness. One that doesn't feel forced or the requirement to fill every moment with activity in order to assert its legitimacy but rather acknowledges value within the presence in and of itself. For Joshua Green of Lawnmowers a learning disability theatre company from Gateshead, the CDB allowed people to be 'Working on something online but in a spacious way' or Jo Frater of learning disability dance company Confidance 'With the Creative Doodle Book there is something about the quietness of working [that] allows people a bit more space.' The Doodle Book therefore enabled a return to that almost secret joy and benefit of calmness, and just hanging out together.

It is not accidental that the very concept of doodling aligns itself to calmness, to allowing the mind to drift in manner that is akin to daydreaming, to considering what if, to not worrying about

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outcomes. Doodling is about process and not product. As noted above, the books were private, physical, tangible spaces which belonged to the participants. They were a space into which the participants could drift, explore and play. Returning to ideas of togetherness as a form of communitas, this balance is key. A community or experience of togetherness in which we lose entirely our sense of ourselves is potentially as harmful as a world in which we all remain atomised individuals.

The bigger critiques of the value of such liminal experiences remain. The CDB could not permanently transform the material experiences of isolation that accompanied the pandemic. At its least it provided a respite, something positive and uplifting to look forward to. Many of the participants discussed how participating in community arts was central to their identity and their relief that online practices such as the CDB meant they could continue to feed that element of their sense of self. For example, Luke from learning disability self-advocacy group Our Lives Our Ways commented: ‘It made me reflect on the past year, but it made me feel confident about the future. […] And more confident about myself as well. It brought me out of myself again. Because with isolation I found it really hard.’

It is ideas of selfhood, and the relationship between the self and the other, that will be the focus of the next section.

Selfhood

The importance of considering the self – that is, the individual and their sense of selfhood – might seem counterintuitive in discussions about togetherness. Indeed, central to critiques of neoliberalism has been an over-emphasis on the individual, and specifically individualism, to the active degrading of ideas of community. Individualism and selfhood, however, are not synonymous – indeed, a strong sense of the self as having autonomy and agency seems vital to a healthy and non-coercive experience of community. Rather than being counterfactual, a sense of self emerges through engagement with others. Often this is described in terms of identity politics, of in-groups and out-groups, and of definition in opposition to the other. Here, however, I am interested in the idea of the self that can be developed through being together *with* others.

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One recurring framework here is that of dialogue, which invites us to consider the ways in which people engage with people as equals and peers. Dialogue is at the heart of Mikhail Bakhtin's writings, describing how the self cannot be self-sufficient but is always formed in relation. That is, in dialogue: 'I am conscious of myself and become myself only through revealing myself for another, through another and with the help of another. The most important acts constituting self-consciousness are determined by a relationship toward another consciousness' (cited in Crang and Thrift, 2000: 27).

That the self is formed in relationship to others recurs again and again across philosophy. The nature or qualities of this of course vary: whether from the coercive societal gaze articulated in existentialism or a more neutral sense of co-being in phenomenological intersubjectivity. For Paolo Freire, dialogue is central to his proposal for a liberatory education, described in contrast to hierarchical, one-directional teacher–student relationships (Freire, 1972). Dialogue here is about people encountering each other in a particular kind of way, which Sandra Smidt writes 'relates to the fact that humans are born into and live in communities made up of other humans with whom they constantly interact' (2014: 23). As with Bakhtin, for Freire dialogue also has a function in individuals' claiming of self, or conscientisation, although now in a more political form of being able to assert meaning and consciousness upon the world around us.

A further articulation comes from Martin Buber, who describes how every human encounter can be understood in terms of relationships between the self and other, which either tend towards an I/It or I/Thou relationship. I/It relationships are instrumental or monologic, not unlike Freire's description of a uni-directional or 'banking' style of education. In contrast I/Thou relationships are dialogical, open-ended and mutual (Buber, [1923] 1999). Such I/Thou relationships occur within a community, with the following articulation from Buber appropriately enough cited by Turner:

> Community is the being no longer side by side (and, one might add, above and below) but *with* one another of a multitude of persons. And this multitude, thought it moves towards one goal, yet experiences everywhere a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the others, a flowing from I to Thou. (Buber cited in Turner, 1969: 372)

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In our reflections on experiences of the CDB we felt that it constructed a mode of communitas – a shared modality of being and doing together – but which also encouraged particular reflections on the individual and their role and relationship to the group.

Jo Frater of Confidance, for example, reflected on how the parallel spaces of the Doodle Book and Zoom room enabled autonomy within the collective doing: '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.'

Tina Shuker of learning disability theatre company In on the Act identified a similar process, where by working online participants could be together but also 'there's space for the participants to go off and do something' on their own. This was markedly different to in-person practice, which can produce an intense form of groupness in which the individual disappears. While Alice Linnane of Square Pegs talked about the balance between 'creating a space that was collective and communal' and space 'that's just them and their book'. Joshua Green of The Lawnmowers drew this together into a broader conceptualisation of the benefits of working together online while apart: 'I guess it's people doing like, tasks more autonomously. […] people, being in their own space, going off and doing things and bringing them back. […] showing different sides of themselves.'

It is worth recognising that the manner in which online practice expands community arts into spaces of autonomy and privacy does bring its own challenges. Autonomy includes the potential for disengagement, without the at-the-shoulder support that is possible within a physical space – and indeed there were several comments about the difficulty of providing one-on-one support online in a manner that didn't disrupt the whole session. With learning disability practice, the engagement can then depend on the availability or otherwise of family or carer support (see Reason, 2023). Online workshops also raise valid questions about safeguarding structures, as they open individuals' home lives and privacy to outside view. Acknowledging these concerns, there are a number of reasons why this autonomy within the experience of communitas should be recognised and celebrated. Various practitioners working with the

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CDB contrasted this way of working to experiences of in-person practice, which can be dominated by the same (particularly extrovert) individual or lead to forms of 'group-think'. Jess Robson, of inclusive youth theatre company Fuse, for example, reflected that working online they heard from different and more members of the group. Within the specific context of learning disability practice, such autonomy is vital, countering a cultural/social experience of being silenced and spoken for which was only exacerbated during COVID-19 (McCausland et al., 2021). The relationship between learning disability autonomy within supported or facilitated structures is something that Lauren Hall explores in her analysis of learning disability arts practice. Hall suggests that while a 'full' independence is often held up as a marker of aspiration and achievement, in fact relationships of interdependence more accurately describe all our experiences as humans living alongside other humans. The question for Hall, and in this discussion, is the extent of the learning disabled individual's agency and autonomy within such interdependent structures (Hall, n.d.).

This autonomy, however, was simultaneous within a process that was shared. Each individual was aware that other people were present, also engaging with their own books and in their own physical spaces with the always implicit invitation to then share and compare and take pleasure in how other people had responded very differently to the same task. Here the two spaces, virtual and book, came together. In almost every session there would be a moment when – across the series of tiled rectangles on the Zoom screen – participants would hold their books up to the camera and create an instant gallery (see Figure 2.3). As Hannah Thompson of AA Media put it: 'You could really see that they were looking and concentrating at other people's, and if somebody did something a bit different it was like Ohhh, they didn't think of doing it like that.'

This doing apart, doing together, doing with and alongside and in conviviality represents, I would argue, a form of dialogue. A dialogue that was not always verbal, but which nonetheless fulfils the descriptions of interpersonal encounter of Freire and Buber. Indeed, that dialogue has the potential to be non-verbal is an important point to note, given the context of working with people with various learning disabilities. A fundamental principle of the Doodle Book was that of the 'open task', where the same stimulus or starting

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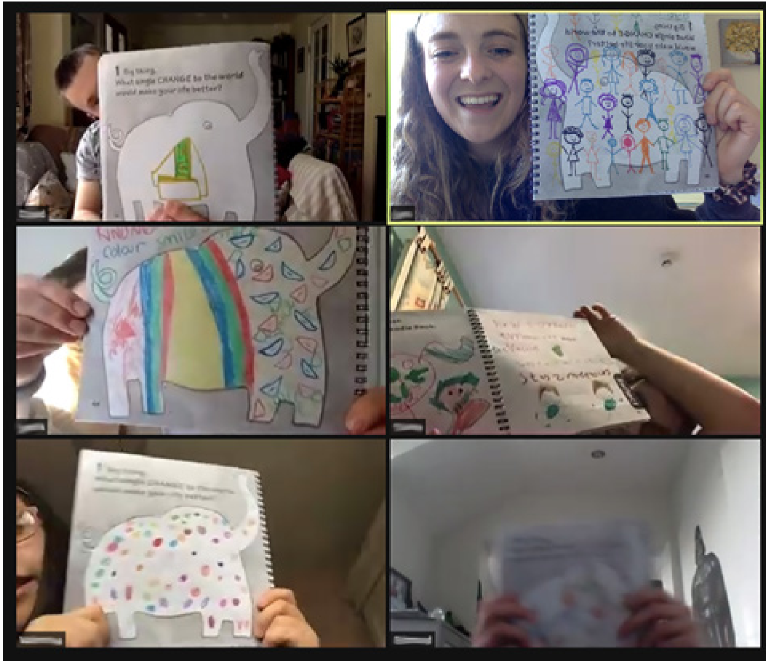

Figure 2.3 Instant virtual gallery, Fuse Theatre

point could prompt multiple different kinds of responses regardless of skill or cognitive ability. This was central to the design of the book and the workshops and was picked up upon by many of the practitioners, including Jess McKenzie of learning disability theatre company About Face: 'I like the 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.'

The CDB therefore enabled the engagement with experiences of togetherness that were inclusive in a manner that represents not just a set of technical requirements (which might be better described as accessibility) but which aligns with Sailaja Chennat's description of inclusivity as an 'outlook, a conviction and a philosophy': 'Inclusion is a way of implementing the democratic principles of equality and justice with acceptance and conviction so that every individual of the group feels accepted, valued and safe' (2019: 39).

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Through this ethos and practice of inclusivity the CDB constructed a kind of microtopia, a temporary space (both physical and virtual) in which participants were able to exercise a sense of self within the experience of communitas. In the context of COVID-19, during which learning disabled people were at once among the most vulnerable but simultaneously often excluded from public discourses, this inclusive togetherness that did not erase the individual felt particularly significant and empowering.

Conclusion

Togetherness is an unassuming word, which became perhaps overused and certainly over-politicised during COVID-19. While the evocation of togetherness was utilised by government to support public health strategies and produced genuine grassroot responses to experiences of isolation and dislocation, it was also used to hide inequalities, shut down criticism and in tokenistic gestures that could never substitute for meaningful action.

The stakes are different in the community arts, but nonetheless it is important to interrogate what we really mean in the claims we make about applied and participatory practices. The discussion here of the CDB has sought to model a more nuanced exploration of togetherness, specifically within emerging online community arts practice. Here communitas and selfhood have been presented as concepts that allow us to think into togetherness, beyond the rhetoric and consider when it is productive of meaningful and authentic experiences. As a final thought within this conclusion I want to stress a third theme, which is that of inclusivity.

The pandemic exposed the hollowness of rhetorical togetherness in public discourse, resonating across a range of structural inequalities. It was a togetherness from which certain individuals, groups and communities were excluded. The CDB project created a space – the space on the page and the virtual space via the screen – in which inclusivity was taken as a fundamental starting point of how we should be together. Governmental, corporate, top-down assertions of togetherness result in a loss of authenticity and autonomy and the exclusion of anybody who does not fit within a homogeneous narrative. One question that we must ask after COVID-19, is how

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can we be together, in communitas, but without losing autonomy and inclusivity?

The CDB was a creative adaptation responding to particular circumstances, from which we can learn important lessons for the future. None of the partners involved would have moved so swiftly or with such inventiveness into online practice if not required to by COVID-19 restrictions; as we recover from COVID-19 there has been an equal rush back to in-person delivery. With resources limited, this has resulted in online delivery ending and the benefits that it provided being lost. There is a lack of inclusive and accessible online community spaces, both for learning disabled and others who might benefit from ways of being together while apart. During COVID-19 practitioners (the CDB is just one example) learned how to deliver this kind of inclusive virtual practice, but that learning is already being set aside. With appropriate support, in the form of investment, technological infrastructure and skills training, there is strong potential for the ongoing delivery of *online* community arts to provide a network that supports the social and individual resilience that a genuine sense of togetherness enables.

Key insights

- COVID-19 prompted extensive creative adaptation into how to deliver community arts online.
- Through online engagement, participants gained meaningful experiences of togetherness, particularly valuable for vulnerable groups and shielding individuals.
- Online spaces have the potential to be inclusive, enabling autonomy at the same time as fostering experiences of communitas.
- As we return to in-person delivery and ‘business as usual’, continued investment in online community arts should not be neglected as an ongoing and important form of practice.

Note

1 The Creative Doodle Book: Developing Inclusive Community Arts Engagement during Physical Distancing project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, project reference: AH/V011405/1.

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