

Remembering Yesterday, Caring Today – European Reminiscence Network

Reflections on being an apprentice on a project using creative reminiscence with people with dementia and their family caregivers.

Before taking part in this project, I never could have imagined the captivating, complex and personal nature of the recollections that would be shared. Initially, I wondered what on earth reminiscence in a group was all about, and tentatively embarked on the journey alongside the participants. The environment of the sessions soon felt cohesive, inclusive, and very important to both participants and facilitators.

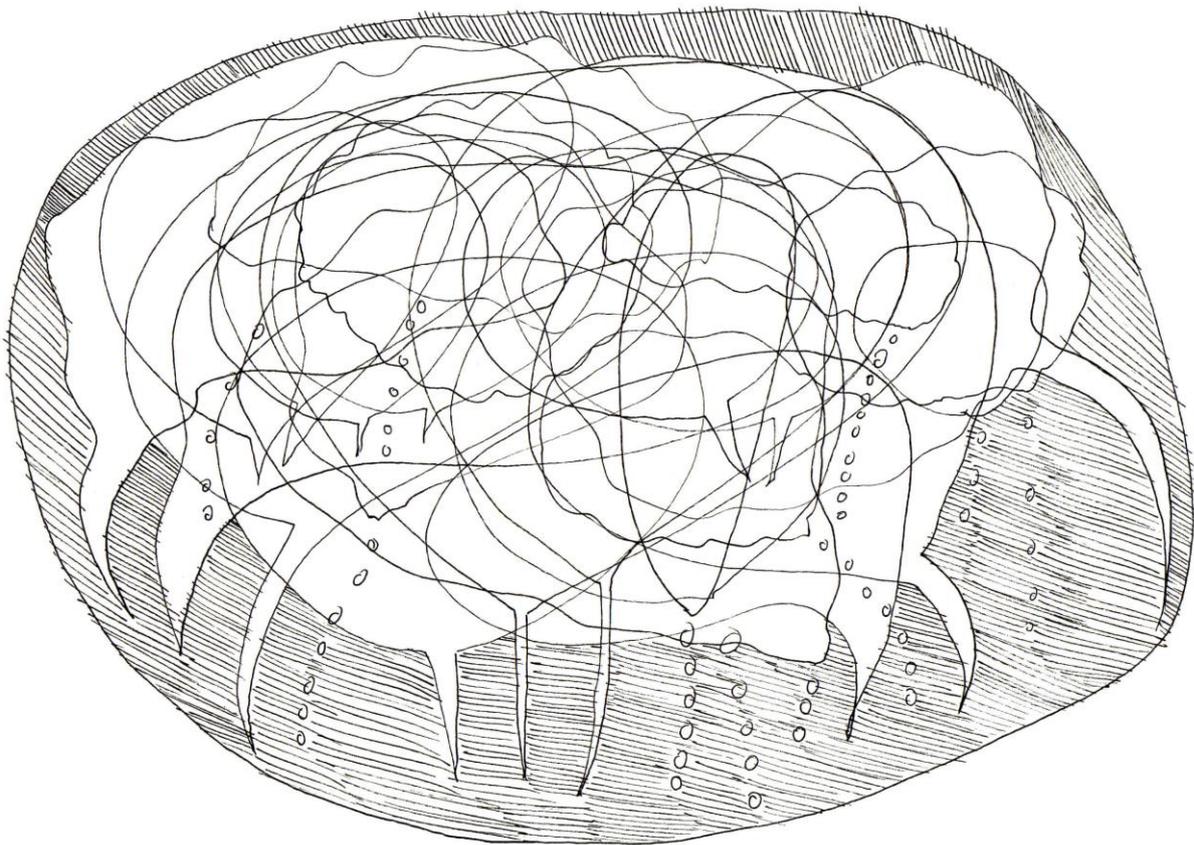


Figure 1 – Mingling thoughts and speech. A drawing I made in response to the first session.

Making reminiscence activities relevant and enjoyable, and the use of the creative arts:

From day one, I saw how the use of creative methods enhanced the work. The first warm-up activity of moving around, and using different physical ways to greet one another, seemed to immediately disperse some feelings of apprehension and formality, and allowed people to connect with one another on an equal footing – people with dementia, carers, apprentices and facilitators alike. It is also a good example of an activity being universally accessible: People could choose their own action or copy another; they could move around or remain in a chair; it could be an army salute or a Parisian set of kisses.

Over the weeks, the importance of drama techniques for the project became clear. Without the need for any words at all, Keith showed us how he used to trace lines on a map with precision and concentration, and when our small group imitated him, it demonstrated our understanding. When we then shared it with the whole group, it allowed a shy man to convey something to a large audience. It also showed his mastery of the task, and was fascinating! Drama removed the need to struggle to find the words which can be hard to put together coherently, or make heard.

Additionally, drama allowed for the silly and the unexpected – suddenly we had a golden retriever barking, a game of cricket-boules, a lady in a public toilet, and a fish swimming about in the circle. Nothing was impossible, or wrong. Physical actions seemed to display memories stored in a different way and allowed another dimension of communication.

It was important to think of the specific group members, and to use what knowledge (from what they told us, from carers, or from Afrose/Adrian) we had about them to make the activities relevant and comfortable. For example, before the ‘next generation’ session, we considered whether there were any sensitive issues around childbirth which might affect how we addressed the subject. We tried to provide relevant resources, thinking of the age and interests of group members. When I put together the collaged journeys activity, I made sure to include some images of bicycles (Figure 2) as I knew Chris had spent time cycling with his brother. For the ‘looking good and going out’ session I brought in images of mods and rockers because Susan had told me about these fashions in her youth, and of couples dancing for Keith and Eileen as that is how they met (Figure 3). Also, it was important to think of the historic events throughout members’ lifetimes. Sometimes, perhaps, we did not pick up on certain factors early enough - for example that many members were children during the Second World War and therefore did not have big birthday celebrations as children.

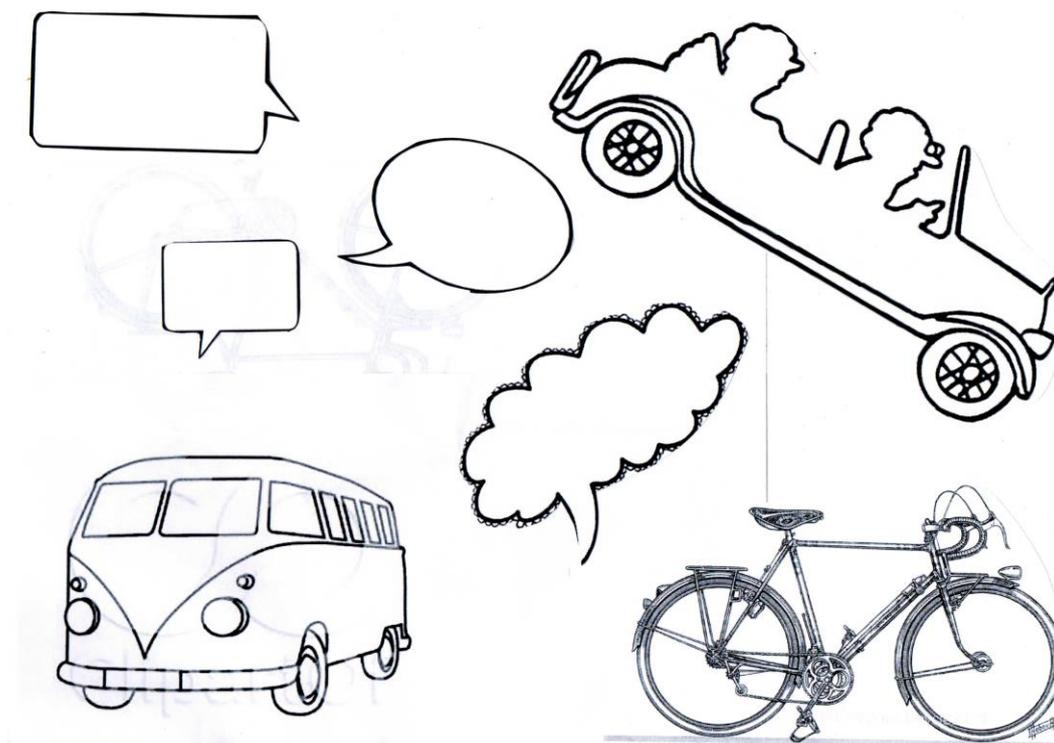


Figure 2 - Examples of resources for the collaged journeys activity.



Figure 3 - Photographic resources.

As visual art is my particular area of interest, I tried to use it when possible. This included making attractive title pages on the flip chart, and using drawing with group members during one to one or small group discussions. For example, I drew Susan's cat and John's parrot as they described them to me. Additionally, if an image of what someone had said stayed in mind between sessions, I drew it and gave it to them the following week, for example the story of how Keith and Eileen met (Figure 4). Those drawings seemed to affirm my genuine interest in the story, and that I had listened and valued it. I encouraged members to stick any drawings, photos, song words and notes into their scrapbooks, to look at between sessions and return to afterwards. I hope this encouraged members to continue reminiscing at home.



Figure 4 - My drawing of the night Keith and Eileen met.

When it came to the apprentice-led sessions, I designed the collaged journeys activity already mentioned. I wanted to be sure that everyone would be able to join in and not feel put off by needing to draw something accurately. I therefore provided pre-cut outlines of vehicles and speech bubbles which could be stuck down to provide immediate visual aids to telling their story (Figure 2), and also examples of the sort of thing that could be created (Figure 5). I hoped not to be too prescriptive but to facilitate image-making on a theme, which was also open to individual interpretation. With apprentice support, every person with dementia created an image of an important journey they had made and was able to share it with the whole group.

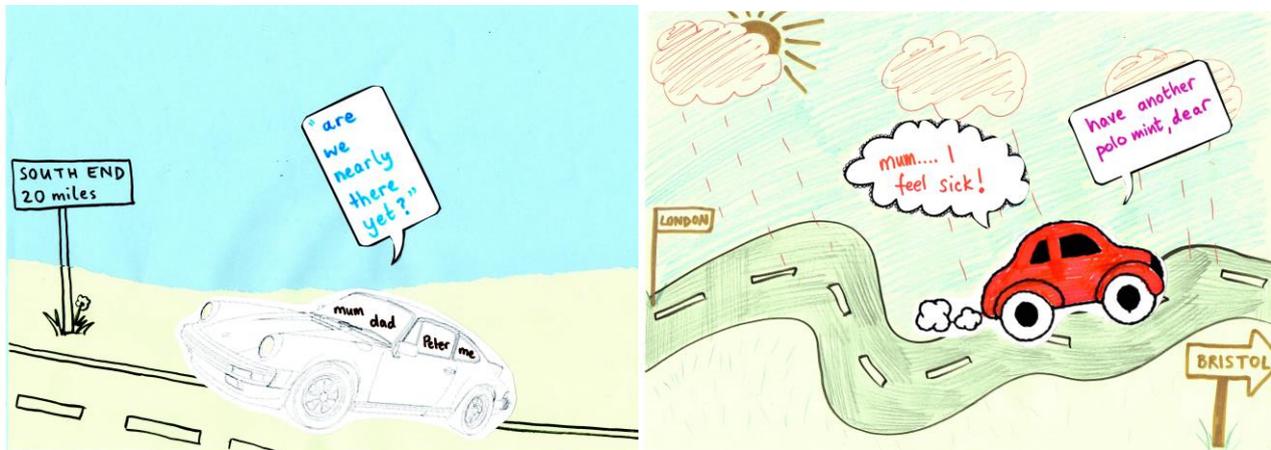


Figure 5 – Example collages.

Other points to consider:

- Music, singing and dancing were other powerful tools for communication.
- Take the lead from participants and try different prompts for reminiscence, to find what each individual responds to.
- How viewing, handling and smelling authentic reminiscence objects provokes memories, and provides a starting point for conversation.
- Allowing for different levels of ability, for example one member may be able to make a single movement, whereas another could reenact a whole scene.

Skills needed by group leaders, my strengths and areas for development:

It was clear that having a clear leader and focus helped the group to relax and engage with the activities. I am aware I need to further develop my confidence to take charge and “hold the audience” in order to be a focal point and thus guide participants through the sessions. To do this, it will be important for me to be comfortable with session plans yet willing to adapt to the specific needs of the group, and to know my team members well. I try to speak loudly and to announce but am aware this is something I need to continually check.

An essential aspect of the group was the use of a whole range of art forms. Although I am very comfortable with art making, I am not so with drama or music but determined to be actively involved and go outside my comfort zone. Singing in front of others fills me with dread! But I think that awareness of my own fears, strengths and difficulties can aid work with others. I can encourage them to take part in activities from a place of sympathy and experience. Having a sense of fun and

exploration as a facilitator is needed to engender a relaxed, sociable, inclusive and enabling atmosphere, as is enthusiasm to enter into the spirit of reminiscence.

A key role of the leaders was to amplify from individuals or small groups to the whole group by repeating or summarizing what was said, demonstrating actions or displaying things created. This showed people had been heard and understood, and connected with the group as a whole. Checking back that a story was being retold correctly was empowering.

Leaders must also pick up on, and highlight, experiences which connect group members. Shared experiences give a sense of commonality, which can encourage socialising and combat feelings of isolation. When it became clear in the large group activity that Patricia and David had both been evacuated, we sat them together at tea time and facilitated a conversation about their experiences. Spontaneity is key for implementing such connections.

We also celebrated differences. During a warm-up activity of passing a plate around the large group, it was delightful to hear described a meal each person remembered from childhood. The diversity of foods was sumptuous. That activity highlighted the rich mix of religious, cultural and geographical backgrounds in the group, and the overall sense was of inclusivity, acceptance and appreciation. Though we had differences, we were sharing the group experience.

Language barriers (not speaking English, having speech or hearing difficulties) were tackled using modes of communication other than speech. For example, a lady who spoke little English was able to describe her garden in detail by drawing a picture. I admired the care group leaders took to be understood by speaking clearly and using exaggerated facial expressions, gesturing, eye-contact, and physically moving around. Recording key points on the flip chart helped everyone see what was being said.

I feel most confident in my ability to listen and to work on a one-to-one basis, particularly in conversation or art-making. I would, however, like to improve my skill at using appropriately open, and closed, questions to elicit reminiscence. Also I aim to develop a better sense of when and how to let people flow into “off-topic” reminiscences, and when to pull them back. For example in a session when memories of day trips became about evacuation, my temptation to bring conversation back to fit the plan almost resulted in a missed connection between two group members. I can see that it takes real skill and sensitivity to allow people’s memories to flow, yet also to allow everyone to have a turn, and to make sessions coherent. To do this also requires flexibility.

Other points to consider:

- Use of language – varied and not too technical or modern.
- Adapting to the number of group members.
- Using the talents of team members.
- Sessions ran best when a range of creative arts activities was included and time was allowed for individual, small and large group activities.
- Time keeping.

Working with people with dementia to support their well-being and maximise impact:

Kitwood (1997) describes person-centred care and how to work positively and respectfully with people with dementia so as to affirm their personhood and meet their needs as an individual. Throughout the project, I saw the value in having a positive, accepting attitude toward participants, and treating them with respect and genuine interest. On the whole, participants seemed enabled and uplifted by the sessions. Engaging in exploration with others, with the warm spirit of mutual respect, had an enjoyable and supportive community feel.

Dementia was not avoided but was not the focus of the sessions. They were concerned with finding things people can still do, thereby discovering how to live well with dementia. We encouraged people with dementia to take part in activities like gardening and sandwich-making independently to promote a sense of capability and achievement. As previously mentioned, we highlighted connections between participants. That enhanced the social aspect of the group, for example encouraging Chris and David to act out playing football together.

Another example of using information collected about participants, enabling us to make activities relevant, interesting and appropriate, was in the weddings session. It began with informal conversations as participants arrived that gave us information on individuals' experiences of weddings so we could assign meaningful roles during the enactment. For example, Alan was able to use his knowledge of being a father of the bride twice to inform the role play.

I have already written about good use of communication and would add here that every effort should be made to allow people with dementia to tell their own stories - they are the experts. Enough time should be given for people to respond to stimuli and to elaborate if possible, using any means of communication. For David, it was obviously important to recount his evacuation to Wales, therefore we allowed time, when possible, for him to go over and expand on those memories.

To ensure participants' needs were met, it was important to be sensitive to non-verbal communications. During one session early on, an apprentice sat between each couple to promote independence. However, I sensed that Chris felt anxious and distracted when not sitting next to his wife. Therefore in future sessions we did not separate them. I also felt it was important to let people know about timing and order of activities to help them relax. Taking care of practicalities such as booking transport, liaising with carers about session dates, and checking in when they missed a session were all part of facilitating attendance.

Over the course of the project, I learned the importance of valuing every contribution, no matter how brief or relevant to the theme. Early on, I worked with Chris on childhood memories of home, using pens and paper to record our conversation. Chris was unable to make representational marks and I made a drawing of him and his brother on bikes. It was my picture that I used when feeding back to the larger group but afterwards I felt I had not given Chris's marks the recognition they deserved and that I should have shown both. I gave both drawings to the couple to keep, and hope that being able to look back on it showed my appreciation of Chris's contributions.

The apprentice-led sessions highlighted the importance of having a specific theme, to help participants engage. In particular, it seemed to get confusing when activities switched between different times in people's lives. Over the weeks I saw how effective the use of variety in sessions

was. Some people responded more to music, action or art-making: Lily did not feel confident to describe how to bathe a newborn, but could show me expertly; Chris found it hard to join in with discussions, but seemed to be in his element when acting out scenes from his youth, and delighted in hearing his stories retold; Chris and David were able to sing songs from their earlier years with pride and skill. Using a variety of creative methods and multisensory reminiscence prompts allowed us to meet participants' individual needs. Saying "show us" rather than always "tell us" opened up a whole other realm of memories.

We wore name badges every week, and started each session with a recap of what had been done the week before so as to orient people to the group. The aim was to give a sense of continuity without expectations or demands of what people could recall. The week following a session I had missed, it was interesting to experience what it was like to really not know what had happened the week before, as might be the experience for group members. That highlighted the importance of working in the moment by responding to how participants presented on that day

Working supportively with family carers to enjoy sessions and build confidence and skills:

The sessions were as much for family carers as for the people with dementia. We aimed to value and support them in their role by modelling positive behaviour towards the people with dementia and facilitating supportive discussions for carers, as well as offering time to relax and engage in their own reminiscence, and to enjoy the activities and community spirit.

By modelling positive behavior, it was hoped participants' relationships would be enhanced at home. In early sessions, one carer appeared frustrated with her father and would often sigh loudly and make infantilising remarks when correcting his confused responses. Facilitators modelled encouraging her father to tell his stories independently and, over time, his daughter became more patient with her father, allowing him to speak for himself, and they were able to enjoy activities together. She reported feeling more able to interact with him without getting angry and was very emotional in the final session. She shared how much she valued her father, and the sessions.

Sometimes, carers spent time apart from those they care for in order to explore issues connected to being a carer and to share advice, information or concerns, facilitated by a group leader. I was part of the discussion about preparing "appreciations". A common concern was finding enough time to do everything. At other times, carers initiated one-to-one conversations with a facilitator. During these conversations, it felt that having the opportunity to talk with someone empathic about how things were for them, and the challenges they were facing, was rare. I aimed to listen attentively and without judgment, accepting both positive and negative emotions.

The sessions offered many opportunities for carers to try out different activities alongside enthusiastic facilitators and to witness how their people with dementia were able to engage with reminiscence creatively. That raised awareness of what is possible and had an optimistic, hopeful feel. Participants shared with their partner/parent intimate memories, often of a shared past. They connected in a way which seemed to be a very positive experience, strengthening and affirming their relationships.

Carers were encouraged to bring in objects and photographs from home to use in sessions. Having items related to their own families helped the people with dementia to connect to the theme, and

also seemed to be a source of pride for carers. It was a good experience to share stories with the group and to have them really appreciated.

The drawings I made for members of the group were in response to the carers as well as the people with dementia. After the first session, for example, I made some front pages (Figure 6) for scrapbooks which had details from what I had learned so far about the couples. As well as being a record of what was said and done which can be revisited and used for reminiscence again, it also demonstrated that I had heard and valued what they said. For the final session, I made small decorated notes of appreciation for each participant (Figure 7). I wanted to celebrate everyone's achievements and contributions, and hoped that this would also encourage carers to have the confidence in what they had done, and to continue to use reminiscence at home.



Figure 6 – Front page.



Figure 7 – My notes of appreciation.

The final session was very moving. No carers had prepared "appreciations" in advance but made short, heart-felt and spontaneous speeches to their loved one. They felt very special and significant, as if the sessions had enabled the participants to spend time together meaningfully.

Methods used to extend the benefits of the group beyond sessions included encouraging positive interactions, finding alternative methods of communication, using scrapbooks, and promoting the Reunion Club. Groups can have a wonderful, life-enhancing effect of reducing feelings of isolation and depression, and participants were encouraged to share contact details and keep in touch.

Final thoughts:

The apprenticeship gave me the opportunity to try different approaches to reminiscence by using many art forms. I was able to learn from, and admire, the skills of others – notably Maria's ability to lead, and Wioleta's acting, as well as the experience and knowledge of the leaders. Reflective

discussion and feedback after sessions helped me to think about the work and how to build on and improve my skills, and was also supportive in a field of work which is emotionally demanding.

It is often assumed that in old age it is too late to change or develop, however it may still be possible to help improve older adults' mental states (Waddell 2002). Through the use of reminiscence and the enabling environment created by facilitators - by listening, interacting creatively, being dedicated, and showing positive regard and appreciation - the sessions supported participants to celebrate their abilities and find ways to communicate. It was a brilliant experience.



Figure 8 – A drawing I made in celebration of the group.

References:

Kitwood, T. (1997) *Dementia Reconsidered: the person comes first*. Buckingham: Open University Press

Waddell, M. (2002) *Inside Lives*. London: Karnac

Lucy Pashley, spring 2014