London online taster session

13.5.21

*15 mins to lift-off*

Session is scheduled from 2-3.30 but I have been told to arrive at 1.45 for pre-planning. I arrive online and am surprised to see stuff is happening.

Main screen is a room with 4 chairs. One is inhabited by Artist who is leading the others in the real room through warm-ups – singing ‘throw and catch’ and funny words. Facilitator is on zoom, like me, and explains in the chat that it’s a sound check. Then we start discussing issues around sound and the **camera angle**. One artist shares concerns about the camera. If we can see her looking at us, she feels like she’s talking in an unnatural direction. There’s also concern about a **Bluetooth speaker not working**. I expect this is normal pre-workshop stress and it’ll be alright on the night… in 10 mins….

Facilitator says she’s has a phone **cancellation** from someone who has had a rare offer to go out for the afternoon, which is a **better offer**.

Artist thinks she’s talking to us but it’s the **wrong camera angle** again and we’re viewing the back of her. Facilitator tries to explain this but the people in the room can’t tell what angle is being shown.

When [Facilitator] tries to talk it’s a bit like the producers talking to live presenters through their ears, but as it’s not going in their ears they don’t hear her.

Artist tells Facilitator the hand signal for ‘there’s something in the chat’. Jennie says ‘no that ones for distress, an emergency, I need help’!!

*We begin*

There are two stroke ambassadors there in real life, plus two on zoom screens.

Artist checks that everyone knows how to mute and unmute. A voice says ‘no I don’t know how to do that’. Artist tries to talk her through it. Online ambassador tries to help. It’s good they know how to explain this clearly, and she seems to understand.

‘If you need any help, just put up your hand. If you need to leave, just let us know so we know you’re safe.’

I turn my camera off as agreed, so I can type notes instead of participating. I will participate a bit invisibly to get the feel for it.

First thing, sitting postures. Sitting up and breathing. Artist shows her lovely expanding breath ball.

Some tinny noise intrudes a couple of times – maybe someone’s phone?

14.13 message in the chat: ‘I am sorry that I will have to leave shortly when expecting a phone call. I just wanted to say hello and so impressed with your work. Best wishes’ I wonder if that was a participant? Seems this is not a closed group- they can come and go.

I think we have 5-6 participants?

Oh here’s that tinny music again – it wasn’t someone’s phone. It’s the music. It just came at the wrong time before. Better in context!

Just realized I’ve been getting quite carried away doing my dancing arms along with the breathing and moving, interspersed with typing! The magic is working 😊

Artist asks how it was. A couple of voices say ‘alright’ and ‘lovely’. Artist checks in with them all. All ok. Participant blows his nose on full screen.

Now it’s skin time. Imagine you’re in the Caribbean with a lovely light tropical rain shower. Should feel quite relaxing, just awakening. Next we tap our muscles to bring ourselves into the room. ‘Bring your body into the room’. (Interesting phrase for more pondering in online context.)

Next we squeeze and massage ourselves. (oo this is a lovely break from just sitting at the desk)

Now we’re onto something called Curiosity. ‘Just be curious about what movement you have in the hand, and what it can do…’ Extend curiosity to forearm… etc etc. I can’t resist. I’ve been extending my curiosity standing in my room swirling my limbs like an octopus. This is lovely! And funny but in a joyful, playful way! I don’t feel like laughing at anyone in a sneering or skeptical way. I just wish I had more ceiling height up here under the eaves!

‘In the room we begin to find a duet. You may find someone on the screen whose movement you enjoy, and begin to dance with them.’ We try again to a different track. I am invisible but will still seek out a participant dance partner. I choose Participant X. It’s fun! It’s like we’re dancing together at a wedding! Now I’m dancing with Participant Y. Fun fun! I’m laughing a lot on my own.

How’s everyone doing? One man says ‘really lovely for me. Loosing up all the muscles.’ Others say they are fine, ‘just relaxing. Love the movement. Loved it.’

*Over to another Artist now.*

More warm up. We are all yawning and laughing. We stretch our palms.

Now we’re singing. Ma ma ma ma ma. Da dada da da. Ta tata ta. Na na. Lalalalalala. I stop to listen and it’s nice to know everyone is joining in, but I realise it’s not embarrassing when you’re doing it but it looks embarrassing when you’re watching it. *Floppy fluffy puppy*. *The tip of the tongue the teeth and the lips.*

A song. People online are really going for it! Sometimes it makes the artists laugh as they are not expecting to hear the online participants. It works quite well eventually, with an artist singing with the online people.

*After a break - Part 2*

Breakout rooms.

First, we visualize somewhere we’d like to be.

Someone whose face I can’t see tells their story about being in Nigeria and the advice their dad gave. In the garden with the trees and fruit. They’ve been cut down now.

Ambassador likes the story and says it’s common among Nigerian fathers and mothers. Her story is a cruise from Southampton, looking at the waves on the water. Remembers the Eiffel tower in France. Shops. Cheese. Chocolate. Hearing the waves against the boat at night.

Another participant tells of back home in the West Indies. Hot and warm. Relatives. Sitting on the veranda with brother taking in the cool breeze.

Two participants have speech difficulties and the artist helpfully asks closed questions to overcome communication difficulties.

*Groups come back together.*

Trouble getting every breakout group back – tense for a bit but then they return.

Artist wraps up.

People say goodbye and I consider that they are lacking the opportunity for the sort of chat they might have had putting their coats on; they seem keen to be friendly.

Summary

* Tech seemed tricky behind the scenes before we started but seemed fine in the session.
* Potential participants have competing offers e.g. going out for afternoon / phone call.
* It’s lovely when you get into it.
* People do actually participate online.
* Potential for more opportunity for mingling at the end to ‘build community’ or ‘kinship’.

Donegal Session 1: 4th November 2021 10-12

I join and am let in – and music is playing! What a lovely mood. Some cheery van Morrison – but Artist asks if Participant likes Van Morrison and he says no I wouldn’t be a big fan. Artist asks what he likes and he requests The Wonder of You by Elvis. I can see the efforts being made to create an inclusive online environment. Facilitator has already said we need to show everyone how to switch to gallery view – this seems very helpful and empowers participants to take more control of their experience. Artist is greeting everyone as they come online and introducing herself. Now she is playing the Elvis request. To me it is a lovely friendly atmosphere. Facilitator has told us he is ringing people to check they are getting in ok. Artist is asking others for song requests. One loses his audio – Artist explains that and moves on, but there is some muddle about who is who. Artist laughs about the mistake and it isn’t awkward. Another participant tries to make a request but the signal is very bad. There are 16 of us here so far and it’s 10.05. Artists explains it is tricky to hear sometimes but if people let her know she can play people’s music over the weeks as we come in.

There is some discussion about who is missing / late / having trouble. Facilitators are contacting people. Artist decides to get started anyway.

She offers everyone a huge warm welcome. All artists and facilitators introduce themselves, their roles and their backgrounds. I am given a really good opportunity to introduce myself and my research. It feels appropriate to keep my camera on for these sessions, as I have been introduced and feel more a part of the group rather than a fly on the wall. I think it will also be useful to contrast the experiences of camera on / camera off.

Artist explains how to change the view to gallery view – really helpful! Also that she will pin people when they are speaking.

She explains she will record the sessions and explains the purpose clearly.

We start.

A big stretch and a yawn. I join in for a lovely stretch,

Shoulder roll. Look through window. I’m joining so will type less. We all do our own Welcome gesture together and Artist says it’s beautiful.

Movement warm up.

Artist explains about having 2 screens, so it might not always look like she’s looking at us. She shows her full body with chair. Tells us how to arrange ourselves in space. I was joining in and it was great. I am joining in more this time so I can see if I can understand how participants think this makes them better over time. Also, I cant really see the participants anyway as main person is pinned.

Vocal warm up. Breathing, explanation. For the vocal exercises we are on mute on so don’t have a cacophony, but I can see people are doing it. Another participant has just arrived to a warm welcome. Artist explains what has happened so far and invites her to join in.

What a fun vocal exercise we do, and not embarrassing as we are muted.

Artist’s dog joined in, adding to the relaxed, at home atmosphere.

We can see Facilitator is on the phone constantly trying to help people join, but he is joining in too – looking like a person that takes the calls for charity on a show like children in need.

We meow and artist’s dog is barking a lot. Artist gives us a moment of breathing while she sorts him out. It was the postman.

That was our warm up but Artist says we will end with a little song. She says there’s an Irish ballad she likes called You’re as Welcome as the Flowers in May. She explains all the local context about Malin Head or Banbas Crownn. She has put her own autumn leaves words to it and participants can come with their own words during the week.

You’re as welcome as the autumn leaves as they dance among the forest trees, and I breath, I dream, as I watch the golden colours dance.

I am having a hearty sing along. Artist says after the break we will unmute and try to sing it together… (!!!).

Here we go. It’s pretty bad but I don’t think we mind.

Artist says she will make a little video to send everyone so they can practice at home.

10 minute break. Artist says people can get a cup of tea or stay on and chat.

After a while… chat starts. They talk about the trouble someone had getting into the zoom, but the man on the phone walked him through it. Someone explains it’s the first session so they are trying different things to make it work and warm things up. People know each other already so say how happy they are to see each other. Three are now having a lovely chat. They don’t all know each other, but say they hope to meet at some point, face to face.

By now we have 19 in the zoom.

It would be good for Artist to unpin herself to help them chat as they can’t really see each other. I’ve switched to gallery – better. There’s a lovely few chatting now. One explains the issue I just mentioned with the view.

I join the conversation as there’s a question about the consent forms – Facilitator has been on the case giving them all the information. We all have a laugh about how he’s gone to the top of the class, bringing the red apples and getting a gold star. I can see how dedicated and hardworking he is saying he will follow up and call people. **Even though the sound is bad the atmosphere is friendly and warm – this acknowledged opportunity for mingling is really important.**

Artist is back and says there is a big zoom delay but she heard some fantastic singing coming back. She says ‘it’s a known fact that sometimes if you struggle to speak you can sing much easier. You can try singing ‘I am getting up and eating my breakfast’. The singing will really help everyone’s confidence with voice. Across the lockdown we’ve been on own and even my voice has got weaker. I’ll give you a video you can do at home between sessions if you want to.’

Artist says in all her zoom classes she starts with the thought – look around your room and make sure there is nothing you can walk into or bump into – lamps can be dodgy so take a minute to notice your own space. She says ‘I danced in this room for all of zoom and I would forget about my fireplace’.

First we are invited to listen to a poem, which she will type up for us to read again. Then we will get up and move to music. Today we are focusing on autumn.

We are going to explore some of the descriptive words. They tend to trigger an idea. When we are starting to work through a process of movement it’s wonderful to have a picture in your mind of what you can do. Then your body will come through and give you a little answer.

Get off the chair and clear a little space. We need space to walk.

Rose petals falling – make our own gestures. Walking on crispy crunchy leaves. Scampering cat. Next: birds.

We do our gestures as she reads the poem.

Artist explains the breakout rooms. Aim is to have a chat. Thinking about autumn. Would like to ask you to think about a question. The trees are letting go of these leaves. What are you letting go of this autumn. Imagine you’re a leaf. What are you letting go of?

Break-out group:

My group is a mixture of some lovely sharing and some awkward connection issues. One participant seems keen to speak but keeps breaking up, and another is too. What a shame. We realise it’s better when the rest of us are muted.

We regroup, and one person from each breakout group feed back to the others.

One group: colours, tinged with sadness as light goes in. Letting go of the barriers we have put up.

Another group: promise of the new coming after you let go of the old. Mention of the impact of covid. The grandchild someone couldn’t see. We are letting go of what was a comfort zone which we are no longer in because of the stroke, we come into a situation which is colourful in its own way, and brings the promise of a new future.

Another: warmth, the glow, getting together and hibernating, eating and drinking and coming out and reforming, the mushiness of the leaves and Larry liked it and we liked the colours and the crunchiness etc.

Another – sometimes it’s dark, the cloud is dark, my speech is getting bad. The crunchy leaves is mushing, when you slip in it it’s not crunchy any more. Life is ok even when it gets darker.

Another: oh god I’m going to forget everything. We talked about how beautiful it is and the light, and sometimes its hard to think about things you let of. In September we start something new like school, diet, but you’re always starting something new so you let go of some things. Sometimes about death but also renewal. We talked about what happens next.

A participant suggests: there might be something about the rules of this group, it’s ok to not remember. Can we have a rule that it’s ok not to know or remember?

Artist says – yes at the beginning of next week we can have some rules, one I always have is everything is good. There is no wrong in these sessions. Even if you forget something, you just come as you are on that day. So next week let’s bring some things we would like to be the rules of the group. The session has moved so fast and I had wanted to share one last song with you but I’ll share that for next week. I want to share a huge thank you with you all. You all jumped in and had a go at singing, moving, talking. This is a really safe space for everyone so you can feel comfortable to share.

Next, at the end of the session we will do our ending ritual. If you have any questions you can speak to Facilitators. Facilitator will phone you tonight and check in with you and feed that back to us so that we can adapt for next week. Don’t be afraid to feedback both the positives and the things that will be useful. We will send the little videos. You can practice or you don’t have to. I will link you to this little page here and on this page you will be able to find the video. We have 2 more things that we would like you to do, but only if you want to. Whatsapp group –It’s not a chat group. It’s just for sharing things. We would also like to know your favourite piece of music. You don’t have to remember, all this will come in an email.

Questions? No.

After the end – a participant thanks Facilitator for the laptop. There is a woman who has dropped out as it wasn’t for her, and apparently we are down to 9, so there must have been a lot of non-participants there helping to get people set up. Facilitator gave one lady a laptop but she didn’t have Wi-Fi, so he got her to go to her local resource centre and will go there again next week. Inventive, but how easy is it to sing and dance I wonder?

*Summary*

* This format – everyone on zoom not in studio – feels engaging and like we are being addressed directly.
* There is a whole team of dedicated people needed to make this work smoothly. 2 or 3 people on the phones supporting people, participant ambassador and advocate, the actual ambassadors, the artists.
* Huge efforts being made to include people e.g. providing laptop, directing to resource centre with Wi-Fi
* All the little things really make a difference e.g. introductions, explanations, being inclusive, signposting, asking people’s preferences, welcoming them in.
* Vocal work is much more pleasant with everyone on mute, and it’s more freeing being able to be loud without worrying about the sound or being in sync.