

# Creating Out Loud: Peer-coaching for the arts & culture sector



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This report is available online at <https://creatingoutloud.business.uq.edu.au/>

To interrupt the flow of this report as little as possible, reference information appears at the end of the document and citations have been minimized.

This report includes links to various web material. All links were working at the time of publication. Please note however that these links may become outdated over time.

## Acknowledgements

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I hope and trust that the Creating Out Loud resources will prove useful to Australia’s arts and culture sector, helping to build new networks of mutual support that foster both creativity and wellbeing.

I encourage its use by artists and arts workers everywhere!

Kate Power

## Executive Summary

### Aims

Responding to the devastation wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic on Australia's arts and culture sector, this action research project developed a new peer coaching resource to support artists and arts organizations by

- facilitating networking and knowledge-sharing, and
- promoting strategic conversations about key issues affecting the sector.

Inspired by the widespread use of peer coaching in both business and higher education, Dr Kate Power of The University of Queensland Business School worked closely with industry partners representing diverse art forms to explore the applicability of peer coaching to Australia's arts and culture sector. This proceeded along three phases, conducted iteratively throughout the project.

1. **Phase One** involved surveying Australia's arts and culture sector about key issues facing the sector and what might be most valued in a peer coaching program.

In this phase, Dr Power collected data to inform the design of any new arts-specific peer coaching program.

2. **Phase Two** involved testing an existing peer coaching program known as "Working Out Loud" (<https://www.workingoutloud.com/>) with arts sector partners.

Designed for business, Working Out Loud has been used extensively around the globe, but had not previously been evaluated for use with artists and/or arts managers.

In this phase, Dr Power evaluated the acceptability of Working Out Loud for the arts.

3. **Phase Three** involved co-designing with industry partners a new peer coaching program, known as "Creating Out Loud."

In this phase, Dr Power also measured the acceptability, feasibility, impact, and sustainability of Creating Out Loud.

### Timeline

This 18-month research project began in January 2021 and concluded in June 2022.

- Needs Assessment Survey opened in April 2021 and remained open throughout 2021.
- Working Out Loud Circles were held between March – August 2021.
- Creating Out Loud Circles were held between August 2021 and May 2022.

### Peer coaching

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Peer coaching involves  
"a focused relationship  
between individuals  
of equal status  
who support each other's  
personal and professional  
development goals"

Parker et al. (2020)  
*Peer Coaching at Work*

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Traditional mentoring has long been a central pillar of professional development within the arts. However, it can be difficult to access, particularly when resources are limited.

Peer coaching offers a low-cost, high impact, sustainable alternative that has been shown to build competence, agility, and self-efficacy across diverse cohorts.

Like traditional mentoring, peer coaching can be dyadic, when two people of roughly equal professional status agree to support one another's personal and/or professional goals.

Peer coaching can also take place in small groups, typically known as 'circles.' For example, the Working Out Loud program is reportedly run in both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations in over 60 countries.

## Creating Out Loud

The Creating Out Loud program is a suite of Discussion Guides, which are freely available for download from the project website.

These Discussion Guides are designed for use by independent artists, small-to-medium and large arts organizations, and peak bodies.

Participants can choose between

- a **“topic-based” program**, which addresses key issues affecting the arts and culture sector (see Figure 1 below), and
- a **“goal-focused” approach**, which supports participants in bringing their own questions, issues and/or challenges to the circle for input from fellow circle members.

These resources may be used alone or in combination.

- Some circles may wish to begin with the Topic-Based program, then follow up with Goal-Focused meetings.
- Others may wish to alternate between Topic-Based and Goal-Focused sessions.

Participants may also select just those Topic-Based Discussion Guides that suit their needs and interests.

*Figure 1: Key issues facing Australia’s arts and culture sector*



All resources have been tested with artists and arts managers, representing the diversity of Australia’s arts and culture sector.

### Four overarching resources support the Creating Out Loud program:

1. **Overview** provides background information about peer coaching, and describes the Creating Out Loud program.
2. **Working Agreements for Courageous Conversations** is designed for use with both the Topic-Based and Goal-Focused programs. As the first of two “circle formation” guides, it helps lay the foundation for effective mutual support.
3. **Building Community** is also designed for use with both the Topic-Based and Goal-Focused approaches. As the second of two “circle formation” guides, it helps circle members reflect on their goals and begin to get to know one another.
4. **Facilitator Guide** describes the “self-” or “co-facilitation” process used in Creating Out Loud. It includes some tips for first-time facilitators and refresher points for people with experience facilitating small groups.

### The Topic-Based program includes seven Discussion Guides:

1. **Working Agreements for Courageous Conversations**
2. **Building Community**
3. **Communicating Value**
4. **Sustainability**
5. **Coping with Uncertainty**
6. **Alternative Business Models**
7. **The Future of Artistic Practice**

### The Goal-Focused program uses one Discussion Guide:

1. **Working Agreements for Courageous Conversations**
2. **Building Community**
3. **The Council model** outlines a process for bringing issues to the circle for input. After establishing a Working Agreement and Building Community, Goal-Focused Circles use this same Discussion Guide for every meeting.

## Innovative features of this project

This project has developed the first theoretically-informed and empirically-tested approach to giving and receiving peer support within the arts and culture sector.

It involved participatory action research with artists and arts support workers in both large and small-to-medium arts companies, as well as independent artists representing diverse art forms, around Australia.

The Creating Out Loud program delivered by this project was developed and tested in close collaboration with Industry Partners.



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Dr Power's Creating Out Loud program is an important tool designed to support artists and arts workers to rebuild connections, have focused discussions, and to learn from each other in a well-structured and supported format.

It is sustainable, industry-based and industry-tested. It recognises and respectfully incorporates First Nations cultural perspectives, and promotes and supports diversity, equity and diverse representation. We highly commend this program.

Nicole Beyer, Executive Director, Theatre Network Australia

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## Major findings

### This study shows that

**1. Creating Out Loud is impactful for the arts and culture sector.**

Most participants (91%) either agreed or strongly agreed that Creating Out Loud is impactful for the arts and culture sector.

**2. Creating Out Loud is supportive for the arts and culture sector.**

Most respondents (88%) either agreed or strongly agreed that Creating Out Loud is supportive for the arts and culture sector.

**3. Creating Out Loud contributed to positive outcomes for participants.**

Key outcomes for participants included positive developments in:

- Social capital (91%)
- Adaptability (86%)
- Positivity & confidence (82%)
- Future proofing practice (76%)
- Resourcefulness (72%)
- Networking (68%)
- Collaboration & innovation (63%)
- Business acumen (57%)

**4. Creating Out Loud participants intend to participate in peer coaching in future.**

More than three quarters (77%) of all participants indicate an intention to join or recommend a peer coaching circle in future.

**5. Creating Out Loud can be successfully delivered both in-person and online.**

Most of the peer coaching circles in this research took place online, with participants using ZOOM to connect with colleagues.

Two circles were run chiefly in-person, with an online option for participants who were working from home, unwell, or otherwise unable to attend in person.

While participants across both modes valued in-person connections, they also appreciated

that online delivery enabled new connections with people outside their usual networks.

**6. Creating Out Loud can be used successfully with both artists and arts administrators.**

Most of the peer coaching circles in this research were mixed groups that brought together artists and arts administrators. Participants in these circles repeatedly appreciated the opportunity to learn about different perspectives in the sector.

Two circles involved arts administrators with highly specific job types, who are often working alone and can feel isolated within their organization. These participants appreciated connecting with others who share their concerns and can help address highly specific work-related challenges.

**7. Creating Out Loud is valued across all career stages.**

No statistically significant differences were found in the responses from early-, mid- or senior-career participants.

**8. Creating Out Loud works well in Queensland and nationwide.**

Three of the peer-coaching circles in this research were based solely in Queensland, and one further circle had a majority of Queensland-based members.

The remaining groups included participants from around Australia, some of which also included Queensland-based participants.

**9. Creating Out Loud is applicable for people working in the performing and visual arts.**

Most of the peer coaching circles in this research involved participants representing diverse performing art forms. One circle also included only visual artists.

**10. Creating Out Loud is applicable for people working in diverse organization types.**

Most of the peer coaching circles in this research brought together participants from diverse organization types, including independent artists. Two 'in-house' circles were also run.

**11. Creating Out Loud Topic-Based Discussion Guides address key issues facing the arts and culture sector.**

Our Needs Assessment Survey found that arts and culture sector workers are interested in discussing numerous topics.

We selected five of the most popular topics for inclusion in the Creating Out Loud program:

- Communicating the value of the arts
- Improving sustainability
- New/alternative business models
- The future of artistic practice
- Mental health

**12. Participants responded positively to both the Topic-based and Goal-focused programs.**

This research found that the Topic-based program was well-received by most participants. However, a small number of participants had expected something closer to “peer-coaching” than “peer-learning.”

The Goal-focused Discussion Guide was added in response to this feedback, and met with positive evaluations.

**13. Voluntary participation and carefully curated group membership are both essential components of Creating Out Loud peer-coaching.**

Of the 21 peer-coaching circles in this research (4x Working Out Loud; 17x Creating Out Loud), only one in-house (Working Out Loud) circle was discontinued due to a lack of commitment by participants.

Follow-up interviews with this company confirm findings from previous research, that

- participation in peer-coaching must be voluntary; and
- peer-coaching circles whose participants bring pre-existing conflict and mistrust to the group are unlikely to work.

**14. Goal-setting is not an essential component of the Creating Out Loud program.**

Peer coaching is typically defined as a people at roughly similar career stages coming together to provide mutual support in the pursuit of personal and/or professional goals.

In this research, however, goal-setting was not seen as a critically important element of Creating Out Loud peer coaching.

**15. Most participants in both the Topic-based and Goal-focused programs valued the invitation to set a personal or professional goal at the state of the program, but found that**

- they did not have a clear goal in mind at the start of the program, other than expanding their network across the sector
- their goal(s) emerged, or changed, during the program, and/or
- they valued setting smaller session-by-session goals, supported by the gentle accountability of being asked about those goals at a subsequent session.

**16. National peak bodies are well placed to host the Creating Out Loud program.**

Given its expansive network, connection to diverse artists and arts workers, credibility within the sector, and level of resources, Theatre Network Australia was ideally positioned to host Creating Out Loud.

As a smaller and much less well-resourced organization, Arts Nexus proved unable to host Creating Out Loud, as originally planned – despite having a strong interest in doing so.

**17. Notwithstanding its more generic content, the Working Out Loud program was also evaluated favourably, when delivered by an facilitator with knowledge of the arts and culture sector.**



## Recommendations

This research reveals a strong positive response to the Creating Out Loud program amongst artists and arts administrators around Australia,

We therefore recommend that it be adopted by the arts and culture sector in the following ways:

**1. All levels of government can make Creating Out Loud available to the artists and arts organizations within their purview.**

Federal, state and local governments offer various funding and professional development opportunities for artists. However, these are often oversubscribed and highly competitive.

With minimal investment, government agencies could facilitate mutually supportive relationships amongst unsuccessful applicants, by curating Creating Out Loud peer coaching circles.

By connecting artists and arts workers across different art forms, locations, and job and organisation types, government agencies could ensure that unsuccessful applicants still gain access to a valuable professional development opportunity.

**2. Peak bodies can make Creating Out Loud available to their constituencies.**

Industry bodies often provide training and networking opportunities, and they are well-placed to curate peer-coaching circles amongst their members.

Creating Out Loud provides a low-cost, high-impact program, which is suitable for use with people working in different art forms, locations, and job and organisation types.

By hosting Creating Out Loud peer-coaching circles, peak bodies can strengthen relationships amongst their members, thus promoting collaboration and furthering important discussions about the arts and culture sector.

**3. Arts and culture organizations can offer Creating Out Loud as an optional “in-house” opportunity for staff.**

Creating Out Loud can help to deepen relationships amongst artists and arts workers at all career levels.

It can work particularly well as a way to connect staff in different departments and/or teams within organizations, thus helping develop greater appreciation for colleagues' goals and pressure points.

New Executive and/or Artistic Directors could also use Creating Out Loud as a way to get to know key leaders within their organization.

When using Creating Out Loud “in-house,”

- participation can be encouraged, but must be voluntary (including having the option to leave a circle mid-program).
- time spent in peer-coaching sessions should be valued by senior leadership.
- staff should be afforded time to participate, during working hours.
- all efforts should be made to avoid scheduling conflicts that prevent regular participation.
- circle membership should be curated in ways that build trust, foster mutual respect, and avoid importing pre-existing conflict into the circle.
- smaller organizations may need to host smaller peer-coaching circles.

**4. Individual artists can use the Creating Out Loud program materials within their own networks.**

Creating Out Loud circles can work something like a book club, where individuals invite friends and associates to meet together for interesting discussions.

**5. Creating Out Loud Topic-based and Goal-focused programs can be used alone, or in combination.**

The Topic-based Discussion Guides offer a 6 or 7 session program.

Participants looking for a longer program (e.g., 12 weeks), could

- begin by completing the full Topic-based program, then follow up with any number of Goal-focused sessions, or
- alternate between Topic-based and Goal-focused sessions.

**6. The existing Creating Out Loud Discussion Guide Library could be expanded.**

Further Topic-based Discussion Guides can be developed in collaboration with relevant Industry Partners, providing more opportunities for artists and arts workers to explore the key topic areas identified in this research.

Our Needs Assessment Survey shows priority discussion topics (in order) are:

- Collaborating outside the box
- Increasing diversity and equity across the sector
- Networking beyond the sector
- First Nations arts and cultural practices.

**7. Further research could help identify more clearly the peer support needs and preferences of First Nations and other minority groups.**

This research sought to include the perspectives of First Nations arts and culture workers, as well as regional and remote artists, artists for whom English is an additional language, and artists living with disability.

However, these cohorts were not prominently represented in this study and we did not run any circles that included only artists or arts workers from those demographics.

**8. Further research could explore the applicability of Creating Out Loud to other parts of the arts and culture sector.**

This research focused on the performing arts. While some visual artists did take part, further research could fruitfully explore the use of Creating Out Loud in other parts of the arts and culture sector, including visual arts and the museum and gallery sector.

**9. Further research could explore the use of Creating Out Loud in other locations.**

Creating Out Loud has been used successfully to connect artists and arts workers around Australia.

Further research could explore its use

- in regional and remote Australian locations, including the Northern Territory and Australian Capital Territory, neither of which were included in the present study.
- Internationally, amongst artists in other countries, but also connecting Australian artists with their peers around the world.

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There is an urgency for these sorts of meetings. There is an urgency for cross collaboration between the arts. There is a necessity for us all to be able to speak on a regular basis.

It's elevated every single one of us. And it's made us all feel more powerful, more creative, more valued than what I had anticipated.

It should be annual. It should be part of our yearly arts practice.

Malia Walsh, Producer,  
CircusTrick Tease

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