



HOLISTIC CREATIVE PRACTICE REVIEW

Welcome to the Holistic Creative Practice Review
Session 1: Look Back (5-10 years)

This guide will offer you some suggestions for thinking holistically about your creative practice, reflecting on how it has been going, and discovering where you would like to take it in the year ahead.

It offers you some prompts to take a moment to really think about what it is you do. To not be distracted by your 'to do' list and feelings that you should be getting on with things. Allow yourself to pause, inhabit the space and hold it for a while.

In this session we will be doing a long-term review of the past 5 or 10 years, whichever period of time you'd like to focus on. It will be an overview of the main events in all aspects of your life, not just your work or your creative practice.

REFLECTION

Look back at the last 5 years (or the last 10 years)

Acknowledge the most important events that occurred (in all aspects of your life).

You may wish to do this chronologically - looking at each year individually - or you may wish to do this thematically - picking a theme and reviewing each year that way.

Suggestions for themes might be:

- life
- family
- friends
- work
- creative practice
- education
- health & wellbeing
- politics/world events

You don't need to acknowledge every single event, just the ones that feel most relevant now, most important to you.

QUESTIONS

Looking back at all the things you have experienced in the last 5-10 years, here are some questions* to get you started reflecting on the journey you have taken:

1. What am I most proud of?
2. What was the best decision I made?
3. What was the biggest risk I took?
4. What was the most surprising thing that happened?
5. What had I completely forgotten about?
6. What is something I used to find hard but is easier now?
7. What do I need to let go of?
8. What do I still need to work on?
9. What was my greatest contribution?
10. How did I take care of myself?
11. When did I feel most connection to myself?
12. When did I feel most connection to others?
13. When did I feel most at peace?
14. When did I feel most creative?
15. What do I wish I'd done more of?
16. What do I wish I'd done less of?
15. How do I want to feel in another 5 or 10 years' time?

Answering some of these questions might have been really tricky for you, or brought up difficult emotions. So, that could be enough reflecting for now- in which case go off and do something you love or be with people who care for you.

In the next session we will be looking more specifically at the things you did last year.

(*I'd like to acknowledge the influence of Fiona Buckland's end of year reflection questions here)

HOLISTIC CREATIVE PRACTICE REVIEW

HOLISTIC CREATIVE PRACTICE REVIEW

Session 2: Look back (last year)

In this session we will be doing a short-term review of the past year. As with the long term review in session 1 we will take a look at the events in all aspects of your life, not just your work or your creative practice. This exercise could take a while to complete, so give yourself some peace and quiet when you know you will not be disturbed.

REFLECTION

Acknowledge all the things you did last year. It can be helpful to flick through your diary or calendar to really get a sense of all the things you were involved in.

Write down everything (both work & life). All the time spent working, in the studio/workshop, at meetings, appointments, selling at shows, fairs or events, professional development days, studying etc. Don't forget all the things you do for your health & wellbeing, as well as time spent with friends and family, and the quality time you take for yourself.

You may wish to do this chronologically - month by month - or you may wish to break it down into themes (like work, creative practice, family, friends, health & wellbeing)

Take it all in. Isn't there a lot? It's easy to overlook so much of what we do, but by noticing and recording the activity of your daily life here, today, you are giving yourself the chance to see how much you have already accomplished.

That's all for this session! Save your notes, you'll need them next time.

Session 3: Understand what happened

In this session we will be analysing the events of the past year through a lens that suits you. This will help to understand what was going on and how you felt about it. This understanding and awareness will be really helpful when we come to start making plans in the last session.

CHOOSE YOUR LENS

When it comes to reflecting on what happened in the past (especially when it relates to work or our creative practice) it's often using the usual metrics of accomplishment and activity. Now, there is nothing wrong with doing a review based on what you did in the past 3 months, 6 months, 9 months... and asking what you still want to do in the months ahead. But, it focuses very much on numbers (quantity of work, frequency), and it can be quite binary (done/not done, successful/not successful). And this can sometimes leave us feeling a bit disheartened if we haven't done as much as we set out to do.

In choosing another way to frame the review, I wonder if the same work can be done, but in a way that embraces the nature of life to be messy and not go to plan, that we are all imperfect and that's ok.

For this exercise I'm going to suggest that we explore new ways of framing the review of last year's events, that we find a lens to look through that suits who you are, not some generic one size fits all. Here are some ways of looking that I have used in the past which I have found helpful:

ENERGY

We can choose to interpret our activities through the energy they give us or use up. This framework is useful if you find yourself dealing with physical or mental health worries, if you find that there are certain times of year when you are naturally more alert or tired, or if you are someone who has a lot of demands on them through family or other caring commitments.

Monitoring and maintaining your energy levels can be an incredibly helpful way of making sure you can do all the things you'd like to do and not take on too much.

VALUES

Looking at past activities through the lens of core values (for yourself and for your practice) helps to remind you what is most important and to reconnect to your purpose. I like to use this lens with clients when they are feeling a bit lost, that they're not sure where they are going or that they've lost a spark. Often these things come from a disconnection with their values- they've been drifting off course.

Understanding which activities align with your values and which ones don't can also be incredibly helpful in knowing when to say no, as well as recognising which work truly inspires you.

HOLISTIC CREATIVE PRACTICE REVIEW

HOLISTIC CREATIVE PRACTICE REVIEW

SUCCESS

I'm going to be contrary now and include success as a lens because I'm sure that for some people the idea of evaluating their practice through energy or values might be a bit much. Although 'success' is the typical way of evaluating for most year reviews- asking things like 'what went well' or 'what worked' or even 'what made money' - I'd like us to reframe success in this context to be something more specific. What does success mean to you, here? Was an activity or event successful because it made you feel good about yourself and your work (enjoyment) or because it gave you the chance to be around like-minded people (connection). Perhaps your idea of a successful activity was one that didn't feel like hard work to complete (ease) or maybe it was the struggle that made it so worthwhile (challenge). Any of these lenses (enjoyment, connection, ease, challenge) could be perfect for you.

HOW DO YOU FEEL?

Once you've decided which lens to use to analyse your activities in the past year, I'd like you to sort your long list (from session 2) into 3 categories- positive, negative, neutral:

Energy

- Gave me energy
- Drained my energy
- Energy was balanced

Values

- Brought me in line with my values
- Took me away from my values
- Was neutral

Success

- What worked (ie was enjoyable, gave me connection, was easy, was challenging)
- What didn't (ie wasn't enjoyable, isolated me, was hard, wasn't challenging enough)
- What was neutral

Be honest with yourself – no one else will see this so it's ok to put things under 'drained me of energy' that you feel awkward about (maybe things you have no choice about doing or you think you should enjoy but don't). This is a non-judgemental exercise, try not to over-think it or criticise yourself, just acknowledge where your energy seems to go when you do certain things or how much you

HOLISTIC CREATIVE PRACTICE REVIEW

feel you are expressing your values.

There may well be lots of activities that felt pretty neutral. Not to worry. The key with this analysis is to begin to identify those key activities that feel right compared to those that feel very wrong.

Now that you've sorted out all the activities into these categories the next step will be to see how you feel about it. To become curious about why certain events make you feel wonderful and others leave you cold. We'll be considering how to balance these experiences and how to deal with the ordinary-but-necessary tasks that we all have to do in our practice.

Session 4: Be curious about why

In this session we will be building on the work we did in session 3, where we interpreted the events of the past year through a lens that suited you. We will be looking in more detail at the activities you categorised, to understand why they made you feel that way, and how we can use this to help plan for the year ahead.

BEING CURIOUS

In the last session I asked you to categorise all the activities you did last year into positive, negative and neutral (using the lens of your choice). I hope you found that illuminating!

So often I realise that the reason something felt 'off' or like it wasn't successful was nothing to do with how well I'd done the task but it came from it draining me of energy, or that it didn't allow me to connect with people in the way I'd hoped. I've been able to start to identify similar things when they come up, or to be mindful about how much of these things I plan into my diary. I'm learning to develop strategies to mitigate the negative effects and enhance the good ones.

And that's what we're going to do now.

In this session we are going to be curious about the activities on your 3 lists. I'm going to give you a series of questions or prompts which will hopefully lead you to a better understanding of what has been going on, and what you'd like to build into your life going forwards.

HOLISTIC CREATIVE PRACTICE REVIEW

Look at your 3 lists.

Notice the things that feel obvious, or that you weren't expecting.

Look at your 'positive' list.

What activities gave you the most energy? Put you in line with your values? Were most successful (as defined by you)?

Why is that the case? What about those activities makes you feel that way?

What did you learn from these 'positive' experiences?

Can you rank the tasks/activities/events?

Look at your 'negative' list.

Which ones took drained you of energy? Took you away from your values? Were unsuccessful?

Why is that the case? What about those activities makes you feel that way?

What did you learn from these 'negative' experiences?

Can you rank the tasks/activities/events?

Consider all the lists.

Is there a list that feels like it might be too long or too short?

Does this give you an indication of where the balance might be off a bit?

Now, beginning to think ahead

Which of these tasks/activities/events would you like to do more of next year?

Which of these tasks/activities/events would you like to do less of next year?

What things can't you change?

How can you help to create better ways to deal with the things that must be done but which you know fall into the 'negative' category?

HOLISTIC CREATIVE PRACTICE REVIEW

Doing this exercise should have given you a visual idea of how you spend your time, and how you feel about it. By identifying and ranking the positive and negative activities you are already starting to hone in on what is most important to you and which direction you should be going in.

Now, I'm not advocating avoiding doing tasks that drain you of energy, or take you away from your values, these things always have to be done, but you can choose when you do them and how you do them.

We can't always plan everything and quite a lot of our life is up to other people's schedules. But we do have a certain amount of flexibility. So, for the things that you are responsible for, that you control, focusing on where the energy is going/where your values are honoured might mean that you can adapt your working routines to help deal with the things that don't feel great, as well as amplify the things that do.

We'll go into more detail about this in the last session when we start making plans. For now, it's good to just get a sense of the things you already do that make you feel good and those that don't. And to spend a bit of time working out a personal way of dealing with those tasks that don't fill you with excitement but are important parts of your practice, nonetheless (tax return I speak of you!)

Session 5: Plan ahead

In this session we will use all the self-knowledge from the reflection and reviews in the earlier sessions to plan for the year ahead in a way that feels right for you.

This session could take the longest to complete. Don't be put off by all the text here- read it, think about it, come back to it later. Only start your planning when you feel ready but don't rush it. You might need more than one go at it and you may want to use other resources/websites too.

PREPARING

Let's start by reminding ourselves of the work we've done so far:

Did the 5-10 year review highlight things you'd still like to do or build on further?

HOLISTIC CREATIVE PRACTICE REVIEW

Are there new challenges you would like to use your past experience to create or develop?

What did last year tell you?

Is there work you would like to be doing more of? Less of?

What things can't you change and will continue this year?

What do you need to be mindful of when planning (energy, values, other measures of success)?

What needs do you need to honour this year?

What are your priorities within your practice to keep things manageable and maintainable?

Keep this list of needs, priorities and desires for the year ahead to hand while you start to plan ahead.

GETTING STARTED

What happens next depends on what you need right now. I try never to tell people what they should or shouldn't be doing, especially when it comes to how you organise or manage your time. Some people are big planners and love to have the whole year mapped out. Some people rely on the goals they set in the new year to keep them motivated until December. Other people really don't enjoy the restrictions that goals and plans put them under and like things be a bit more freeform. I get that.

So here are some options and some suggestions - see which ones resonate for you.

AIMS

Armed with the things you have learnt so far about what you would like to do this year you may wish to set yourself some overarching aims for the year.

Aims are quite general. I like to think of them a bit like guiding principles. They give you direction but they don't necessarily tell you how to get there. They are the sorts of statements you might make like "this year I want to keep on top of my finances" or "this year I want to balance my work with my family time better" or "this year I want to create a new body of work". They are the kinds of statements that, when you're faced with a decision within your

HOLISTIC CREATIVE PRACTICE REVIEW

practice, you can ask “does doing this help me meet my aim?”

If you’re someone who doesn’t like to over-plan or set goals then having a list of aims that you keep visible or handy might be a helpful strategy to maintain some focus this year.

The nice thing about aims is that they’re easy to come up with. The downside to aims is that they are so over-arching that it’s sometimes impossible to meet them.

GOALS

Goals are essentially the small building blocks of aims. They are more specific, discrete tasks that once completed get you closer to your overall aims.

There’s a lot of advice out there for setting goals and organising your time accordingly. I’m not going to spend too much time on it here. What I’d like to talk about is the importance of setting goals in a way that works for you. Too often we feel compelled to set goals in a way that someone else tells us, and then we wonder why we don’t meet them, or why we don’t feel motivated. No more, I say. Let’s do things the way we want and feel no guilt!

If you’re happy to set goals and like the structure they can bring then here are some questions you need to answer for yourself:

How many goals will you set this year?

It’s so tempting in January to get a bit ambitious or over optimistic and come up with a long list of goals. It all seems completely do-able now, but life always gets in the way. And then we find ourselves at the end of the year, facing the busiest period, with to do lists that won’t budge and the nagging sense that we won’t get it all done.

There is nothing to say that you can’t set one or two goals to begin with and then set new ones later when those are done (or dare I say it, abandon ones that aren’t working for you).

How often will you set goals?

You don’t only have the opportunity to set goals in January. You can choose to do it at any time in the year. In fact, it might be more useful to set a couple of short-term goals now with a built in review point in 3 or 4 months. Then you can set more goals at that point if you wish.

How will you make the goals more achievable?

Don’t be tempted to make your goals more like aims, very general

HOLISTIC CREATIVE PRACTICE REVIEW

and vague. Keep them as specific and focused as you can so that you know for certain when they are done. How will you know when you've achieved your goal - what will have happened, what can you measure? Try to set a deadline, but don't forget it's ok for that deadline to move or be put on hold.

How will you stay motivated?

- Breaking the tasks down into bite-sized chunks means you are more likely to get things done. Remember to give yourself credit for all the small things you do that are getting you one step closer to your goal.
- Be accountable. It can really help having someone else who knows what you are working towards. Buddy up with a friend – share your goals and support each other at every step. Find a group of makers who you can share your journey with.
- Establish a routine. By doing 'little and often' you will quite quickly find you have done more than you thought you could. It's not always possible to devote a large chunk of time to your goals, but if you were able to spend 1 hour each day on them, by the end of a week it's as if you had spent a whole (working) day on it.
- Remember to reflect regularly on the big picture, what you are working towards. Imagine that you have achieved your goals. What does that look like? How does that make you feel?

How and when will you review your goals?

There's only one thing that I am happy to tell people to do - build in a programme of regular reflection to your creative practice. But how often you do that, and when, is up to you. I enjoy using the seasonal markers of the equinoxes and the solstices as my guides (every 3 months) but whatever works for you. Just make sure you're reflecting and reviewing more than once a year.

With a routine of reflecting built into your year it's easy to review your goals - just piggy back it onto your reflecting.

How will you celebrate the small victories?

If you are going to set goals this year, please remember to celebrate when you achieve them! In whatever way you like it's a great boost to acknowledge the work you've put in and how things are changing. This is also another reason why a routine of regular reflection is good - it forces you to notice the work you are doing, making it easy to give yourself credit.

PLANNING

Again, how you plan your time needs to reflect what feels natural for you and the way you work.

Do you like to take a longer view?

- You might like to plan your goals or tasks thematically to reflect how things like holidays and public events affect your work load.
- You might want to respond to external events that structure your year (like school holidays).
- If you're someone, like me, who notices the effect of light on your energy levels you may want to plan according to those rhythms following the seasons.

Do you like a shorter timeframe?

- You might prefer to plan on a month-by-month basis and respond to the individual characteristics of each month.

(At this point in the year, when we're taking a long view of the year ahead it shouldn't be necessary to plan down to a weekly basis. That's fine when you're actually doing the work, but right now that sort of detail is only going to slow things down.)

Filling in the gaps

Once you've decided on your format for your plan, start by putting in all the things you cannot change or move, the events, activities that you are committed to already or that you will have to deal with. This is where your needs and priorities should show up. Populate your plan with your most important life stuff first. Then don't forget to add in all the regular activities you do, the things you need to do to maintain and manage your creative practice (including those reflection points).

This is where you can see, clearly, how much space and time you have for your new goals. It's often not as much time as you think. Seeing the times in your year where you may have more flexibility or those tricky pinch-points will help you to set realistic timeframes or deadlines for your goals.

ALTERNATIVES

NO GOALS

It's entirely possible that this year you don't want to or don't need to set any goals. Crazy as that sounds you may find that you just need to keep working away at the same level as last year, solidifying your practice or building on all the new things you did

HOLISTIC CREATIVE PRACTICE REVIEW

HOLISTIC CREATIVE PRACTICE REVIEW

in the last 12 months. There's nothing wrong with that. I'd be tempted to say that you will still want to make a plan - to have an overview of how the year should go, the things you'll need to do each month to keep things ticking along, just to keep you on track.

If the idea of setting yourself targets of things you want to do this year feels wrong, then how about looking at it from the opposite side? Have you considered making anti goals? The things you will try NOT to do this year? This could involve things like "not checking emails after 6pm" or "not saying yes to work that I know I will not enjoy" or "not spending so long on Instagram".

These things could become guiding principles - stick a list up near where you work, put it on your phone - see what happens when you work with these new intentions.

NO PLAN

It's a brave person who goes without a plan all year, and I'm not sure I'm suggesting you do that entirely. If the thought of not having a plan at all fills you with horror, maybe ask yourself why that is? What does a plan do for you? What security does it bring?

It can be so easy to plan every hour that we forget to look up and respond to what's going on in that moment, to miss opportunities that come out of the blue, because we haven't scheduled them in. It's these random, serendipitous events that often lead us to unexpected places, to new people or things we might never have considered. It would be a shame to miss out on all that potential because we held on a bit too tight to our plans.

Finishing up

Congratulations on reaching the end of the Holistic Creative Practice Review. Phew, that was a lot of work. I hope you found the process enjoyable, challenging and illuminating but hopefully not too arduous. I'm afraid I can get carried away when it comes to reflecting and thinking about people's creative practices (that is my job!).

This guide was designed to give you the tools to look back and plan ahead in a way that fits you and your practice best (not some one-size-fits-all approach that might not ring true for you). Of course I've structured it in order and we've followed the path step by step, but there's no reason why you have to complete all of this now, or why you can't return to some exercises later in the year if that feels more appropriate. Whatever works for you.

This e-book was written by Melody Vaughan (they/them).

©Melody Vaughan 2019

Creative mentoring tending to cultures of care

Melody is committed to working with professional artists, designers & contemporary craft makers who want to build ethical and sustainable creative practices full of care.

melodyvaughan.uk

[@melody_vaughan](#)

HOLISTIC CREATIVE PRACTICE REVIEW