Beyond arts and health: the need to include all of popular culture

Arts and health could benefit from expanding to become popular culture and health. Just as not everybody is interested in health, not everyone is interested in the arts. Practitioners and academics need to find out what the cultural interests of different target groups actually are. They can then systematically explore how to use these interests for health purposes. Mark Burns looks at the application of this approach specifically to health education.

Don’t be a bore: start with people’s own interests not your own

Back in 2006 I was a health education worker in North East England. I was faced with the task of communicating about health to large numbers of people from a variety of different target groups. Campaigns involving leaflets, posters and health stalls still had their place in the health education toolbox, but I felt something was missing. Just producing more of the same did not strike me as being an effective way forward.

It seemed to me that health workers often assumed everyone is, or should be, interested in healthy living. The rising figures for lifestyle related conditions such as obesity suggested otherwise.

I decided to turn things on their head and start from what different target groups were actually interested in, then look for ideas and evidence as to how to link these to health.

Sex and Drugs and Rock and… Health

I wanted to find out what different target groups were actually interested in and not make assumptions. After leaving the NHS I accessed some market research data for a local city.¹

The data broke down the population by demographic group. This gave both health status in different categories and groups’ pastimes and hobbies, e.g. pop music, romantic novels, magazines and fashion.

Other than these topics loosely related to the arts, football and crosswords were also popular with many groups. I also looked at comedy, comics and computer games. I knew that they had all already been used in health education.

I used this information to produce a website on using popular culture as a health education and engagement tool.²

I do not claim that the interests I have listed are relevant everywhere in the UK, never mind in other countries. Instead I would encourage people to do their own research into what is popular with the people they work with and adapt the approach accordingly.

Popular culture needs to be used systematically

In some ways of course what I am writing about is not new. However, my own experience suggested that the use of popular culture was often not fully thought through. I believe that what I am calling for is more systematic and rigorous.

I suggest what is needed is:

- A cultural shift to attempting to always see issues from the point of view of what would interest and engage the target group. This is even if this approach is eventually dismissed as irrelevant for the particular project in question.

- The systematic use of research to confirm what interests the target group and how such interests can be used to influence their health behaviour.

- The application of health theory to the use of popular culture as a health tool e.g. the stages of change model.³

- The application of practice from other disciplines where appropriate e.g. around how to write an effective comic.

- Effective collaboration between health workers and other professionals in the field of entertainment e.g. stand-up comedians.
The evaluation of projects and the dissemination of results through dedicated channels e.g. popular culture and health conferences

- The coming together of workers who use different types of popular culture to promote health. This is so as to create a common identity and share good practice, e.g. community writers, football in the community projects and producers of computer games

- Potentially the creation of a specialist popular culture and health workforce, both in the field and in academia

More on research and theory
I was impressed by social marketing theory and its stress on finding out what prevents or encourages healthy lifestyles in different demographic groups. This information can help inform how to use popular culture effectively.

I also suspect that a wide variety of other health education or communication models can be used within the framework of popular culture. One that particularly influenced me was the stages of change model. I believe that pre-contemplators in particular are a good target to use popular culture with. These are people who are not even thinking about changing their behaviour. They are therefore less likely to notice any appeals based around health - it seems to make sense to try to engage them initially through their own interests. Soaps have sometimes been used to do this. In a different context the most famous example in the UK is probably the Archers. It was originally set up to educate farmers around food production, a vital economic and public health issue in the UK when rationing was still in place.

I also think that it worth looking at how to use particular popular culture approaches in terms of the health education model that stresses the need to give information, deal with attitudes and develop skills.

In addition I believe that it is often important to use appropriate theory from the particular type of popular culture used e.g. how to write an effective romantic novel.

Some examples of using popular culture as a health education tool

- Computer games: Games have been produced about health both to train professionals and to educate the public. ‘Fat world’, for example, is a game about the politics of food in America.
- Comic strip: ‘Dragonslippers’ is a graphic novel about domestic abuse. It has been translated from English into Spanish, Italian, French, German, Dutch, Portuguese and Indonesian.
- Romantic novels: In Mexico, a writer collaborated with sex workers to produce a story about their lives and how to prevent the spread of HIV
- Crosswords: A quick Google search will find examples of crosswords to use in the classroom. Perhaps however crossword magazines, with embedded health messages, could also be produced and given out to specific target groups.
- Football: In England many football teams employ staff to use soccer to engage people around health projects e.g. the anti-depression programme, ‘It’s a Goal’

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