

Reflections on being an apprentice on the *Remembering Yesterday, Caring Today* (RYCT) programme, 2016/7.

1. Introduction

Remembering Yesterday, Caring Today is a structured, twelve-week, closed group programme which uses reminiscence techniques to improve the wellbeing of people with mild to moderate dementia and their carers. It is funded by Camden Carers. I was an RYCT apprentice from October 2016 to early February 2017. Here, I outline what I learnt working with 2 lead facilitators, up to 8 other apprentices, up to 5 volunteers and a cohort of up to 15 participants, half of whom had mild to moderate dementia (one of the people with dementia was accompanied by two family members).

2. The apprenticeship

Apprentices attend two days of intensive training exploring issues critical to the design, delivery and evaluation of reminiscence sessions. I found these invigorating and useful in clarifying the tasks that lay ahead. Critically, I learnt that RYCT comprises twelve 4 hour sessions which run from 1 pm to 5 pm on Monday afternoons in Camden:

- The first hour is dedicated to preparation. I learnt the importance of: setting up the room; ensuring all apprentices were 'on task'; warming up physically and vocally; building supportive relationships with others; honing interactive skills; posing questions; building confidence to guide activities and work intensively with couples.
- Hours two and three are the meat of the programme. Couples - a person with dementia and a carer, usually a partner or close family member - joined us for reminiscence activities structured around predetermined themes such as 'school days', 'first jobs and homes', and 'trips and holidays'. A summary of the previous session is presented. The session is summarised before the close. Participants keep a log book – of memories, photos, postcards, etc. – to remind them of the topics covered. It should not be possible to judge who has dementia and who does not.
- The fourth hour is spent tidying up and debriefing, reflecting on the session - what went well, and not; sharing observations and concerns about dynamics; developing understanding of the progression of different types of dementia; appreciating the exhausting and often stressful task of caring; preparing the next week's session.

I attended 11 of the 12 sessions.

3. Making reminiscence activities safe, relevant and enjoyable

As the programme unfolded and my understanding matured, I assembled a check list of practical, organisational and psychological elements critical to successful RYCT facilitation.

- ✓ **Be respectful, empathic and compassionate**
 - Remember that the diminished person you see is not the person they are
 - Listen hard - repetition is common; listen each time as if it were the first
 - Wait ten seconds for a reply to each question you ask
 - Don't talk over or patronise
 - Don't repeatedly ask: 'Do you remember?'. You are actually saying, 'You've forgotten, haven't you?'

- Validate feelings – the person’s capacity to remember might be reduced; their ability to feel endures
 - Keep an open mind – resist assumptions, not least in relation to age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and religion
- ✓ **Create a person-centred environment**
- Welcome participants warmly
 - Keep the environment safe – free from trip hazards, with accessible toilets, well aired, lights and with good acoustics (an inability to hear excludes participants)
 - Provide refreshments – homemade cake is always successful
 - Be prepared and stay on task – clear and organised activities put participants at ease and contain anxieties
 - Be creative – a stimulating set of activities which draw on several modes will engage participants
 - Have fun – relax and enjoy it, keep interactions light and enjoyable
- ✓ **Be professional**
- Be part of the team - support colleagues and participants to make the experience the best it can be; work hard
 - Be present – the sessions can be repetitive, it is vital that you are always engaged; presence contains the group
 - Be fit for purpose - arrive well rested; leave troubles at the door; be enthusiastic
 - Be authentic – participants sense if you are feigning interest or being insincere
 - Keep separate – remain engaged with, but not overwhelmed by, participants’ stories – merge is not helpful; the goal is to support, not be friends; manage endings well
 - Trust the process – to some extent, the group will have a life of its own, trust it; do not be reckless but trust the group to function even if you make errors or miss opportunities
 - Reflect – keep a critical eye on your practice; learn from mistakes

4. Using creative arts

Creative activities – singing, drawing, acting, re-enacting, miming, storytelling, recitation - are modes of engagement at the heart of reminiscence.

Poetry can play a powerful role in stirring and capturing memories. Poems can be read and shared and used as spring boards for reminiscence (triggering memories of childhood, for example). Poems can be composed in the group, synthesising stories and memories, summarising group activity. Poems with internal rhythm, strong rhymes and humorous elements are easily remembered, much like songs. ‘The Owl and The Pussy Cat’ was recited on several occasions.

During the Winter Warmer session, I read ‘Winter Time’ by Robert Louis Stevenson. It followed tasks evoking memories of winter and my delivery was successful. We then quickly moved on to the next choreographed task in a full schedule of activities.

After feedback, I learnt that there is a difference between engaging participants in pleasurable activities and activities to promote reminiscence. Reading the poem brought pleasure to participants

but failed as a reminiscence task. I did not embed it in a broader exercise to evoke, share and celebrate memories – a missed opportunity. Reminiscence activities are not simply diversionary. Their purpose is to bring memories to the surface, which in turn are shared and processed – a critical difference between the aspirations of RYCT and other programmes.

In truth, reading the poem was an opportunity for me to exercise my skills in commanding an audience. In turn, I enjoyed the feelings of being a successful performer, liked by the group. Afterwards, I was reminded that the role of the apprentice is not to be an entertainer, but a facilitator, amplifier, helper. Ego should be absent. Every interaction is a potential entry point for stimulation of, and reflection upon memories. It is not an opportunity to show off – no matter how satisfying that might feel.

5. Making connections and holding boundaries

My learning was sometimes unsettling as the connections I made often had an intense - albeit fleeting – quality. I often felt moved, or touched by participants' recollections. Our interests and identities at times overlapped, despite key demographic differences. Important, yet temporary, connections were made. Common ground provided a basis upon which memories could be shared and explored.

For example, M was born in the same village as my grandmother, close to a once industrial northern town known for its production of sweets. I surmised that she would recognise liquorice root, as it was a common treat there. I found a shop that stocked it in London. 'Where did you get that from?', she asked, 'we had it when we were children'. I felt validated in my action – the root stirred memories without pushing too hard. The moment felt personal, without being intrusive. 'My dad used to bring it when he went to the market', she said. At the next session, her daughter thanked me; her mother had talked about the root and shared childhood memories. My gift had had positive effects on her mother's mood.

I started to understand that RYCT can have a material impact on people's lives.

When one couple spoke about their political activism in the 1960s, I admired their courage and felt outrage at the injustice against which they struggled. Their story evoked an immediate sense of comradeship. It also instilled a deep respect for them, which, in turn, I learnt to extend to all participants - to respect their memories, stories and relationships.

I soon realised, however, that I should not place too great a significance on identifying commonalities. It was critical that I was not seen to have favourites or to be too partisan – although there were couples, understandably, with whom I enjoyed extensive interaction. However, in the name of fairness, it would be wrong for personal interests to restrict opportunities to interact with all participants. Neither was it appropriate to disclose too much personal information. Boundaries and equity must be maintained. It was incumbent on me to develop, and exercise, generic skills in engaging and stimulating memories, regardless of personal connection.

The focus should always be on the couple, after all.

6. Knitted Squares

Important learning arose from close collaboration with 3 other apprentices to design, deliver and evaluate week 11 - Winter Warmers. We focused on evoking memories of cold winters, activities they undertook to keep warm, the shock of British winters for participants who came from hotter

climes, recollections of severe winters. Activities included miming relevant actions for others to guess ('Chopping logs!', 'Lighting a fire!', 'Carrying hot potatoes in our pockets!'), singing songs, making warming winter drinks and presenting knitted blanket squares which were prepared in advance.

I felt uneasy asking participants to prepare knitted squares. I feared that the task would be too complex and potentially daunting. I also feared that the task was perhaps unnecessarily gendered because despite the best efforts of many, knitting remains primarily a woman's activity. However, a fellow apprentice – Angela - with whom I was working, is very well versed in the creative potential of wool and so I went with the vision, tentatively. However, the anxiety about the task was my own, it was clear, and once I managed to source a knitted square, it subsided.

When I saw the efforts of others, experienced the pride with which they shared their squares and described their significance and witnessed the joy of the act of knitting, I was immediately convinced that the task was a good one. I learnt to trust the group process, especially when working with competent colleagues. I also learnt the importance of resisting the assumption that the primary benefits of the group are always felt by participants with dementia. I engaged with carers about the significance of the items they attached – buttons, trinkets, badges and hand written notes. They appreciated the opportunity to contribute and share memories.

It was clear that the power of reminiscence for the carer could be as potent as it was for the person with dementia.





7. The death of a group member

The death of a group member only weeks after the programme ended came as a shock. V had been an important part of the group, a committed attendee, whose wife was a charismatic and good humoured participant – somebody with whom I felt a connection. Their love for each other was evident. And although V said very little – his dementia was quite advanced and he was physically frail – he played a full role in the group. We heard how his life was one of creativity and he achieved the kind of success many of us wish for, yet few of us achieve. He was good looking and talented; I suspect he made an impact wherever he went. I was impressed by tales of his creativity, artistic ability and practical skills. K, his wife, brought photographs which showed the transformations he brought to their homes over many years and the family life he built.

Observing the interactions between V and his family taught me a lot about how to work with people with dementia. The family eschewed patronisation and platitudes, yet sat with him, reassuringly, happily, quietly - week in, week out. On occasion, I met the family at the gate and lent a hand in bringing V into the building. I was struck by the family's interactions with him; they were straight forward and respectful. There was no 'talking over' or infantilization often observed in the company of people with dementia.

At the end of one session, V asked his son, T, if he should drive them home. T responded totally straight forwardly, 'You're all right, Dad', he said, 'I'll drive'. In that moment, I was reminded of the importance of maintaining respect for people with dementia – even in potentially comic moments. It is important that we laugh with them – it can build relationships. It is, however, imperative not to laugh at them, to do so would undermine the group's safety, distract us from respecting and valuing their lives, from validating their experiences and celebrating their relationships.

When I heard of V's death, my initial response was sadness, then concern for his wife and family, then I had a sense of privilege in the hope that I had played a part, however small, in celebrating his life in what came to be his few final weeks. I recalled the privilege of the insights I had been given

into the lives of the couples - witnessing their relationships, listening to them retell and relive special or inconsequential moments, narrate their lives, as individuals, and together.

I shared fleeting moments with V and his family but what I learnt will endure.

V's death also brought into sharp focus how, as a practitioner of RYCT, I manage my emotions in engaging with participants, remain active and curious in my practice, authentic and open minded, yet resist overidentification and confusion of feelings. I should never assume that the intimacy is anything other than a professional exchange. As an RYCT practitioner, I must hold the boundary firm, keep the exchange clean, ensure the safety of the work. To overidentify is not beneficial, least of all for participants; clear focus on their needs is of primary importance. It was right to be sad for V and his family – in the right measure, at the right time. But it is also critical that attachments – and endings - are managed appropriately.

8. Conclusions

The group leaders, volunteers and apprentices – and increasingly throughout the process as they settle and gain confidence, the participants themselves - create the conditions in which moments are recalled, tiny fragments are assembled, stories are told and where participants renew their identities, refresh their purpose and validate their relationships.

To my mind, knitting squares became a metaphor for our work on RYCT. The facilitators, helpers and apprentices were, in effect, helping couples knit together disparate memories – some close to the surface, others well-hidden, or long forgotten, or which might never be recalled. Our task was to stimulate and unlock memories and make something coherent and recognisable from them. Like knitting needles which are pulled out when the job is complete, our role was to bring shape and purpose, at least temporarily, and help participants find and share memories, to recall ('remember') and reorder ('re-member') them. The product was uneven, perhaps; with dropped stitches, undoubtedly; and gaping holes, on occasion – but something of which to be proud all the same. Loops - stimulated by song, poem, act, action, smell, taste and prop as well crafted, curious and validating interactions - were pulled together.

Being a metaphorical knitting needle was a critical task as an apprentice. I relished the responsibility.

When I embarked on RYCT, I thought I was going to learn, quite simply, how to design and deliver memory workshops. The experience was something else entirely: a personal journey - deep experiential learning - for which I was barely prepared but will always be enormously grateful. I look forward to exercising my newly acquired skills.

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