

A how-to resource
written by Chloe Cooper

ARTIST PEER SUPPORT GROUPS

New Contemporaries

HIYA!

My name's Chloe. I'm an artist, educator and massive fan of artists getting together to support one another.

This how-to resource is for artists who are interested in meeting regularly to give and receive critical feedback, share reference points, ask questions, discuss issues in contemporary art practice and support one another's artistic endeavours.

It's based on my experiences of being a member and initiator of peer support groups as well as a facilitator delivering peer mentoring workshops for Artquest and New Contemporaries.

It starts off with the "what", then the "how", then the "who" and the "where" and "when" pop up in the middle too.

Happy peer supporting!

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WHAT IS A PEER SUPPORT GROUP?

Here's a
definition by
[Artquest](#)

A peer support group is a group of practitioners who meet regularly to discuss:

- ★ Their practices
- ★ The state of their careers
- ★ Other professional or cultural developments

Peer support groups are an opportunity for artists to:

- ★ Gain feedback on their work
- ★ Learn more about their own interests and ways of working as well as the work and perspectives of others
- ★ Develop skills in reading and talking about artwork
- ★ Think about the display or wider context for their work

For me, they've been a lifeline when my practice looked dead and buried, a positive pressure to actually stick with art when life's been tough and a bottomless pool within which to share ideas, resources and opportunities.

Looking back, what I wanted out of being in a peer support group was a genuine reaction to the work I was making, a group of people who I could trust and learn from and advice on how to be an artist. I didn't realise it but I actually had lots to give too: years of asking similar questions, a commitment to artistic practice and enthusiasm for trying to solve other people's problems.

Take a moment to think about your life as an artist right now. What do you need? What can you give? Write a list for both.

I NEED	I CAN GIVE

This list should give you a clue as to the best way to structure your meetings so that you can get* what you want out of it...

*and give!

WHO DO YOU NEED FOR YOUR PEER SUPPORT GROUP?

When putting a group together it could be useful to consider what is the glue that holds you together. It could be that you share...

LOCATION

Like a studio block, or a specific neighbourhood

MEDIUM

Like performance art or photography that has specific processes, challenges and network/“scene”

IDENTITY

Like ethnicity, cultural heritage, gender identity, sexuality, class, ability, age or religion

NOTHING?!

Maybe you want to create a symbiotic community of artists, curators, critics and collectors. Maybe you just want it to be your friends

(WARNING! DON'T GET TOO COMFORTABLE!!!)

A note on where to find people you might want to be in a peer support group with... How about:

- ★ Putting a call out on social media
- ★ Asking friends to recommend people
- ★ Finding online artist feedback sessions run by art spaces like [Turf](#) and groups like [The Other MA](#) (TOMA)
- ★ Joining an evening class

...and how to invite them when you do...

- ★ Explain your peer support group in 3 lines max.
- ★ Make it clear why you're inviting them (complement them!) and what you're asking them to commit to.
- ★ Give them a deadline to reply if you want to be able to move on...

HOW DO YOU STRUCTURE A PEER SUPPORT GROUP?

*Here are
three different formats to try.
Feel free to mix and match to get
your perfect combination of ways
of being together.*

1. WEEKNIGHT

7-7.30pm

Update each other on what's happened since you last saw each other

7.30-8.10pm

One person shares work and gets feedback

8.10-8.15pm

Break

8.15-8.55pm

Another person shares work and gets feedback

8.55-9pm

Decide on a date for the next meeting and who will share

2. WEEKEND

10-10.30am

Eat breakfast together and catch up

10.30-11am

Silent looking at one piece of work from each person and note taking

11-11.15am

Dancing

11.15-12.30pm

Talking and reflecting on what you've seen

12.30-1pm

Checking out, including a recognition of how everyone's feeling

3. WEEKEND EVENING

6–7pm

Everyone shares something new they've tried this month (*anything as long as it's something you're interested in and are willing to share*).

7–7.10pm

Break for eating and chatting

7.10–8.10pm

15 min slots for people to try out an idea, start a discussion, ask for advice on a specific problem etc.

8.10–8.20pm

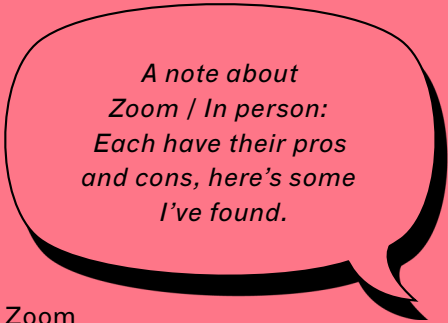
Break for eating and chatting

8.20–9.20pm

Two 30-minute slots to receive feedback on new work

9.20–9.30pm

Eating, chatting and saying goodbye



A note about Zoom / In person: Each have their pros and cons, here's some I've found.

Zoom

Pros:

- ★ More accessible to those with caring responsibilities, mobility issues and in different locations.
- ★ Less commitment and pressure to show a lot of work.
- ★ Offers closed captioning options.

Cons:

- ★ Access to stable wifi, screen-fatigue and loss of concentration.
- ★ Loss of detail/inability to conceive of sculptural/ textural qualities.

In person

Pros:

- ★ Sharing food, sharing experiences in the same room.
- ★ Experiencing the scale/ texture of artwork.

Cons:

- ★ Travel time and cost.
- ★ Infecting each other with viruses.

In my experience, a hybrid approach (with some people in the room and some people on Zoom) does not work very well... but maybe you will find a way!

To make your group work, you need people to fill the following roles. It works best when you swap roles every meeting so that everyone gets to have a go and have a slightly difference experience each time.

TIMEKEEPER

Helps the group to stick to the agreed schedule, giving time checks and stepping in when conversations go on—because even though they're super interesting it's time to move on!

RESPONDERS

Offer responses to the artwork in dialogue with the sharers.

SHARERS

Offer up artwork to explore in dialogue with the responders.

FACILITATOR

Hosts the session and moves the group through the different stages of the chosen format. May need to remind some members to take a step back and others to take a step forward in discussions. May need to steer the group back on track and flag conflict as it arises.

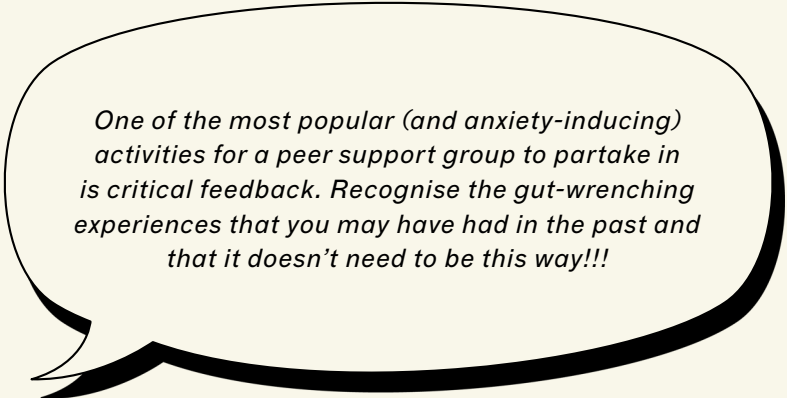
Looking out for one another

It's the responsibility of everyone in your group to care for each other. To help define what that means for you as a group, write a group agreement (including things like respecting each other's lived experiences, listening, disagreeing with the statement not the person etc) and review it every 6 months.

A note on conflict

Conflict will occur in your group. Make sure your group agrees on how to deal with conflict when it arises. For example, once it's been flagged during the meeting, the people involved could arrange to have a chat about it after the session.

Check out this [*booklet on Working with Conflict*](#) by Seeds for Change. It's a guide for grassroots activists, but I've found it really helpful for this context too.



One of the most popular (and anxiety-inducing) activities for a peer support group to partake in is critical feedback. Recognise the gut-wrenching experiences that you may have had in the past and that it doesn't need to be this way!!!

HOW DO YOU GIVE CRITICAL FEEDBACK TO EACH OTHER?

The first peer support group I was in was organised by a fantastic artist called [Louisa Martin](#). We used this critical feedback method by a choreographer called Liz Lerman who was sick of hearing feedback that reflected the interests of the responders more than her intentions.

Read more about [Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process](#) to check out the steps in detail or a condensed version here...

STATEMENTS OF MEANING

Responders state what has meaning for them in what they've just seen.

ARTIST AS QUESTIONER

The artist asks questions about the work. After each question, the responders answer.

NEUTRAL QUESTIONS

Responders ask neutral questions about the work.

The artist responds.

Questions are neutral when they do not have an opinion in them.

OPINION TIME

Responders state opinions, subject to permission from the artist. The usual form is "I have an opinion about _____, would you like to hear it?" The artist has the option to decline opinions for any reason.

Stick with it! It's so tempting to just say what you want to say whenever you want to say it but **BE DISCIPLINED!** For me, having a structure in which to organise my thoughts leads to a way more fulfilling critical experience. Try it out and see how it goes.

*Here's another idea.
I call it the HUSH HUSH
ESCALATION method*

STEP 1

Artist shows 3 images but
doesn't say anything

STEP 2

Artist asks responders to
discuss what they saw whilst
they listen in for 10 minutes

STEP 3

Artist responds to
responders and asks them
questions about what
they said

STEP 4

Responders ask the artist
questions in response to
their questions

There are lots of other ways to give and receive critical feedback too. Experiment! Ask the other people in your group about strategies they've used previously and maybe even invent your own! Just make sure that you are always foregrounding the intentions of the artist and it doesn't become about who can deliver the most egotistically slamming response.

AND THAT'S IT!

We've covered what a peer support group is, how to structure a meeting, who might be part of your group and how to give critical feedback to each other. We've also dipped our toes into managing conflict, writing group agreements and weighing up the pros and cons of online vs irl.

Basically, it's not rocket science but it does require care and commitment, which can sometimes deplete in this exploitative world in which we live. Don't try to do it on your own because that's where the peer in peer support comes in!

You've got this! Enjoy!

xxx

This how-to resource is developed by New Contemporaries with Chloe Cooper and Artquest. Graphic Design by Ashley Kinnard.

Artist and educator Chloe Cooper has run a series of Peer Mentoring events with Artquest as part of New Contemporaries artists' development programme.

Chloe Cooper is an artist and educator. She makes interactive performances, zines and workshops via the medium of paper marbling. She invents props and processes for participants to use to take on roles, collaborate together and rebel against whilst exploring their desires, feeling their feelings and sharing their ideas on how the world works. Chloe joined her first peer support group the year after graduating from her Fine Art BA at Leeds Met and has been in one group or another ever since (that's 13 years and counting!). Check out [*Chloe's most recent work*](#) here.

New Contemporaries is the UK's leading organisation supporting emerging and early career artists from established and alternative art programmes. Since 1949, we have provided development opportunities for artists, helping them to successfully transition from education into more established pathways.

The development and production of this series of resources is part of New Contemporaries Bridget Riley Artists' Development Programme, which is supported by the Bridget Riley Art Foundation. The programme comprises a range of activities that includes events, resources and mentoring, enabling artists' practices to become more sustainable in the long-term.

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