

“They have become my family”: Reciprocity and responsiveness in a volunteer-led program for refugees and migrants

ANNE SMITH

anne.smith@faithaction.net

ABSTRACT

Creative English is an applied theatre program that supports English language learning for adult refugees and migrants in the UK. The program is shaped by an ethic of care, focused on responsiveness, reciprocal relationships and empowering individuals to take action. This article identifies challenges and opportunities highlighted by the rapid expansion of a project governed by these values and delivered by volunteers.

Immigration has long affected the UK. The first migrants arrived in the 5th century and the first refugees were documented in the 12th century (Panayi, 1999; Kushner, 2006). The Commission of Human Rights (1998) defines migrants as those who have freely taken the decision to leave their country of origin for reasons of “personal convenience” and without “the intervention of an external compelling factor” (United Nations, 1951, p. 16). The United Nations Convention Relating to the

Status of Refugees (1951) defined a refugee as a person forced to leave their country as a result of “a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” (p. 16).

Despite a long history of immigration, integration remains a challenge for refugees and migrants at the start of the twenty-first century. Atfield, Brahmhatt and O'Toole (2007) found the ability to contribute to society was the key aspect of integration. The ability to speak English and negotiate systems in the UK is central to integration. In the 2011 census, however, around 850,000 migrants self-reported that they could not speak English well or at all (Paget, 2014). In 2013, the UK government's Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) launched a competition to find innovative ways of teaching the English language and increasing engagement in the community for those who had not previously accessed English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes. *Creative English*, administered by FaithAction, was one of six winners.

Creative English is an applied theatre program that supports English language learning for adult refugees and migrants in the UK. The methodology developed through practice-based research in partnership with 53 women in East London. The research focused on using drama, shaped by an ethic of care, to facilitate belonging. Framed by the care theories of Held (2006) and Pettersen (2008), it focuses on responsiveness, reciprocal relationships and empowering individuals to take action. Barnes et al. (2015) believe an ethics of care connects values, practical help, support, and policy, recognising and privileging essential relationships when circumstances are challenging (p. 233). *Creative English* combines these personal, practical and, through its government funding, policy objectives.

Creative English consists of 38 sessions, consonant with an academic year, which are themed around everyday experiences. Participants improvise as fictional characters in an on-going storyline. The storyline provides opportunity to practice the language, builds confidence in participants' ability to communicate beyond words and creates the sense of fun which characterise the sessions and has resulted in the project's tag line: “Laugh your way to confident English” (*Creative English*, 2016). Facilitators receive a case containing props, costume, puppets and visual aid cards to support communication and encourage a sense of play in the sessions. Using playful improvisation

and archetypal characters, participants gain confidence to use English in everyday situations, including talking to doctors, teachers and landlords. The plotline for the drama features a number of families, who live on the same street. Family relationships have a universal quality and help participants find common ground, as similar feelings and pressures are shared regardless of cultural background. As part of its responsiveness to the needs of individuals, the program is designed to accommodate the erratic attendance of the most vulnerable, as each session is self-contained with its sense of continuity generated by the on-going plot. Participants may engage with as much or as little of the program as they wish, which helps them progress as appropriate to their needs and desires. Some participants simply need the confidence boost to move onto formal ESOL or employment, whereas others benefit from a long term context to make friends and develop skills.

The DCLG funding resulted in *Creative English* being delivered in 36 'hubs' across 22 areas nationally. Between 2013 and 2015, 2,432 learners participated in the program. Over 85% of learners were women, 75.4% were from Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian or Somali backgrounds and more than 70% were Muslim (CTPSR, 2015, pp. 3-4). In addition to measuring increases in confidence and language proficiency, the program sought practical engagement with the wider community as its outcome, demonstrated through engagement with new community activities, health services, formal education and employment. The program over delivered significantly on targets set. For example, the target for learners to engage with further education including ESOL after taking part in *Creative English* was 492 learners. The final total was 1,148. (CTPSR, 2015, p. 14). 725 learners on the program have made progression towards work whilst taking part. This is against a target of 461 and so, again, represents a significant over-achievement (p.15).

The partnership with FaithAction was important in enabling the program to reach those who had not previously accessed ESOL. FaithAction is a network of about 2,000 organisations and individuals, representing the nine recognised faiths in the UK, involved or aspiring to be involved in social action. As a result, the program was facilitated by trained volunteers in a range of settings familiar to learners, including community centres, mosques, churches and gudwaras. Volunteer facilitators, motivated by a desire to make a difference in their communities, were recognised to go out of their way to make people feel welcome and to create a relaxed environment conducive to learning

(CTPSR, 2015, p. 19).

The faith sector is particularly effective in engaging those traditionally considered hard to reach (Dinham, Furbey and Lowndes, 2009). Many migrants place greater emphasis on religious and cultural traditions from their countries of origin, which means places of worship are often the first point of community connection for new arrivals (Fortier, 2000; Griffiths, Sigona, & Zetter, 2005). Responding to learners' need to be able to access the program in a safe, familiar space and adopting a drama-based methodology which focusses on the oral suits those who are illiterate in their first language and have no formal education. Although *Creative English* benefits a diverse range of participants, including those with professional qualifications, it also empowers women, some of whom have been in the UK for 20 or 30 years, to experience greater levels of personal independence. Responsiveness to the needs of individuals not traditionally served by formal education in the development and setting of the program is crucial in its success with learners. The sense of community built between learners who attended regularly caused terms relating to 'family' to be used by participants to describe other members of the group. This article will explore family, reciprocity, responsiveness and empowerment as a small project is upscaled.

AN ALTERNATIVE 'FAMILY'

Beyond the fiction, program participants and volunteers frequently refer to other participants within the project as "family". This association with family is perhaps not surprising in a project shaped by an ethic of care, as care has always been synonymous with family (Philips, 2007); that said, the relationship between care and family has also always been contested, particularly as traditional notions of the nuclear family have changed, postmodern emphases on individualism and selfishness have evolved, and geographic separation grows more pronounced, which is particularly pertinent in the case of migrants (pp. 56-59). This applied theatre project offers an alternative 'family', as the safety of facilitated workshop spaces and the challenges of specific group tasks accelerate the development of relationships.

Philips (2007) found that shared histories, ongoing relationships, reciprocity and knowledge of the preferences and values of members are central to notions of care amongst families. Similarly, duty, power

and obligation are commonly cited as foundations of care within family relationships, as are love and, sometimes, altruism (p.64). When participants talked of peers from the applied theatre project as family, their focus was on certain idealised benefits: unity in shared experiences, despite differences, and its substitution for relationships currently unavailable to them. One participant explained:

“Family means to me: these are the people I want to be with. We are very different but we are the same. We have [the] same problem[s], same laugh[s], same hope for [our] family. I have big family in my country – I miss very much. This class make my family here.” (*Creative English* participant. Personal Interview. 2015, November 8)

Tidyman, Gale, & Seymour (2004) indicated that acute senses of isolation and marginalisation may be experienced by refugees and migrants, as a result of feeling detached from both their host communities and people from their own backgrounds. They also found that isolation is linked to the highest levels of mental health problems, and highlighted that importance “of building on and supporting people’s survival skills and resilience” (p. 26). Eaves (2015) found such isolation even applied to those on spousal visas, facing the challenges of re-establishing social networks in the UK in a very different culture. A common focus on a shared arts task is an ideal context in which to build friendships with people one might typically consider “other”. Working alongside one another is a non-threatening way to find out about one another’s preferences. The overall goal – in this case the development of a plot to improve one’s English language – supports ongoing relationships. In one session, for example, the group collaborate to help the woman playing the mother get her lazy teenage son to school. Participants from Poland and Pakistan support one another in the fiction with threats of punishment and bribery. There was laughter at the physical embodiment of a surly teenager from the slight Algerian woman, who was in role as the son, and a sense of triumph when the son was finally pushed out the door. In a subsequent week, the same two women were observed sharing their real life concerns about their children’s behaviour in school. Participation in creative tasks provides a shared history, however short term, as well as reciprocity that can be found in the creative process itself. These characteristics mimic those

that form the foundations of care within a family. Collaboration and celebration of one another's successes and concerns helps to build a sense of community within the project.

In addition to creating a culture of reciprocity and empowerment through the arts activities, it is important to encourage interaction outside the creative, as this may be sustained when the project itself is over. Structured time for what Muir (2009) described as "loose interaction" is important, including: coffee breaks, shared food and trips into the community, as these encounters cement and support emerging relationships. These friendships encourage more engagement with society outside project. Activities facilitated outside the arts project provide opportunities to redistribute power and generate a bridge between the safety of the workshop space and the real world, encouraging further independent interactions. For example, it appeared a trip to the Olympic Park would go unattended, as no-one had replied to the facilitator's text. Upon departure, however, a large group of participants and their friends arrived. Although the project facilitator had proposed and planned the outing, the participants themselves organised one another. One participant explained that, because her peer invited her, she 'had to come'. A familial sense of obligation is at work here, exerting a pressure to engage without an uneven power dynamic. At the end of the outing, the group subdivided and went shopping rather than travelling home with the facilitator all together. One of the women who didn't typically leave home without her husband was asked if she would be ok to travel back. "Yes, of course! My friends will help," she smiled. Previously nervous to make the short walk to the workshop alone, she was now comfortable managing crowded public transport, a double buggy and two children under the age of five. Her relationships with others in the group freed her of certain dependencies. She could make the choice herself, and in doing so opened up the possibility of other trips out. She later attended a parent and toddler group for the first time with one of these women. As another participant explained: "Here [in *Creative English*] I have friends for help not just for fun" (Smith, 2013, p. 138). The help offered by friends was not limited to the hours of a workshop. Reciprocal relationships multiply the capacity for support well beyond what any professional service can offer.

'FAMILY' FOR VOLUNTEERS

Creative English volunteer facilitators also chose the word "family" to describe their relationship with workshop participants. This particularly

applied to volunteers who themselves may not have conventional families. Angela has been a volunteer on *Creative English* for 3 years. She explained:

For myself, as a single person with no immediate family, they have become my family. We have been laughing so much this morning, it's a complete tonic to come here. You could never regard it as work. It's just a sheer pleasure to come and be with these people and just be able to help them in something that is so easy for us and see them progress. (*Creative English Alliance, 2015b*)

hooks (2003) spoke of political resistance engendered through 'service' as the foundation of teaching, particularly because it eschews the notion of reward (p. 91). However, for the volunteer facilitator the reward is clearly in relationships and enjoying others' successes. A phrase like "complete tonic" suggests significant impact on Angela's own well-being. Celebration of one another's successes is again characteristic of the idealised family. Another volunteer framed her feelings of satisfaction as being the response of a mother:

These ladies have become like my children. When they tell me about their successes – how they have been able to go places and do things they never thought they could before, I'm so proud I could burst. It's so lovely to see. I never thought I'd feel like a proud mum, but I do. (Volunteer facilitator. Personal interview. 2016, January 12)

While the experience of unconventional motherhood is clearly an option within the applied theatre project's alternative family, the project may also offer opportunities to escape from traditional family roles, reaffirming independent identities. Fahema, a volunteer, explained:

I didn't want to be stuck at home alone after my kids went to full time school and it gave me a good opportunity to help others who have a lot less English. It makes me feel good to do it. It's lovely to see them develop and improve and go on to better things after it. (*Creative English Alliance, 2015b*)

Consonant with the experiences of program participants, a multiplicity of motivations and needs may be satisfied by involvement as a volunteer

facilitator. Reciprocity is demonstrated in the participant's desire to share the outcome with the facilitators, who both gives and receives affirmation in their response.

With reference to the role of the applied theatre facilitator, Thompson (2015) noted that "the 'professional' cannot be sustained ethically without a commitment to the potential for it to blur dynamically with the personal" (p. 432). Working alongside one of her learners as a volunteer, Griffin (2014), a professional *Creative English* Trainer, described how Yasmin was "slowly becoming a friend", indicating that focus on a shared creative task builds relationships between staff and volunteers as well as learners. The informal nature of *Creative English* workshop sessions encourages natural relationships on all levels; the blurring of professional and personal is particularly heightened in the role of volunteer facilitator. The lack of financial reward means motivation is closely linked to the needs and values of the volunteer. Volunteers' personal motivations may include gaining professional experience, combatting one's own isolation and/or a desire to see change in their community; engagement is magnified when the volunteer belongs to the community they serve. Unlike the professional facilitator, who usually maintains the status of guest for the duration of the project, the volunteer facilitator is likely to maintain a long term connection with individuals and have in depth knowledge of barriers and opportunities faced by participants. They may engage with participants regularly outside the parameters of the applied theatre project, which may both increase individuals' potential to meet participants' needs and limit their expectations, as they are subject to the same cultural norms. One volunteer explained:

In our culture men and women must always be separate. We can play the games from the session plans but we must do it in separate rooms or, at least, different ends of the room. It is just how it is in our culture. [...] Friendships between men and women do not happen. (Volunteer facilitator. Personal interview. 2016, January 14)

Creating safe spaces that remain sensitive to cultural demands is crucial when supporting people as they access the applied theatre project and facilitators who are from those communities can play an invaluable role. Moreover, once these barriers are overcome, there is value in the

workshop space as a safe context to engage with those from different communities. As one community leader explained:

It's good to meet people who are different to them. This, for many, is the first time – first time to speak to English people, peoples of different background/country. They are learning we are all people. We are the same. We do not have to be scared. (Volunteer facilitator. Personal interview. 2016, February 10)

The applied theatre workshop acts as a liminal space in which relationships can be redefined. Trust, however, has to be present to enable people to engage in the first place. Trust develops through relationships over time.

CHALLENGING POWERLESSNESS

An ethic of care foregrounds the importance of empowerment and ensures that individuals are not positioned passively as the *cared-for* (Pettersen, 2008). One of the most significant elements in the success of the program has therefore been providing opportunities for former participants to transition into volunteer facilitators, promoting a further increase in feelings of confidence and belonging. Migrants and refugees often experience feelings of helplessness due to language barriers, the asylum process and lack of understanding related to the host culture and system, which leaves parents feeling incapable of caring for their children (Furukawa & Hunt, 2011) and refugees in need of using their skills and qualifications (Tidyman et al., 2004). *Creative English* combats powerlessness by encouraging different degrees of volunteerism – some formalised and some informal. Taking full responsibility for the class takes a measure of confidence and commitment. However, former participants have been able to get alongside current ones – interpreting, encouraging, demonstrating activities and facilitating small groups, which has significantly enhanced the program's ability to support diverse learners. Additionally, shared personal experience can be an inspiration to new arrivals and encourage empathy. As Maria, a lead-facilitator explained: "As a refugee I feel I can understand what other vulnerable migrants are experiencing when they move to the UK and I want to put my experience to good use" (Smith, 2016, p. 13). The intermediate steps to becoming a lead-facilitator provide opportunities for deepened

relationships, strengthened applied theatre skills and cultural awareness. While such training will always develop facilitation skills and creativity, it is important to recognise that for many would-be-facilitators, cultural practice (in terms of pragmatic skills, such as how to book a room, organize participant contact information, manage a budget and send an invoice) is equally important to address. As Paget and Stevenson (2014) identified, migrants have complex needs and benefit from an approach that is holistic. Applied theatre is well positioned to do this; it equips volunteers with a range of transferable skills and experiences.

To facilitate the transition toward volunteerism, lead facilitators had to hone their capacities to recognise those who would benefit from further personal development. Kavita, for example, studied IT in English at university in India, so her knowledge of English was excellent. However, in practice, she was lacked the confidence to speak to people, and left the house once a week. She attended one *Creative English* class and volunteered as a teaching assistant for another; in this role her self-esteem soared. Becoming a volunteer is a reciprocal process, benefitting both the project and the participant. In fact, a number of volunteers went on to do formal teaching qualifications. hooks (2003) identifies the importance of a supportive mentor as well as the importance of “serving” students in university education, rather than perceiving them as subject to a professor’s will. Additionally, lead facilitators need to adopt the role Miller refers to as “enlightened witness”: the person who “stands with someone being abused and offers them a different model of interaction” (p. 89). While “abuse” in this context may simply refer to the potential to be disadvantaged through lack of language or understanding of culture, internalised feelings of helplessness and powerlessness can form a type of self-abuse whereby one limits one’s own opportunities through failing to recognise one’s own strengths and capabilities. The enlightened witness can combat internalised powerlessness by recognising successes and fostering reciprocal relationships where all can give as well as receive. A willingness to be open about one’s own mistakes and challenges can break down participants’ “fear of being less than perfect” avoiding the “despair and self-sabotage” that result, replacing them with hope and possibility (hooks, p. 89). In the case of Kavita, the informal interactions with the facilitator, who drove her to and from the project venue, may have been as significant in her raising her self-esteem as her capacity

to help others in the sessions.

CARE FOR THE CARERS

The project's rapid expansion from 78 participants with one facilitator to over 2,400 participants and 43 facilitators generated significant challenges in terms of maintaining the original ethos with its focus on responsiveness to individual need. A level of care and support needs to be modelled for the volunteer facilitators if they are to feel empowered enough to replicate such care for the participants in the project. The geographical spread, costs of travel and intensity of establishing the program resulted in limited contact time being spent with the volunteers initially, who received one day's training at the start and a second day mid-way through the program. The success rate of volunteers moving on to employment also disrupted engagement with the project; as with the migrants themselves volunteers' participation could be of a transitory nature (CTPSR, 2015, p. 14). More contact time with volunteers and more effective use of digital communication channels to develop supportive relationships between hubs in the network will be important areas of development in future.

A project shaped by an ethic of care that values reciprocity, responsiveness to individuals and empowerment should also engender volunteer ownership over sessions. To achieve this, volunteer facilitators were initially encouraged to bring their own expertise into sessions by introducing their own activities. However, in practice Coventry University (2015) found this compromised the quality of the experience for learners, as volunteer facilitators did not necessarily have the skill or experience to navigate cultural appropriacy or the educational value of activities. This was the inevitable consequence of a small amount of training; facilitators who internalised the values of the project were most effective. To ensure care for participants while maintaining respect for the research participants who shaped our methodology, it became necessary to give some level of authority to the session plans as written though the format remained flexible.

Applied theatre in challenging contexts also seems to generate a sense of responsibility, which can have both positive and negative consequences for participants and facilitators, as it becomes 'emotional labour' (Preston, 2013). One example has to do with the sense of guilt and responsibility a specific *Creative English* community felt, when they

discovered one participant (who struggled with learning difficulties) hadn't seen anyone for the 3-week period during which the center was shut. This anecdote reiterates the importance of moving beyond formal provision into natural, self-sustaining friendships that are not limited by working hours or academic terms. A volunteer described the impact hearing a participant's life story had on her:

I hadn't heard it before. She'd only hinted. It was so hard to hear – awful – what they'd done. I find that...when I hear people's stories I find it really hard not to get overwhelmed by the hopelessness of it. [...] You think what can I do in the face of it? It's so dark. It's so good to have X to talk it through with, who's heard lots of these stories before. (Volunteer facilitator. Personal interview. 2016, February 24)

Because the program is powered by playful situations and functional knowledge about life in the UK, this woman's story would not likely be told during a *Creative English* session. The focus on laughter in the sessions reduces Preston's (2013) "emotional work" of switching from a negative to a positive frame of mind (p. 232). In fact, the volunteer only heard this woman's story because they had attended a referral session together. The volunteer facilitator is technically outside the remit of the project, but with access to the support and expertise of colleagues she is able to get appropriate support for the emotional consequences of this work. As in the field of health, there is a pressing need to recognise facilitators as providing care, and to then "care for the carers" (Manea, 2015, p. 207), ensuring appropriate practical and emotional support is available to everyone. As the blurring of the 'professional' and the 'personal' becomes more pronounced, supportive structures and appropriate training are necessary to protect facilitator well-being.

CONCLUSION

Shaped by an ethic of care, the *Creative English* methodology has responsiveness to individuals' needs embedded into the structure of the program. Reciprocity is part of a collaborative creative process; as it is not dependent on language skills or cultural awareness, all participants can contribute. However, to ensure all have the capacity to contribute equally, there is also value in recognising sharing food and supporting

one another outside the sessions as forms of reciprocity, which combat the sense of helplessness many migrants experience. Being able to make a contribution to society is important in achieving emotional integration. While these interactions would not take place without the accelerated relationships and increased confidence generated by the arts, it is important that activity around the arts tasks themselves are recognised to have an impact of longer term personal development for participants. Feeling empowered to help others in small actions, like helping a friend to use a bus, opens up the possibility of making bolder choices: enrolling on a formal language course; visiting an unfamiliar area or challenging your landlord about poor quality accommodation. The impact of the combination of rehearsal for life in arts activities, confidence building and generation of a supportive network of friendships is illustrated in the fact that 78% of participants engaged in new community activities after joining the program (*Creative English* 2015c). Arguably, facilitating these 'family' relationships are as important as the arts activities which make them possible in bringing about sustained change in people's lives.

Despite the projects' focus on learners, these qualities are equally important for the volunteers who deliver the project. In interview, they too used language which suggested a familial relationship with participants, which often rewarded them through pleasure at learners' achievements, especially being able to act independently. Although some formal structures are necessary to ensure learners are protected by a certain level of quality in the sessions, building responsive, empowering, reciprocal relationships between the professional facilitation team and volunteers are equally important. As *Creative English* begins a new chapter of delivery, closer relationships with the volunteer facilitators will be a priority. While volunteering is often considered a sign of acculturation more likely to take place after 5 years in the UK (Bloch, 2002), the initial delivery of *Creative English* suggests that there are significant benefits in empowering participants to join the facilitation team after a relatively short period. Helping others may enhance volunteers' self-esteem and sense of belonging. Providing opportunity for participants and volunteers to develop genuine friendships is key to long term impact beyond the drama workshop.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Anne Smith is an applied theatre practitioner and researcher with over twenty years of experience working in formal and informal education contexts. She is currently working as Lead Trainer at FaithAction, who administer the *Creative English* project. The *Creative English* model was developed in partnership with workshop participants as part of practice-based research for her PhD on using drama to facilitate a sense of belonging for adult refugees and migrants, awarded by Queen Mary University of London in 2013. Her research interests include: the use of drama to facilitating community, language acquisition, family learning, health literacy, and well-being