



Looking after the artist / facilitator toolkit

**Based on conversations conducted by
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Stephen Beggs

**Theatre Maker based in Belfast
(freelance actor, director, writer and
workshop facilitator)**

“There is a constant fear of making yourself vulnerable. I think that happens a lot with any kind of freelance work, but particularly in the arts because you have to open yourself up emotionally.”





How do you prepare for facilitating a drama workshop when you don't always know everyone in the room?

I've been working in the industry for 30 years and I still get nervous before every session. There is never a time when I don't sit in the car and I don't feel like having a bit of a boke before I go in somewhere! Even though I could probably do this stuff standing on my head now. But to me, I want every workshop, every rehearsal, every performance or whatever it is to be as good as what I have done before. But I think if you stop feeling nervous, there is probably something wrong.

I go into every session as a friendly, warm, welcoming person and I try to create an atmosphere in which anyone can say what they want. There are no silly questions and there is no right or wrong way of doing things. I also say to people that they don't have to be an active participant, if that person clearly wants to have a little quiet time, but is smiling and nodding.

I have some workshops where I know from the minute I walk through the door that I'm going to get the mickey taken out of me for an hour, and that's lovely! Equally, I know there will be some workshops that are much more formal - and that's what I find most scary, not knowing how a session is going to go. It's different with established groups because I know what the format is, I know what I'm doing, but even then - you don't know how an individual session is going to go.

So there is a constant fear of making yourself vulnerable. I think that happens a lot with any kind of freelance work, but particularly in the arts because you have to open yourself up emotionally - and you absorb all this emotion and energy, and then suddenly you're back in the car, driving home with your



mind racing. So you're anxious beforehand and then you're all over the shop afterwards - in a good way or a bad way. You could be triumphant thinking 'this is the best thing ever', but you could still be processing all this emotion by yourself, and that's a tricky thing to do."

So how do you look after yourself?

"Well there are the real practical nuts and bolts stuff, like eating and drinking. Because actually, I would quite often not eat before a workshop. My wife is always telling me not to be going around on an empty stomach! I drink a lot of tea, but when I'm out and about I drink quite a lot of coffee, and I've learnt not to drink a lot of coffee on an empty stomach.

Also, when I'm in the car before a session I do try and have a chat with myself. I'll say 'You've got this. You know how to do this, you're good at it.' And I'll think 'in your career how many workshops have you left thinking that was appalling?' Very few! And quite often it's to do with things that are beyond your control.

What about when it all feels overwhelming?

I try to break my life into chunks, because if you took it all in one go it would be overwhelming. I'll look at the week ahead in my diary and think 'oh my word, how am I going to cope with all this?' But then I say let's just think about tomorrow, but making sure that prep is being done. I try to break it into bite-sized chunks: what's the priority today?



Sometimes I get overwhelmed because I've packed too much in and my diary is so full that there's no time to process one thing before moving on to the next. And you find yourself in that odd situation where everything feels current in your head all at once, and it's just too much. So I try to find a way of finishing something, even if it's just in my head, before racing on to the next thing.

Some days that's just not possible - for example, yesterday was manic for me. So today I didn't get up until 10 o'clock - and it took me a while not to feel guilty about that, but I worked until 11pm last night and so there is absolutely no reason why I shouldn't make sure I'm rested."

If you're running a workshop and somebody just won't engage, how do you handle that?

"That took me a long time to get my head around. I remember someone saying to me at one point, don't feel you have to get that person. And, in actual fact, it could be counterproductive to try and drag someone in that doesn't want to do something. But they'll have watched this one and maybe next time they will feel confident enough to join in. Or maybe next time they might just say something, and the time after that they'll get involved. The idea is that you give opportunities for everyone to take part but don't fret too much about someone that doesn't want to. You've done your job."

What about after you've run a workshop or event - how do you leave things behind?

I have the same little talk with myself afterwards. I remember my Mum saying to me 'you'll endlessly replay what



a person has said back in your mind, and that person has probably forgotten all about it'. So don't go home fixating on a conversation that you think could have gone slightly better. They might talk to you about it at some point, but it's much more likely that you're exploding it in your head.

How do you make sure you keep your personal and professional life separate?

"It's tricky. I've had ups and downs with my mental health over the years, and I was never very good at seeing it coming. So I've found myself being completely overwhelmed before I realised it was happening, and then I was no good to anyone and had to take two weeks off. Whereas now I am much better at getting support when I need it - and when I can see it coming, I'm able to thin out the diary if I need to. I move things around and reschedule, that way I can just focus on the things that can't be moved or that won't happen if I don't do them.

But sometimes, you just have to recognise that you're unwell and you need time to rest and recover. You are not so vital to everything that is going on and you have to let go of that idea as a freelancer you have to accept every single job because you won't get asked again if you don't. But happily, my experience has been that if I have to turn something down they will come back and ask me again."

Working as a freelance artist can be quite lonely sometimes, can't it?

Yes. When I'm doing all my planning and admin at home, no one else is in the house, so the radio tends to be my friend during that time! Sometimes when I'm running a workshop I'll



have a co-facilitator, and if I can stand in a room with them - even if I'm doing the majority of the facilitation - it's nice to be able to look at them and go 'blimey this is hard work isn't it?' or something like that. I love having someone else with me, you feel so much better.

And to avoid loneliness, sometimes it's about building things in. So today, I'm having lunch with my daughter even though, timewise, I could probably do without it! But it will be lovely and I can get on with my admin after that. I try to keep up with friends I haven't seen for a while and have a coffee, and I think of that as being just as good a use of your time as anything else.

Any other good advice you'd like to share?

I was once told to make sure that when someone describes something as an 'opportunity', that you check whether it actually is or not! But also, don't turn things down because you feel you can't do it or because you think you're not good enough. Be realistic - if you know something is not for you, turn it down - but it's about finding that balance and not automatically thinking it couldn't be for you.

So it comes down to knowing: that you can take things on, but that you don't have to. I think those would be the two big bits of advice - oh, and don't leave your tax return until the last minute!



Charmaine McMeekin

**A dance artist working in health and
the community, based in Belfast**

*“Value yourself, value the work you do and value your
place in society - because you are making a
difference.”*





How do you look after yourself before heading in to work with a group?

“You have to practise what you preach. So every morning I do some form of physical activity, whether that’s pilates or yoga and a wee bit of breath work. Just something so that I feel grounded and settled. It definitely changes my whole frame of mind when I do a bit of movement. Getting into my body and out of my thinking mind.

Although my work is in my body, I’m very much in my head - and I’m aware that when I wake up in the morning my brain is going at 90 miles an hour! So doing a bit of movement, even just 20 minutes, then I totally feel settled. And without a doubt, feeling calm and settled in my body definitely helps me when I’m going into a workshop.

I work across the health and wellbeing sector, with a lot of different groups that have diverse needs and abilities. So I’m aware of people's conditions - for example, a session with people with Parkinson’s is very different from one in a care home. But ultimately we are all human, and it’s about meeting people where they are. So it's all the same in a sense, we are all coming together to move in a way that suits us best.

For some sessions I might get a bit nervous if it is a new group so I’ll maybe take a minute in the car before going in. And I’ve found in my later years that if I’m really busy, I can’t have any music in the car - I just need to have silence before a workshop.

And this might sound a bit cheesy, but everything I do I come at with an open heart and good intentions. And I think when



you come with that, you can't be met with or by anything negative. Because then I feel that although I'm not in complete control of the space, whatever happens I can manage.

It can be hard not to soak up the energy in a room sometimes, though. So how do you manage that?

“I am definitely more tired than I used to be, and I think that is a result sometimes of soaking up a lot of different energies in a room.

So sometimes at bedtime it's about coming back into your own body. You are giving up so much of yourself into that space, and sometimes you forget to come back again because you've taken in everybody else's stuff. You've absorbed a lot of what has been going on in there and that can be hard. So even just taking a second to say, 'I come back to myself' is useful.

And recently, I have been going for a run to clear my head. Because sometimes, I will go home and do some reporting straight away, which I shouldn't really do, I should wait until morning. But if I come home and have a complete break from work and go running, I come back a different person.”

If you go into a work space, and there is something unexpected, do you have a mechanism for dealing with that?

“I've been doing this for a long time but you can never rest on your laurels and think that you know a group inside out. There is one group I've worked with for two years, and they're all fantastic people but they're living with dementia, and you



just need to be prepared for anything happening in that space. And what I've learnt is to let go and try not to control the environment too much.

I plan a session but I keep it loose, so you can let go and be in the moment. It's about being fully prepared - and having a tool box to pull from - but being ready to meet people wherever they are that day. You have to be on your toes, to deal with whatever is in front of you, but have freedom within that to be flexible to people's needs."

Facilitating others can be draining - and then perhaps you're not working on your own creativity. Have you found a way to feed your own creativity?

Creativity comes in many forms, so I do a lot of dancing and movement in the house myself - even if I'm just preparing for something, but I would like to do more. I love being in the garden, and that's creative - in my brain I am choreographing as I garden.

What about finances - being a freelancer can be very different from being an employee. How do you handle that?

"As a freelance person, you see people around you getting promoted and the joy of those milestones - and there is never that. So ultimately, if you value yourself as a person and in your job, it will link to everything: the work that you take on, how much you charge for that work, all of it. If you value yourself, you'll make the right decision - and only you know what the best decision is for you.

In the past I maybe wouldn't have charged as much, or I would have said, 'no it's OK'. Whereas now, I'm like, 'well no



actually that's not right'. For example some places are not great at paying on time and I used to let that slip because I didn't want to appear like I needed the money, so I wouldn't go and ask. But now there's no way I would let that slip. I put on my invoice that it needs to be paid within the month - and then I will go after it. And that's because I value myself and my work a lot more than I did before. So it's about value: value yourself, value the work you do and value your place in society - because you are making a difference."

Any other advice you'd like to share with us about self-care?

"Give yourself time and space - whether it's to walk for ten minutes out in nature, or just to clear your head. A wee bit of movement helps, a bit of stretching and breathing, or even having a ritual that makes you feel good before and after a workshop or first thing in the morning and in the evening before bed.

And be very aware of the triggers within yourself if you feel burnout coming, because it is very real and it definitely happens. Being aware of how your body is letting you know: whether it's fatigue or forgetting your words, whatever it is, be very conscious and mindful of yourself and what you are doing. Notice when you sense a change and think 'right, it's time to take a walk' or take a break or something that suits you and nurtures you. It's a small thing but do it!"



Susan Kidd

Shining Light Healing, Health and Wellness, based in Edenderry

“Every session is different and you have no idea what is going to come up, but you just work with it.”





How do you look after yourself in the lead-up to a workshop?

“I think it out the day before, and try to be a bit rested myself. But then I definitely take 30 minutes before the event starts to have a bit of quiet time to myself, to be grounded, and to be in that space where I just park everything else. And then being nicely organised ahead of time: so the tables are laid out and everything and you’re not under pressure or rushing at the last minute. Then I’m ready to facilitate and can create a peaceful atmosphere for when people arrive.”

And how do you prepare yourself for the unknown element of a workshop?

“I’m always prepared to go with the flow. Every session is different and you have no idea what is going to come up, but you just work with it. I like to do an introduction if everyone is comfortable, such as ‘what’s your name and what are your interests?’ so everyone feels included. But I learnt very quickly that you can prepare an outline of what you’re going to do, but it can go in all sorts of directions!”

What lessons have you learnt as you have been facilitating over the years?

“Mainly to go with the flow. It will always be positive but the energy of the group is made up of the people who attend, so every group is different depending on who is there. So it’s about making sure they are all OK. The odd time you get a quiet person, don’t let them sit back and feel left out, but without putting pressure on them, just make sure that you ask them questions. Some people will want to talk and be the centre of attention and others will want to sit back - and



it's a balance then to get some of them to calm down and settle and to get the quiet ones to be part of it."

What good advice have you been given, or that you give to others, about looking after yourself?

"Love yourself first - you are the priority. I have to work on that myself sometimes, as you're often running around looking after everyone else. So definitely make the time and put the same effort into looking after yourself as you would someone else. As someone once said to me: one person you are guaranteed to spend your whole life with is yourself, so love yourself, look after yourself - and the rest will all fall into place."





Laura Phillips

Mindful Doodle Artist, based in Edenderry

“Sometimes things happen that are out of your control - so you have to learn to try and recentre yourself and don’t over-analyse it.”





Is there anything in particular you would do to look after yourself before a workshop?

“Before I do a workshop I always make sure I have done something to calm any nerves and ground myself. Doodling is a big part of that, but also breathing techniques or maybe a little meditation to settle myself so I am not flying into a situation feeling stressed.”

And then how do you look after yourself during an actual session?

“Well I’m always aware that people who haven’t tried mindful doodling before may be a bit dubious about it. And they might give the impression that they are not very impressed with trying it out, they’re maybe making assumptions and don’t think they are going to enjoy it. So I try not to take it too personally, and just sit and gently explain that it might help them, and encourage them to give it a try. And I always find that when they try it, they realise how nice it is. Often it’s just people thinking that they’re not artistic and they’re worried they won’t be able to do it - so I always explain that anyone can doodle and then they relax a bit.”

And what about after a workshop - do you have a specific way that you look after yourself once it’s finished?

“I’ve had workshops before where I worried about how people found it, and thought maybe they didn’t enjoy it as much as I thought they would. So I try not to create a story in my head or tell myself something that’s probably not true at all.



And I try to practice mindfulness, and techniques I like to do when I get home to decompress from the workshop and stop myself over-analysing. I'll maybe do some nice breathing techniques, try to focus on the things that have gone well rather than the things that I felt maybe didn't go so well. And then I'll do some drawing myself or maybe a bit of journaling.

But it is just human nature to pick on the negative things that have happened, or things that aren't even that negative - it might be that someone just wasn't into it or weren't in the mood."

If you were to speak to your younger self, what pitfalls would you tell yourself to look out for?

"There was one occasion when there was a miscommunication with a venue about a set of workshops I was going to run. I was waiting on approval from them, but they assumed that I was doing them and had got a date in mind. And I felt like I handled it all wrong - it was just a miscommunication and it was all fine in the end, but I got myself all worked up about it. I just immediately panicked and felt really unprofessional. So I would probably tell my younger self to not get so upset about things, to just take a few breaths and calmly explain. And the key piece of advice would be to always make sure that you are communicating!"

What other lessons have you learnt along the way?

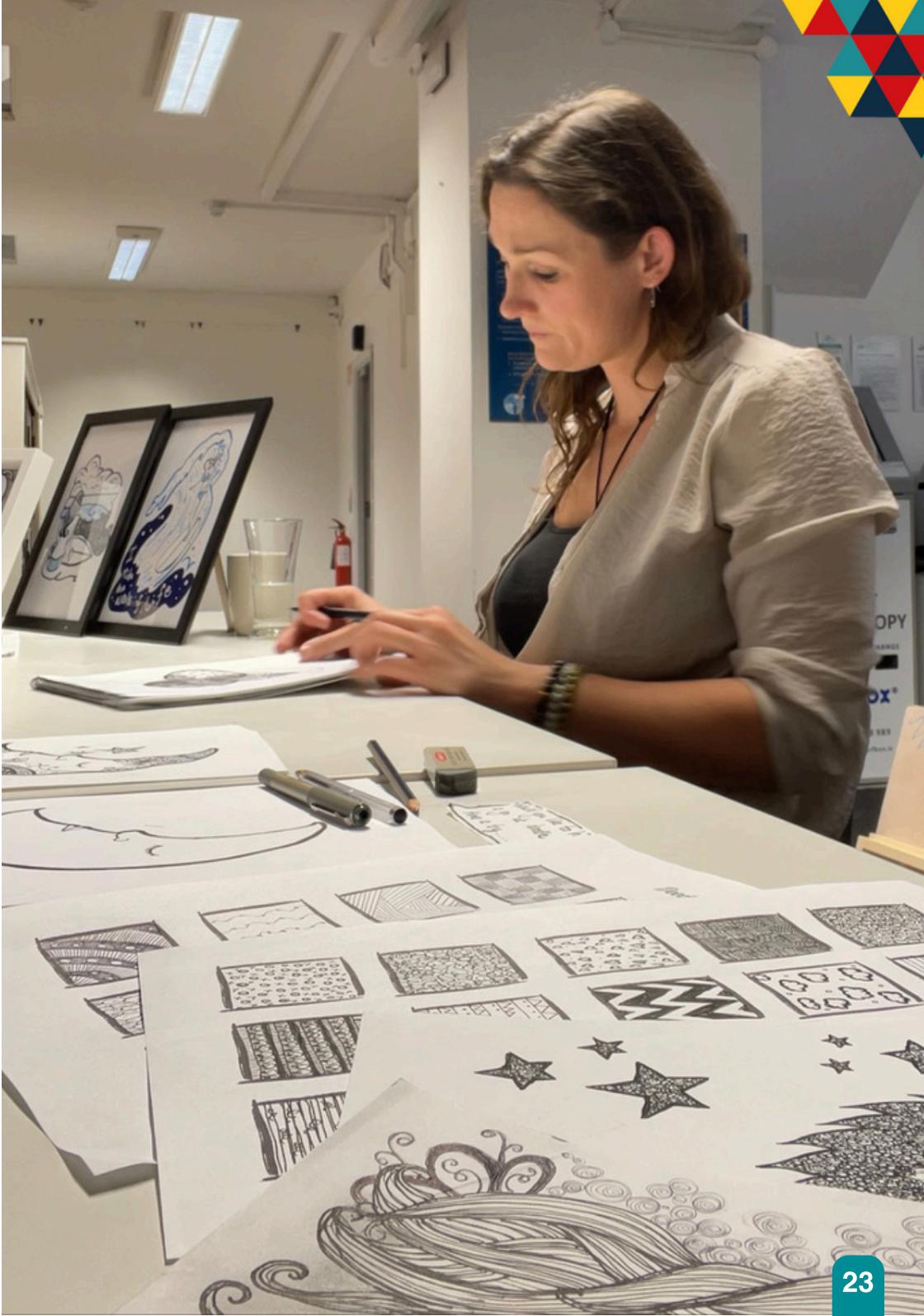
"There was one workshop where I had various appointments that morning beforehand, and I ended up rushing. I was a bit stressed and I remember it took me a while to get into the workshop. And I think people picked up that I was stressed - but I didn't really want to share why. So I think what I've



learnt from that is to try and make sure I don't have loads of things booked up prior to a workshop, and to give myself time so my head is in the right space and I can do my usual grounding rituals.

Also, not to have too many expectations of a workshop. Just go and enjoy it and let it develop organically. I think sometimes you get a set idea of how something is going to go, but actually you can end up putting too much pressure on yourself. I was very anxious about how the first workshops I did were going to work out, because I hadn't done anything like that before. But I remember a friend telling me to relax and not overthink it. To enjoy it rather than focussing on each tiny part of the workshop. To plan it minute by minute - go in, have a cup of tea, settle in and get to know everyone, start it, and go with the flow.

And sometimes things happen that are out of your control - so you have to learn to try and recentre yourself and don't over-analyse it. For example, I'm a bit stressed at the moment about a doodle mural project, because the venue had to change. But what I've learnt is that we will find a solution and it will happen, so not to overthink what's going on because it will be resolved and it will all be fine."





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