

Reflections of Seeds Grant

01/08/2025

1. Description *What Happened?*

I was awarded a 'micro-bursary' to explore themes of loss and grief in a care home through creative experimentation.

My role involved organising an arts project in collaboration with residents and staff. I designed a series of sessions including storytelling of different cultural practices, collage, and Lego as research methods, culminating in the co-creation of a mural as the final output.

The project spanned three months.

2. Feelings *What were you thinking and feeling at the time?*

I felt anxious at times, particularly when participation was low or sessions clashed with other scheduled events. The transition from working twenty hours a week as an Activities Coordinator to visiting only once or twice a fortnight made it harder to build and maintain relationships with residents, and that shift contributed to the unease I felt.

The final day felt subdued. There was a remembrance mass, but little space to acknowledge the creative work we had done. It wasn't a failure, but it lacked the sense of closure I had hoped for.

I also realised that my planning and time management hadn't accounted for how demanding the project would be. The workload exceeded what the bursary realistically supported.

At the same time, there were moments of real excitement and pride. When residents engaged deeply with tasks, especially during the documentary filming, it was clear that the project mattered.

3. Evaluation *What was good and bad about the experience?*

Challenges:

- Shifting from being present multiple times per week to visiting sporadically weakened the relationships I had previously built.
- Few residents felt a strong sense of ownership over the mural. Looking back, I may have prioritised the final output over the slower relational work that creates shared authorship.
- The scale of the project was ambitious for the level of funding and time, leaving little room for the informal interactions that often hold the most value.

What Worked:

- Collage and mural sessions generated real energy, joy, and curiosity. Families joined in, which added warmth and connection.
- Staff were unexpectedly drawn to the creative process. The mural work (especially when I was painting alone in the prayer room, a busy ‘thoroughfare’) opened up conversations about grief, work pressures, and personal experiences. I was jokingly called a ‘death doula’.
- The project helped reframe attitudes around grief. One staff member described how the CARU whiteboard, once perceived as heavy or depressing, had begun to feel honest and communal rather than morbid: “I used to walk past that board and think, why do we have something so heavy and depressing up there? But, after being part of this project, I see it differently; It is not morbid, it is honest. It reminds us that loss is part of living and there is comfort in acknowledging that together.”

4. Analysis *Why did things happen the way they did?*

There is a clear appetite for new experiences in care settings, particularly those that interrupt the repetitive daily rhythms. The mural succeeded visually, but the relational potential of the project was weakened by the sporadic nature of my visits. This became obvious only in hindsight. Securing a new job during the project disrupted the continuity I had planned, and the reduced presence made it harder for residents to build trust or sustain momentum between sessions.

It’s apparent now that consistent, longer visits would have supported the work far better. In future, I would dedicate one full day a week over a set period (something like 11.30–4.30) allowing time for an afternoon workshop, informal interactions before dinner, conversations with staff, and space to document reflections on site. Longer, predictable days make creative work feel integrated into the environment rather than imposed in short bursts, and they create the conditions for genuine engagement to develop.

5. Conclusion *What could you have done differently?*

I learned that large creative outputs can overshadow the slow community-building that underpins good arts-and-health work. A clearer closing moment, where everyone’s contributions were acknowledged and celebrated, would have supported a stronger sense of ownership.

Consistent presence matters. So does the ability to work at the pace of the community rather than the pace of the project.

6. Action Plan *If it happened again, what would you do?*

For future projects, I would:

- Be more realistic about the scope of what can be achieved with limited funding.
- Prioritise consistent, informal presence within the community.
- Consider condensing future projects into a shorter time frame to enable consistent presence and engagement.
- Focus equally on process and product, ensuring participants feel ownership at every stage.
- Plan a closing event that actively celebrates the work and invites reflection from participants.
- Allow flexibility for organic conversations and spontaneous participation as they often hold the most meaningful part of the process.