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Cork Life Centre with

Community-Based Participatory Research Module, UCC (PG6025)



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2023

Cork Life Centre



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh



COMMUNITY - ACADEMIC
RESEARCH LINKS
University College Cork, Ireland

Establishing the Partnership with Cork Life Centre

Community-based Participatory Research (PG6025) is a module for PhD students in UCC coordinated by Ruth Hally (RH), Catherine O'Mahony (COM) and Kenneth Burns (KB). There is a different community partner each year as well as different PhD students. In 2023, 10 PhD students took part from disciplines including psychology, environmental science, social policy, and medicine.

In 2022, the community partner for this module was Cork Life Centre. It was an experience enjoyed by, and of benefit to, both the UCC and Cork Life Centre (CLC) participants. When looking back at the partnership, it was obvious that there were further areas worthy of exploration. The module coordinators visited Rachel Lucey (Deputy Director) and Don O'Leary (Director) to explore the idea of coming together for a second successive year and we decided to another project for 2023. Rachel invited recent graduates from the Cork Life Centre to participate in the module and seven students agreed to take part. Rachel also participated. UCC provided research ethics approval for the study.



Rachel and Ruth agreed it would work best if we met in a neutral, community setting. That place was **The Rock Community Centre** on Blarney Street, Cork City.

What was the question Cork Life Centre wanted to explore?

When the module coordinators met with Rachel and Don, they spoke about one topic that really stood out from the 2022 collaboration: past CLC students wanted to connect with (or give back to) new and current CLC students. This was also phrased as: if I could speak to me younger self, what would I say? The idea was that students who have graduated from CLC, have valuable perspectives, experience and general knowledge that could help the students currently attending CLC and perhaps going through some of the same challenges. So, in the first meeting together, Rachel presented this question to the group and explained where it had emerged from:

How can past Cork Life Centre students support new and existing students?

To make sure the needs of the Cork Life Centre group (who were giving their time voluntarily and very uncertain what this collaboration was all about) were met, we had an open conversation covering questions such as:

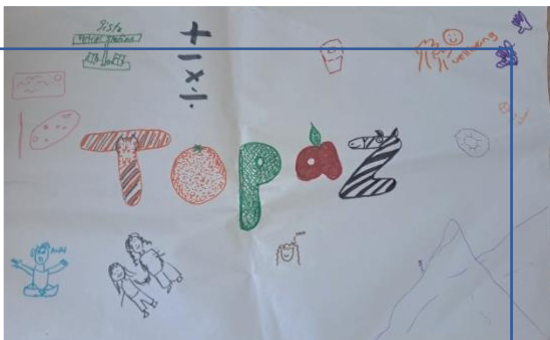
- *Is this our question?*
- Do you think this question is worth exploring?
- Is there a different question you would like to explore instead or as well?

Most likely because it was the first session and many of the CLC group were placing their trust in the process, the group were happy to proceed with this guiding question. It was also agreed to be open-minded to other questions if they were to crop up during the partnership. The group would be reminded of this question (how can past Cork Life Centre students support new and existing students?) regularly and all activities would be planned around this guiding question.

And So We Begin...

Ice-breakers

In our earlier sessions, ice-breaker exercises were used to get to know each other. The first ice-breaker exercises focused on learning each other's names and finding out about each other's hobbies and interests. Follow-up ice-breakers reinforced the importance of our names and interests. For example, after learning a bit about each other the group was challenged to write something on everyone's sheet (where they had written their name):



What do you recall about Topaz?



What did Rachel say last week?



What is Ryan interested in?

Community Session 1

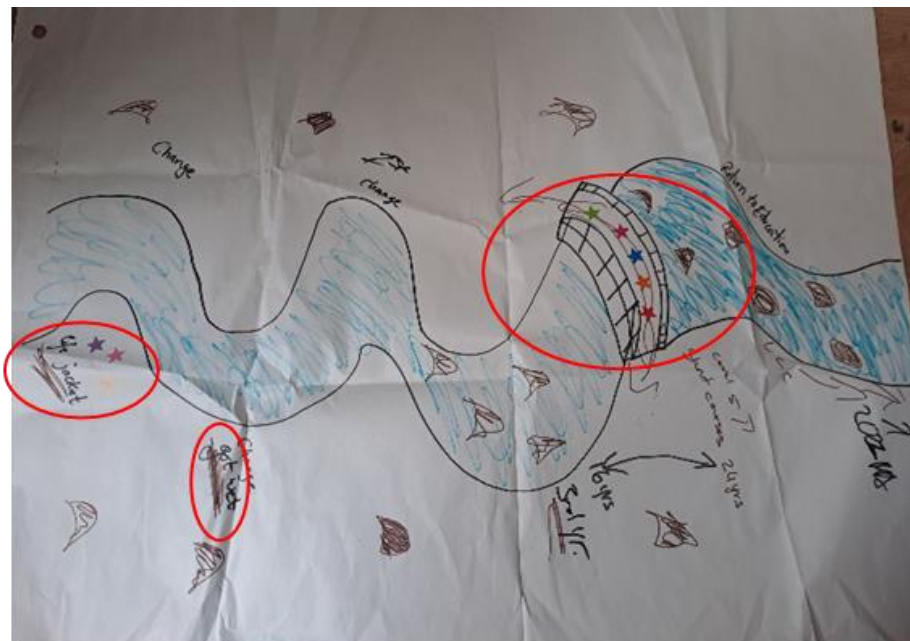
Once the ice was satisfactorily broken, the main activity is introduced. Activities (or methods) were carefully chosen for their potential to create focused discussions (or generate 'data') among the group. As mentioned, the PhD students spend a significant amount of their on-campus time planning the community-based sessions. The idea of '**The Educational River**' was proposed to get people talking and sharing in a non-confrontational way. Arts-based methods were frequently used in this partnership because they give people the time and space to share their stories in a way that respects their individual comfort levels. The below table provides an outline of 'The Educational River' exercise.

Storytelling - The Education River
1: In groups of four, each person draws a river. The river represents your educational journey and should include bends. Add pictures and words next to the river at each bend in the river. 2: Discuss in groups of two (one UCC and one Cork Life Centre) about your educational journey. Take turns to ask each other about the river and its various twists and turns. What do the various kinks and bends represent? What helped you move through these bends? What kind of boat were you in: did it take on water at times? Did you get wet? Did you have a life jacket? How fast was the water flowing and could you control how you moved down the river? Chat about these and begin capturing these stories as images or words on the river drawing. 3: For Cork Life Centre students, put the Cork Life Centre somewhere on the river and talk about its significance in your education journey. 4: Share your poster with the wider group of four. 5: Each table to show the room the drawings of their four rivers. Share the main messages (similarities and differences) about all of our educational journeys.

Here are some examples of the Education Rivers students created:



Liam's Education River featured a boat to symbolise Meitheal Meara who provide opportunities for CLC students, and the iconic front (red) door of CLC.



Arhonda recalled that she had a life jacket in the early years but that didn't last and soon she 'got wet' and had to get off the river (the bridge) before returning to education at a later stage.

This exercise was important because it helped to break down barriers between the two partner groups. In sharing individual educational journeys, it became evident that much of the group experienced bumps along the way; that education, much like a river, was not a straightforward route.

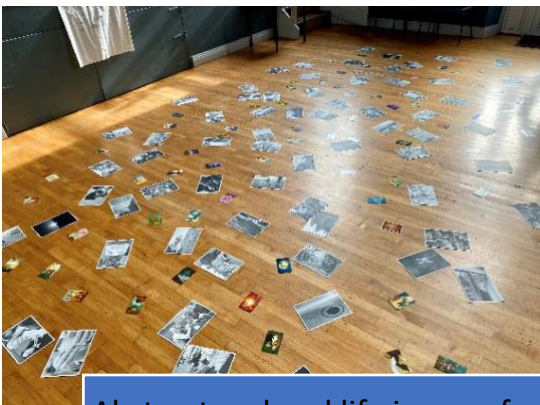
Community Session 2

In the next session, Photo-Voice was introduced. Photo-Voice is defined as:

...a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique. As a practice based in the production of knowledge, photovoice has three main goals: (1) to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussion of photographs, and (3) to reach policymakers”

(Wang and Burris, 1997)

A selection of abstract and real-life images were placed across the floor in The Rock Community Centre. For the first step everybody was asked to select one image that, in their eyes, represented Cork. In turn, every one outlined why they chose their image / how the image resonated with them. For the second step, Cork Life Centre participants were asked to select three images which represented their experience at the Cork Life Centre.



Abstract and real life images for participants to choose from



Rachel discussing the image that represents 'Cork' for her

In groups comprised of UCC and CLC individuals, the CLC participants explained why they chose their images. In doing so, they:

- Provided personal accounts of their experience in Cork Life Centre
- Named specific events/milestones that were significant to them

In their groups, notes were taken, illustrations drawn, and connections made across the images – see examples below of the Photo-Voice sheets from Liam and Darcy:

In contrast, the word cloud below captures how they felt about CLC and their individual experience as students of the centre:



Community Session 3

Following a fun ice-breaker, the UCC students shared something that had been troubling them. Stephanie and Orla told the wider group that the UCC students were feeling a little uncomfortable due to perceived power imbalances largely owing to the UCC participants significantly outnumbering the CLC partners (especially at the sessions where some CLC participants couldn't attend). The UCC students wanted to check in with the CLC students to ask whether they were comfortable with the tasks and openly sharing etc. Not all CLC students could attend session three so it was agreed that this check-in would be repeated in two weeks.

The messages captured by CLC participants at the previous session (based on the Photo-Voice exercise) were revisited and participants gathered into the same groups. UCC students opened this exercise based on a task that had been assigned:

For March 10th, bring an image that connects with/made you think about what your group discussed at the last meeting with CLC students. You will be adding something from your own life/educational story but it will be within the context of your group's main discussion points.

Opening the session this way, with the spotlight on UCC students, was done consciously so that CLC participants were not alone in sharing. It helped to forge trust and ease the group into the main discussion. From here, participants dived into the main ideas and themes recorded on the previous session's sheets. Some groups ploughed ahead and began to identify actions or projects that would bring to life some of the ideas reflected in the sheets. Other groups stayed in the

feelings and rationale for the ideas and thoughts recorded and made a conscious decision not to jump to actions.



Again, the groups provided feedback and it was clear that there were some common key themes emerging. Questions, words and ideas that held significance for Cork Life Centre past students included:

“Informal opportunities to hang out”

“A peer system like the big brother, big sister”

“Formalise (past students’ engagement with) existing events like the Edmund Rice festival and the Christmas Fair”

“A graduate showcase” (music, theatre, poetry etc)

“...like a reunion!”

For Rachel, a recurring theme kept bubbling up for her throughout the process. From experience she knew that past students wanted to engage with the CLC, but in different ways. For example:

‘Pace’ and ‘keep asking’ – providing students with the chance to engage when they’re ready, at a pace that suits them. But Keep asking, even if they say no to one thing, the pattern shows that there is a point in time where they do want to engage or a particular opportunity that appeals to them.

‘Variety of interests’ – not all students want to volunteer as teachers, for example. So, how can CLC provide a variety of opportunities for past students to engage with that are reflective of their interests?

Rachel also felt conflicted with regards to the best way to communicate with past students and this challenge was openly discussed with the wider group.

Community Session 4: Answering the question and a few ways forward

Stephanie and Orla reiterated the concern in relation to power imbalance and asked the CLC group if there were comfortable with the process so far. The CLC participants assured the group that they were comfortable and indicated that they would speak up if they felt things were not fair. This was our last session together and energy was directed to organising the ideas and topics that

were repeatedly mentioned in the previous sessions. A thematic analysis of sorts was used to establish seven key headings.

These are:

1. Mentorship
2. Reunion
3. Communication
4. Events
5. Activism
6. Board Members
7. Drop-in Sessions for Former Students (Alumni)

Each of these seven headings was written on a large sheet of paper and displayed around the room. The sheets used to develop the seven themes are included below and provide a much more colourful account of the rich conversations and ideas. Everyone was invited to move around the room and add to the different sheets, answering two questions:

1. What (...will this look like)? and
2. Who (...has responsibility for this)?

In doing so, the group was able to establish how feasible each theme was, and it was clear which ideas people were most interested in bringing forward.

What is important to the CLC for the Future?

Themes	Summary	Responsibility*
1. Mentorship	How can I help younger students who may be finding it tough? Like a big brother – big sister thing. A buddy system. Play music together – get away from the study. Put on a music or arts showcase with your buddy.	CLC Students with support from RL.
2. Reunion	A fun, social, informal event. e.g., a quiz. Run it every 3 to 5 years at the CLC. A space to celebrate and share achievements. Invite former students and CLC staff.	CLC Students with support from staff.
3. Communication	Establish an effective and efficient way to communicate with past students. Ask leaving certificate students to opt. In for communications before leaving CLC Develop a list serve to house all contacts and use this to communicate.	KB to set up RL to operate RL might seek support from an interested past student
4. Events	The Christmas Fair and the Edmund Rice Week naturally attract past students. How do CLC make the most of this without messing with what is already working? Events that celebrate music and drama to connect past and present students. Leadership Programmes/courses	*
5. Activism	Start a website/blog to capture achievements, challenges, profiles of students, tell the story of pre-CLC to now. Provide life skills and advice such as finances	CLC students with support from UCC staff and students, and CLC staff.
6. Board Members (Committee)	A committee for graduates to connect with each other and give back to CLC. Not involving CLC staff. Provide a forum for past students to 'take initiative'. Allocate different roles and focus on e.g., 1 project per year.	CLC Students with initial support from PG6025 UCC participants
7. Alumni Drop-in Sessions	An informal space for alumni to drop in to the CLC once per month. A cup of tea and a chat. Different thing going on in different rooms e.g., music in one room.	*

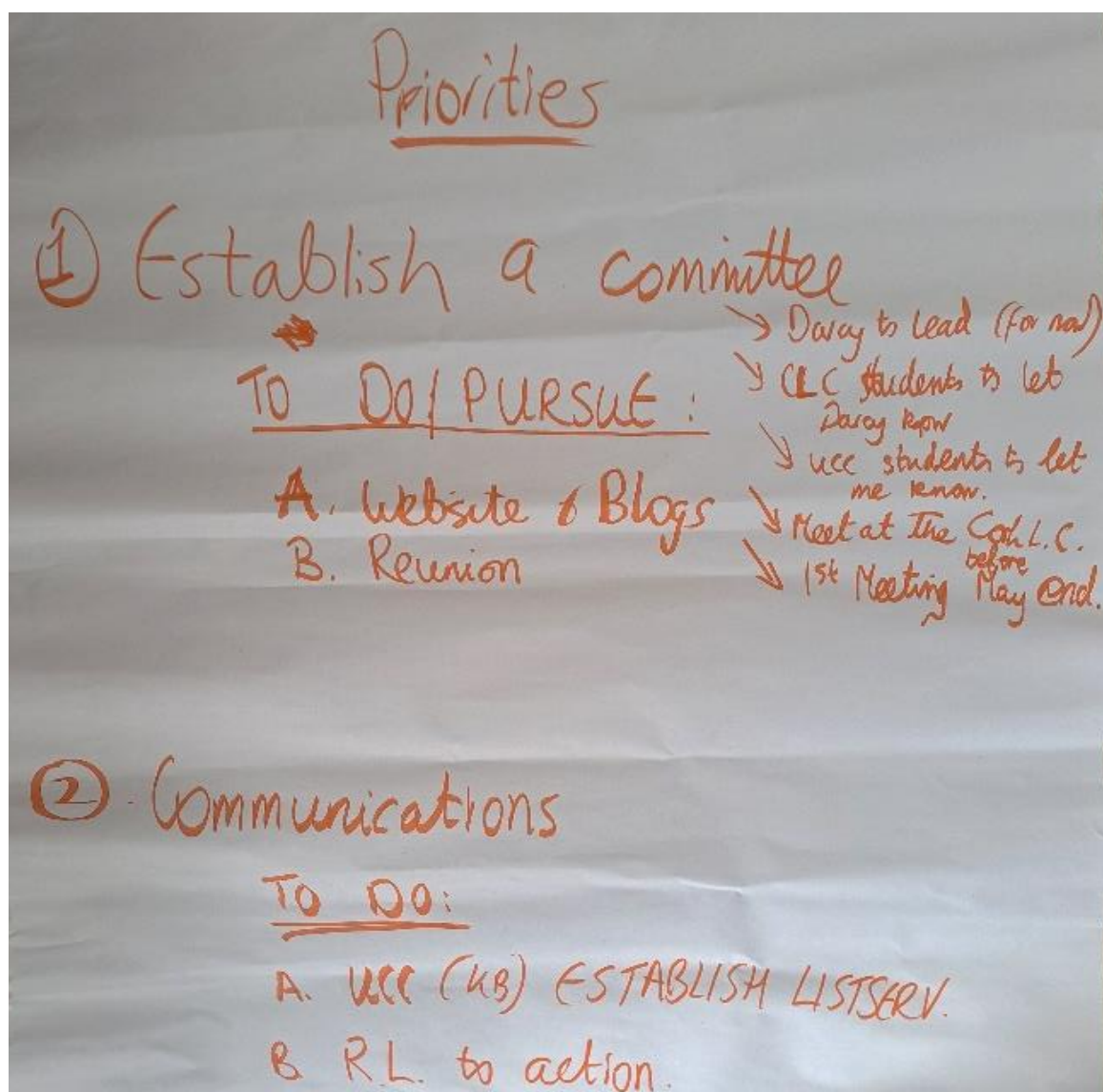
(*It was later determined the newly formed committee would take responsibility for many of the themes)

Towards the end of our final session, the seven themes were distilled into two top priorities;

1. Committee
2. Communication

The other five themes were collapsed into the committee theme with the idea being that the committee (when formed) would decide if, when and how to pursue a, for example, a reunion. The group agreed to meet again in early summer 2023 to formalise the writing of this report and to establish the next steps (e.g., formalising a committee).

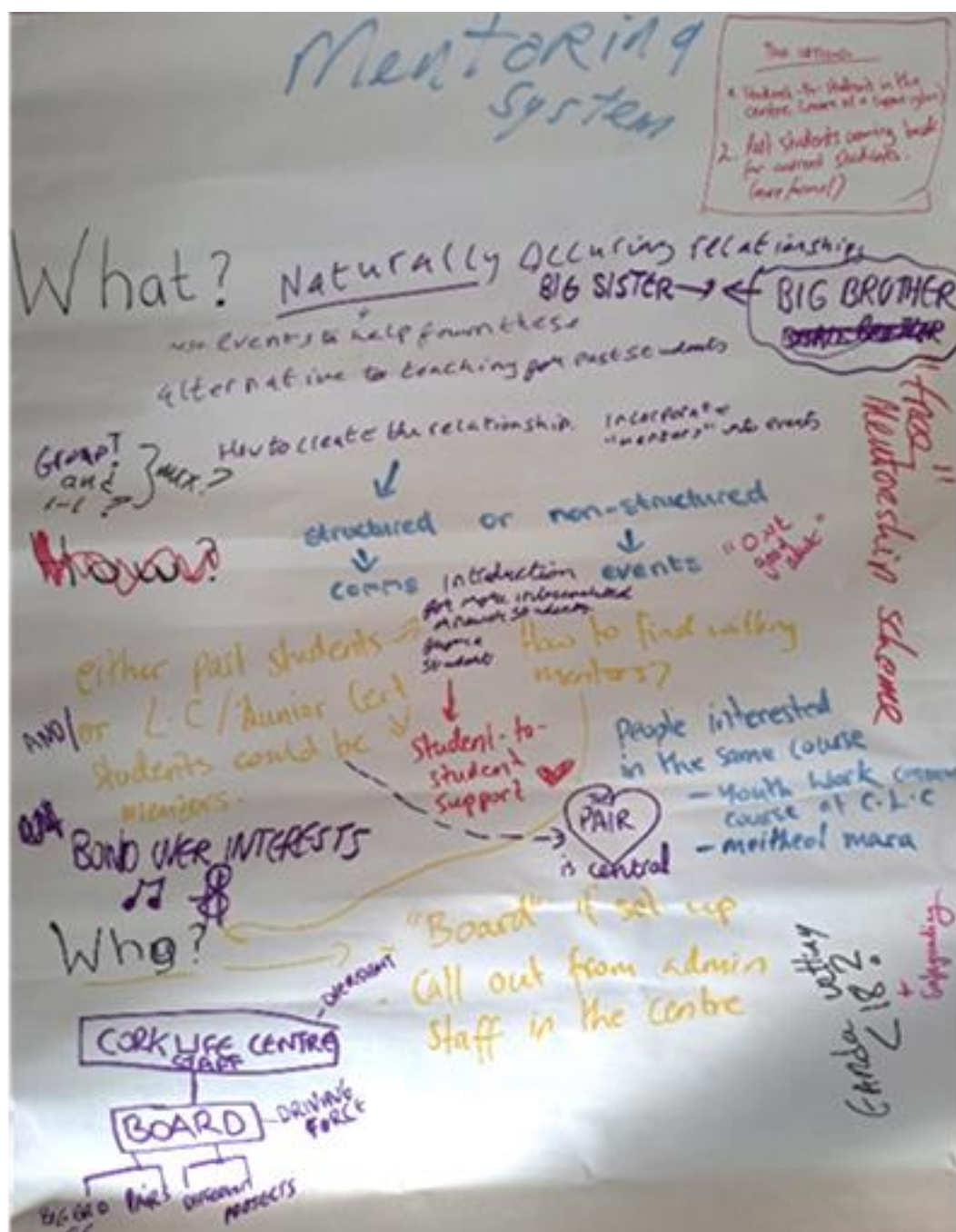
Top two priorities



As a final activity, each person was asked to put forward one song that represented this process (the collaboration between CLC and UCC) for them. Angela then created a playlist on Spotify and shared it with the wider group. The playlist serves as a memory of our time spent together and what we achieved but it was also a fun activity to discover each other's quirks and interests.

Ideas, notes and background for the seven top themes

1. Mentorship



2. Reunion

Reunion

What? 3-5 years (4 groups)

Once off event

→ Run it every 5 years.

Staff + students
(inc. past staff)

Space to share achievements.

~~What?~~

VENUE?

= CLC

"Chilled" + informal

Keep short-timeline 3 months

Opportunity + Connection

CATCH / THEME / HOOK

Coming to look at something?

Quiz? Reason to interact?

Baby Pictures

"Fun/Week"

Build your database

Who?

~~Staff + Stu~~

- Mix staff + students
- Past CLC students + family.

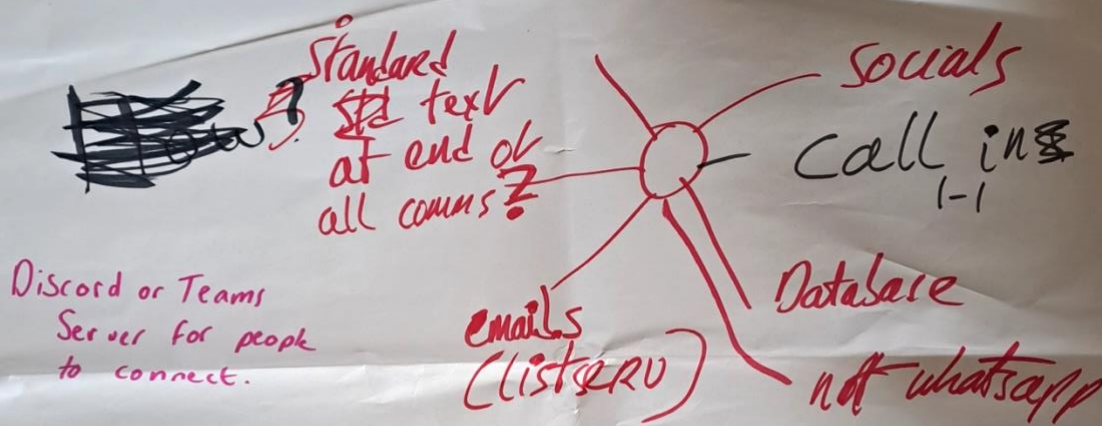
Showcase here?

3. Communication

Communication

What?

- Different comm methods
- Ask leaving year students to opt in to comm list (emails)



Who? - Life Centre

past pupils

Link in With Committee for organisation.

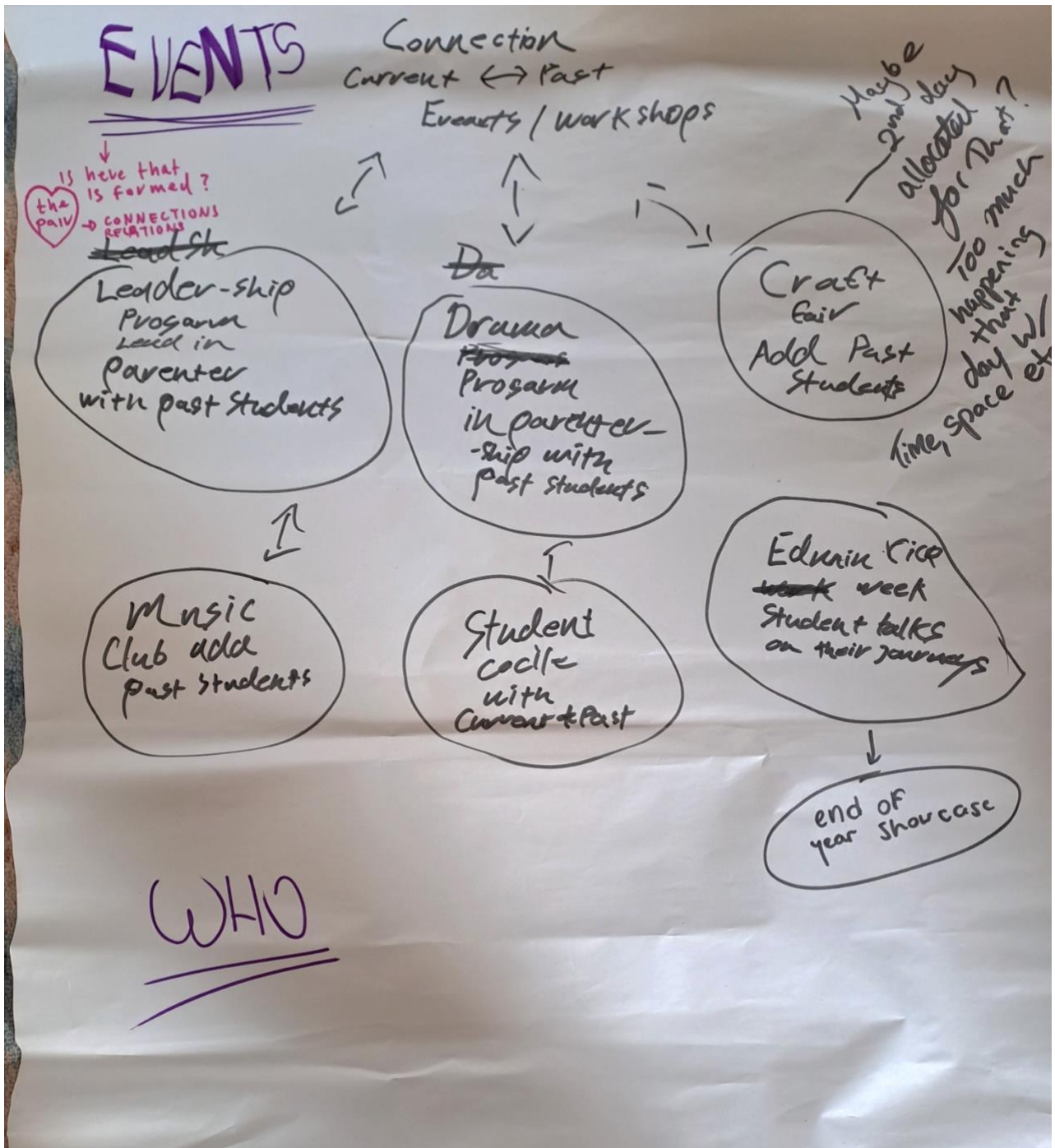
One of the roles could be "comms manager"

"place for stories" + activism

Multiple users on (comms) (Share the load)

Podcast
Blog / vlog

4. Events



5. Activism

Activism

What?

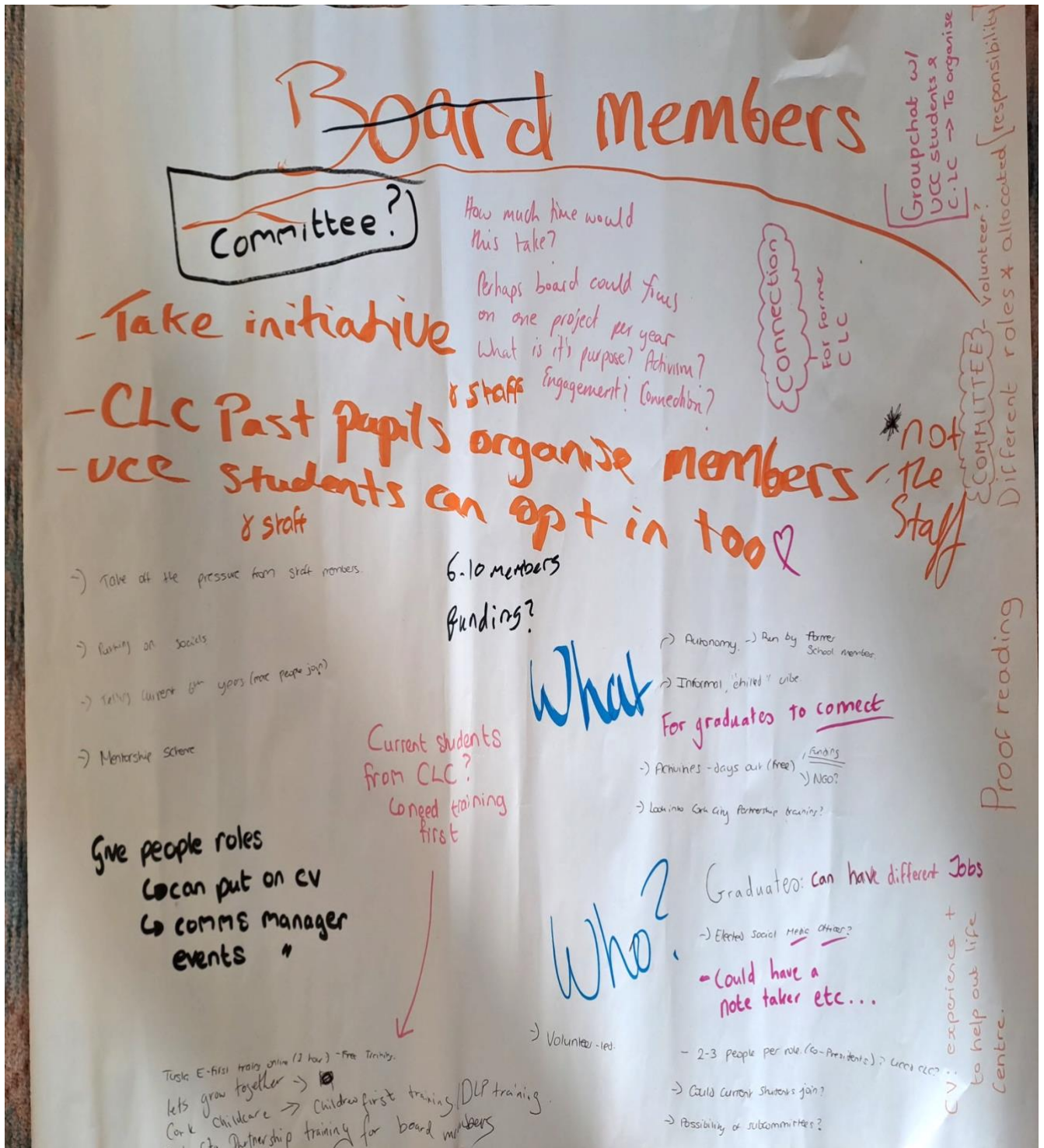
- **Website:** blogs, achievements, Videos, barriers - Educational department / financial Resources
 - ↳ Positive experiences
 - ↳ Pictures reflections on what CLC would have given
 - ↳ Profiles of students
 - ↳ Sailing
 - ↳ Speeches
 - ↳ Personal achievements
 - ↳ Music, art
- ↳ could this be hosted via U.C.C? CLC?
 - ↳ hosted by UCC, promoted by C.L.C
- ↳ or social Media Profiles
- ↳ RSS feed - link to twitter #

WHO?

- Past C.L.C students x UCC students, UCC staff, current students, Staff
 - ↳ interest in tech
 - ↳ put on CV
 - ↳ link in with UCC
- (esp KR!)
- Anyone who's had an experience w/ C.L.C
- Mix
 - ↳ Paid sub domain + server
- Square space to make website

who you were CLC -> to now (journeys)

6. Board Members (later became Committee)



7. Drop-in Sessions for Former Students (Alumni)

ALUMNI DROP-IN SESSION.

WHAT?

- Cup of tea and a chat - often underestimated!
- Could lead to informal mentorship
- ↳ a space to meet / share experiences.

↳ A place to share with each other (skills, accomplishments etc...) in the Cork life centre.

An informal space for alumni to "drop in" at a set time every month. If someone needs a place to go after graduating they know there's a set time / place every month.

- An opportunity to get guidance through connection after leaving C.L.C
- Support between alumni.

- Different things going on in different rooms. For example, a room for music.

- Could be just alumni @ current students.

WHO?

* Link in with the committee → planning etc...

- Who will run this?
- What space will be used?
- Use comms page for ideas (publicity)
- Frequency?
- Is this a lot of work?
- Trial it / volunteers

Is this an "easy" way to create/find mentors?
Recruitment of mentors?