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TOOL KIT

ABOUT THIS TOOL KIT

This Tool Kit aims to enable other community groups to draw on the experiences of the Brunswick Women's Choir in their own group development. Although our group is a choir we find that non-choir groups are interested in our progress and difficulties, because all groups have some tasks in common. There are already many useful resources for groups, but we believe that the Choir's story (seen as a case study of a long-standing group that aims to enrich both members' lives and the community) makes a distinctive contribution.

The Tool Kit is organised into eight themes, or areas of learning, that have been important for the Choir. The process of researching and writing our history has helped bring these experiences into focus. Perhaps our best advice to you would be to embark on a group history and discover your own learning path.

For each theme, there is a short list of our successes and difficulties, followed by some questions that might help a group reflect on, and discuss relevant issues.

▮1 **Core Principles**

The goal of the Choir is to allow women to find their voices, in both singing and decision-making (see Vision Statement, page 108, and it does this by:

- Striving for excellence, which requires balancing the main goal (musical performance) with the goal of empowerment; this balancing act is typical of community arts.

- Participating in collective decision-making and cultivating openness to everyone's ideas.

- Seeking social justice principles by aiming to represent all women (and their backgrounds and experiences) in the musical repertoire, as well as in the membership of the Choir.

- Enabling personal expression, through music, for all members.

EXAMPLE OF THE TENSION BETWEEN CORE PRINCIPLES

Early in the Choir's history Cathy asked for volunteers to sing solos in performances. At a major performance, several soloists changed key so that by the end of the song the music had completely changed key. The sopranos could hardly sing because their notes were so much higher than intended and the song sounded dreadful. Cathy decided to initiate the present process where people audition for solos.

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION POINTS

▣ **Does your vision statement express the core principles of your group?**

▣ **Can you see the vision statement working in a concrete way? Does the group's action match the rhetoric: "walk the talk?"**

▣ **How can your vision statement be used to help self-selection into the group?**

▣ **As a community group, what are your contributions to the community and what do you offer your members?**

▮2 **Time**

Time is an important and intriguing aspect of being in a community group.

- Members don't have to audition to join the Choir, but they do need patience because there is a defined number of members and a waiting list. The test of time, though unintended, can be an important preparation for the group.

- When members first join the group it takes time for them to move into belonging. The 'buddies system' aims to support and welcome new members.

- Most people have not experienced anything quite like the Choir, so they need time to learn what it is about. For some, the reality does not match expectations and they may leave.

- Staying in, after the 'honeymoon stage', requires an ability to accept the ebb and flow of good times and bad. Being in the Choir is like a relationship: it requires time, effort, thought, endurance of difficulties and risk-taking.

- Members need to understand that the Choir can only evolve over time with trial and error, and will never finally 'arrive', eg. in difficult times, 'trust that the Choir will heal and move on'. The Choir's success may be due partly to attracting enough people committed to its ideal and with the capacity to sometimes put the Choir's needs before their own.

- There is an ongoing relationship between the group and the lives of the members. Even though members may be very committed, their life events influence their degree of emotional investment in the Choir and it might become impossible for them to stay.

(Points about changes in the group's structure over time are included under the 'structures' theme).

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION POINTS
- ▣ **How does your group's selection process influence the people you attract and the way the group works?**
- ▣ **What supports do you have to enable people to understand what the commitment means during the transitional period?**
- ▣ **What process do you have for examining issues such as people leaving?**
- ▣ **Does your group have a flexible leave policy that reflects the realities of members' lives?**
- ▣ **What stages do members typically go through to achieve understanding and belonging in your group?**

▣ Belonging and Difference
One of the Choir's goals is to be inclusive of women from all different backgrounds and experiences, so how (or whether) this is achieved is vital to its success.

- Conflict is inevitible within any group trying to balance excellence and inclusiveness. Conflict can also arise out of members' high emotional investment in the group.

- In most groups, belonging is achieved through discovering shared views, experiences, etc. In the Choir belonging also comes from sharing differences, and accepting that not everyone thinks or feels the same.

- The group's diversity is not always comfortable for everyone, because of the diversity of views. Members who stay in the Choir learn and grow from others who are different, and eventually reach a sense of comfort when they realise that they may not be like others but they belong to the group.

- Singing and performing together is the most important shared experience of the Choir, and allows members to put their differences aside for this common goal.

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION POINTS
- **What are the differences and viewpoints emerging in your group?**
- **What can your group do to enable different viewpoints to coexist?**
- **What are the realistic limits to tolerance in your group?**
- **What is your group's tolerance level for discomfort?**
- **What happens in your group when there is conflict?**

4 Structures and Decision-Making

People do not join the Choir for the meetings, but they are necessary to the group's success: 'someone has to decide'.

- A commitment to participatory decision-making complicates the group structures, because it takes time away from singing, and it makes conflict and power issues visible. Over time our group has become more mature in acknowledging that we cannot have it all; and that while BOTH outcomes and processes are important they often have to be carefully negotiated.

- At the same time, the group values the decision-making process: 'we do a lot of talking' because when people feel they have a real say they are more committed to a decision, eg. everyone needs to accept the choice of costume for a performance, so this decision needs to involve everyone.

- Better decisions can usually be made when everyone's input is acknowledged, and in the Choir decisions are important because every choice is both personal and political; e.g. the choice of costume is important because it says something about who the Choir is and what it stands for.

- The structures to handle decision-making have become more complex over time, as the Choir performed more and also developed its organisation. The Choir evolved from one working group in 1993 to two coordinating umbrella groups and four working groups, plus specific project groups in 2005. See chronology page 39.

- Developing policies has ensured that decisions are equitable and clear and efficient; eg. child care and open access for all women, were the first two policies developed at the very first meeting of interested choristers in1991. These two were important because they reflected the values of the founders of the Choir, a maternal and child health nurse, and women who felt strongly about inclusiveness. These policies were not formalised for several years. The childcare policy was written so that members could be clear about what to ask for when needing childcare, and for childcare organisers to know what was expected.

The open access policy was written when the Choir wrote its first vision statement. This vision statement was needed, and used to underpin and influence the way the structures were set up.

- Email communication has evolved as essential to making information-dissemination and decision-making effective.

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION POINTS
- ▶ **What are your group's decision-making processes and structures?**
- ▶ **What kinds of policies does your group need now?**
- ▶ **What kind of trade-offs has your group had to make between decision-making and getting on with the task?**
- ▶ **Every group has conflict and every group has power issues: what are yours and how are they managed?**

5 Learning

Learning is an important part of every group, even if it is not a stated goal.

- The opportunity to learn new skills is important to the group's members, not just singing skills, but also technical, organisational, public speaking; and personal (eg. managing anxiety) and interpersonal (eg. managing conflict) skills.

- Learning often involves taking risks and mistakes are inevitable. This has to be balanced with the goal of achieving excellence, and against the need for people to be supported in their learning.

What kinds of learning process does your group see its members going through?

➡ **How does your group support its members learning new skills?**

➡ **How does your group share (information from) past experiences and learning?**

EXAMPLE

One way to look at learning processes of members is as a process:

- the person doesn't realise what they don't know, (unconscious incompetence);

- the person becomes aware of how much they don't know–this can be a very uncomfortable stage, (conscious incompetence);

- the person realises they have leant a great deal they did not know before (conscious competence); and

- the person has learnt so much they are unaware of how much they know compared to others and may think what they know is obvious and common knowledge (unconscious competence).

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6 Rituals

There are recurring events in the life of the Choir (such as a weekend of intensive rehearsal) that are extremely important to members' enjoyment, learning, participation, and performance.

- Major rituals are formed through a calendar of annual events and permormances; as well as through marking members' events such as birthdays and pregnancies with songs, baby showers, etc. Both public and more private group rituals are important.

- The expectation of regular public performances involves high commitment and an enormous investment of time, energy and emotion. In turn, this leads to high rewards and connection between members and the Choir as a group.

- Rituals provide members with a sense of security, anticipation and excitement.

- Reclaiming women's traditions and making them newly meaningful, eg. baby showers.

- Sharing food and drinks is an important group ritual, eg. drinks after rehearsal, holding meetings over meals, the AGM meal. (See Sophie's article, page 33)

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION POINTS
➡ **Which rituals are important in the life of your group?**
➡ **What positive influences do rituals have in your group?**
➡ **What difficulties are raised about following rituals in your group?**

7 Politics

The Choir aims to make a difference in the community, especially in the lives of women.

- The Choir is political when it works to rearrange power relations.

- By giving women and their stories voice, even in an apparently small way, it empowers them. The Choir shows women building community by getting together to achieve something broader than themselves, not in the service clubs or party politics usually associated with active citizenship, but in the ways and places that are possible for them. Members may not initially join to build community, but by staying and committing to the Choir they effectively 'sign on' to that goal.

- The Choir makes an interesting connection between the personal and the political. It performs in public spaces but there are also private times and relationships which support members to move into the public sphere of performance. Members may be attracted to public presentation when they join and (perhaps even without realising) they see the Choir as a way to make a public contribution.

- The Choir amplifies the extraordinary contributions and capabilities that are often taken for granted in the 'ordinary' activities of women when they get together. It reveals 'ordinary' women as competent community-builders and raisers of consciousness.

- The Choir repertoire is keenly debated to ensure it is meaningful, socially and politically: the Choir seeks songs that identify with difference.

- Sexual politics are important: particular care is taken with the wording of songs to reflect a feminist stance, or at least not to jar, (including healthy debate about feminism/s).

- Other choir 'identities' may be debated, for example whether it is middle-class. Each member has experiences or aspects of their identity that are relevant to their choir

experience (eg. mother, Italian, lesbian, worker), The freedom to move across identities is important to some women.

■ However, there are limits to the political expression within the Choir: it is not open-slather for all issues to be expressed in all forums. There must be a balance between solidarity and difference.

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION POINTS
> **How is your group creating a different opportunity for its members?**
> **How might that opportunity be making changes in the community?**
> **How explicit are political goals in your group?**
> **What identity do all members share and how free are they to express differing aspects of their identity?**

8 Means and Ends

There is an important tension between the overall goal (ends) of the Choir, ie. musical performance, and the ways it operates (means).

■ Excellence in musical performance has evolved as the Choir's overarching goal and it is the 'glue' that holds the group together, although, initially the goal was just to sing together, and to create a space for women to express themselves.

■ The Choir is not a women's self-help group but 'bonding' has always been important, both the musical bonding of singing and performing together and personal bonds made within the group. This bonding also helps achieve the goal of musical excellence, and audiences undoubtedly respond to the group's sense of solidarity.

■ If the main goal is seen as the foreground of the group, and the relationships that make musical excellence possible are seen as the background, we can see they are inter-related. There are also times when the main goal recedes into the background and the bonding is primary, so 'means' and 'ends' are in continually shifting balance.

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION POINTS
> **What is the balance in your group between the means and the ends?**
> **Has that changed over time?**
> **What individual needs does your group meet for its members?**
> **How does the group bonding help or hinder your group in achieving its goal?**

Two of the Choir's most significant policies (as at May 2006) are included for people's information as examples, if any one would like to see more policies the Choir would be happy to share them.

BWC Childcare Policy

Buddy Guidelines – for Existing Choir Members and New Choir Members

When there is a new intake of choir members a copy of these guidelines will be given to both new choir members and new buddies, in order to assist the new members in being informed, comfortable and welcome in the Choir.

- Preferably link up with a new choir member who lives close by, however this is not imperative.

- If there is sufficient notice, ring the person before the first practice and answer any questions, indicate what is necessary to bring on the first night, ie. water, highlight pen, pencil, blank tapes, warm clothes etc. Inform the new member of the practice location, and offer to give a lift if appropriate.

- Make sure you get to choir early on the first night if possible, so you can introduce yourself and assist in making the new choir member welcome to the Choir, answer any questions, introduce her to other members, show her the table of notices, where to sit, discuss what part she prefers to sing, explain the tape system, the supper roster etc.

- Exchange phone numbers and invite the new member to ring you if she is unsure or needs to discuss certain choir proceedings.

- Check if they have any questions about the introduction information booklet and updated repertoire which the member's group will give her on her first night.