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Making a Living Moment More Resonant: an exploration of the role of the artist in co-creative work with people living with dementia

This presentation draws on this publication, which is open access and can be found here:

[Making a living moment more resonant: an ... | Wellcome Open Research](#)

There is also a short animation which explores the same themes and ideas here:

<https://youtu.be/Y3D3vKl9Jic?feature=shared>

Slide 1

The picture you can see here is taken from a project called 'With All', which was a music and dance project with people living with dementia which formed part of the Created out of Mind research project in 2017. With All was an exploration of co-creativity and wellbeing with people living with dementia. We worked entirely through free improvisation. While our results were positive and also illuminating on the nature of wellbeing for those with dementia, I'm not going to talk about that right now – I would like instead to focus upon some of our most recent work, which has been an attempt to understand more about the specific role of the professional artists who took part in the project – what were the methods and approaches that they were using?

The musicians and dancers who participated in the With All project each kept an unstructured reflective journal, in which they considered the ways that they were approaching working co-creatively. In these journals, the artists reflect upon their individual as well as their collective practice. The research used an empirical case study methodology, with the authors adopting a thematic approach to the analysis of the data.

Slide 2 How are the artists working?

Three main themes emerged which characterise the skills and techniques used by the artists during the co-creative sessions – Authenticity, Enabling Risk and Togetherness. Each of these themes is informed by a series of sub-themes. The relationships between the main themes and the sub-themes are illustrated on this slide, and also the interaction between the themes.

I will now talk about each of these main themes in turn and explore some of the sub-themes.

Slide 3– Authenticity

Lucy

There is no hiding place in this project and I am terrified and excited to see what I can reconnect and discover anew in myself in this area.

In their journals, the artists recorded that vital to the success of the work was the importance of working openly, honestly, and trustingly with each other and with the participants. The artists' reflections clarify that their willingness to explore and express their own vulnerability contributed to working authentically during the sessions, as they also explored and expressed a range of emotions alongside the other participants.

I'll now talk about the techniques employed by the artists that supported this authentic approach.

Slide 4 – Holding back

'Holding back' or 'waiting' was mentioned by the artists as being fundamentally important, as it allowed opportunities for participants to initiate activity of their own choosing and at their own pace. Holding back **also** gave time for the artists to formulate genuine and authentic responses. These periods of apparent inactivity were described as 'lulls':

Clare

Treasure the lulls - it's where everyone knows it's co- created and improvised.

This waiting can often result in silence - something which people can find uncomfortable. However, in the *With All* sessions, allowing silence was enabling, in that it afforded opportunities for consolidation and renewal. As one of the artists reflected:

Tim

Silence is the winter that enables the spring.

Holding back can also allow for moments that feel open-ended, uncertain, unresolved. This leaves space and opportunity for participants to find their own personal responses or resolutions, or indeed to allow things to remain unresolved, experiencing this ambiguity collectively.

Slide 5 - Non-verbal communication

In their reflections, the artists identified that for much of the time, they were interacting and communicating non-verbally.

One artist (Lucy) even wondered whether the communication that was possible through the art form was superior to that which could occur verbally:

Lucy

Strangely it was those with whom I have spoken less/ have less words themselves that I felt I saw more

Non-verbal forms of communication in the pursuit of making music and dance together might allow for greater authenticity than some the formulaic phrases that can often be used in exchanges with people living with dementia. Examples from the artists' journals illustrate the depth of the communication and connection that occurred through their confidence to work non-verbally, trustingly and openly with the project participants:

Henry

The moment where I placed the side of my face against the palm of his hand and he moulded to me, read me.

Slide 6 Enabling risk

The second of our overarching themes.

The artists considered enabling a willingness to improvise, and with that a growing confidence in taking risks as fundamental to the group's creative process.

Lucy

the uncertainty of not knowing what will happen next and yet I am so aware that ..that is the very essence of the starting point for co-creativity.

In their journals, the artists explored the ways in which they drew upon their artistic skills and knowledge to support participants in engaging positively with this sense of uncertainty.

Slide 7 Accompanying

Accompanying was used by artists to support participants in taking creative risks. Accompaniment is not just 'going along with' but is active and enabling. Any of the musicians here will be I'm sure have experiences of working with an accompanist who brings out the best in them. For example, a tentative musical gesture offered by someone can be accompanied in such a way as to acknowledge it as artistic material - maybe by repeating it, harmonising it, or extending it.

Slide 8 - Togetherness

A sense of Togetherness, or of collective belonging, emerges strongly from the artists' reflections as an over-arching theme. The work described in the preceding themes of Authenticity and Enabling Risk was pursued in order to create an experience of

collective belonging that included artists and project participants equally. The artists wrote in their journals about some of the techniques and approaches which they were able to employ once the sense of Togetherness had been established, and which also reinforced it.

Slide 9 - Generating material collectively

The organic, unplanned evolution of pieces was a significant way in which the shared identity of the group was enhanced.

The artists' used a variety of techniques for the collective generation of artistic material

Once initial material had been created, either by one of the artists or by an individual participant, there were then ways to build on this to develop the material co-creatively. This might be through the artists responding in a turn-taking, back and forth fashion ('call and response'), repeating material back sequentially ('echoing'), copying material concurrently ('mirroring'). Typically, other participants also engaged in some of these accompanying techniques, with pieces evolving in unplanned ways. As Lucy noted:

Lucy

(It's) like building a building, block by block without knowing the final design.

Slide 10 - Equality and shared leadership

As I have already mentioned, the artists consciously sought to foster shared leadership within the group, and thereby a context where each person was able to exercise power as and when they chose to. This was referred to as an 'ebb and flow':

Lucy

I was thinking about the ebb and flow of co-creativity. I think in my mind I have thought of 'equality' being at the very heart of co-creativity. As I reflect more I see that there is a real power in these moments of equality but that the balance in partnership to achieve those moments is in constant ebb and flow

Slide 11 - Conclusion

I think we can say that it is important to consider that the beneficial effects for people living with dementia of co-creative art-based work come about through the conscious and unconscious application by the artists of their shared skills and knowledge, which are acquired through training and ongoing artistic practice. Rather than an assumption that 'The Arts' are in themselves beneficial for people living with dementia, we must consider the active role played by the artists who are so integral to the process.

Slide 12 – Further Reading

Slide 13 – Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and thank my co-researchers:

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