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# Colours of dementia : a community art facilitation programme for people with dementia

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# Colours of

Written by Sophia Suk-mun Law

A COMMUNITY ART FACILITATION PROGRAMME FOR PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA

# Dementia



## **Introduction**

Colours of Dementia was a trial art facilitation programme for dementia care in a community setting led by Prof. Sophia Law, Associate Professor of the Department of Visual Studies at Lingnan University. The programme was supported by the Hong Kong Alzheimer's Disease Association (HKADA) and Art for All. The funding came from Prof. Law's Education for Service-learning Faculty Award (2013) from the Lingnan Foundation.

The programme, which ran from December 2013 to June 2014, consisted of a series of eighteen specially designed creative workshops for 14 elders, aged 59 to 94, who were suffering from mild to advanced dementia. A group of volunteer participants, including three relatives, two social workers, five elder students and three youths, were recruited as observers. To provide them with some basic knowledge about dementia, art and creativity, the volunteers received ten hours of lectures given by a geriatrician, a professional artist and an academic professor prior to the beginning of the workshops. Each of the observers was paired with an elder enrolled in the programme; they observed the same elder in all of the workshops. Relatives and caregivers accompanying the elders to the workshops were also invited to join the workshops.

The title, Colours of Dementia, refers to the images produced by the elders with dementia. These images reflect the individuality of each elder, reminding us of their distinctiveness and uniqueness as people. Through these colours, we are able to connect to them as individuals.

## **Objectives**

Art interventions for dementia care have been shown to have great benefits for both people with dementia and their caregivers. The aims of the Colours of Dementia project were as follows:

- i) to improve the quality of life for elders with dementia;
- ii) to motivate behavioural activation of elders with dementia by stimulating their senses through creativity;
- iii) to promote communication between the person with dementia and others;
- iv) to provide a better understanding of dementia for the participants in the programme;
- v) to enhance university students' social awareness of ageing and dementia; and
- vi) to connect people of different generations through art.

## **Structure and Evaluation**

Eighteen sessions of specially designed creative workshops were structured and led by professional artists and art therapists. Each workshop lasted for two hours and was built around different forms of creativity such as drawing, painting, dancing, singing or craft making. All of the creative sessions shared a common natural theme such as sky and clouds, leaves and gardens, or fruits and traditional food for festivals. The programme ran during two festivals, Chinese New Year and the Dragon Boat Festival. 'Our tree' and 'Our garden' are two large collaborative works created by the elders during the programme.

All of the workshops were video-taped and the performance of each of the elders with dementia was documented. The three relatives were paired with their mothers and each volunteer participant was assigned to a particular elder for the entire programme. This not only allowed a closer and more detailed observation of each performance, but also ensured a better connection between the elders and the observers. The performance of the few elders who were left without a partner were observed by the research assistant. Immediately after each workshop, all of the observations were recorded. The records included specific details about both verbal and nonverbal responses and the artworks, and special attention was given to the engagement and social interactions of the elders in each workshop.

## **Background and Rationale**

There are an estimated 24 million people living with dementia worldwide (Label, 2013) and the number is increasing. In Hong Kong, the population of those aged 65 and above is expected to grow from 13% in 2011 to 30% in 2041. If we include those over 60, the number of people with dementia is expected to increase by 222% from 103,433 in 2009 to 332,688 in 2039. To cope with this situation, measures to promote active ageing are necessary. Measures to prepare our society to accept and care for dementia are also important.

Recent research on Alzheimer patients has produced new insights into the creative process itself and its relationship to rehabilitation for dementia. Clinical observations have suggested that patients with fronto-temporal degeneration have heightened visual and musical capacities (Miller, 2000). Dr Bruce Miller of the University of California-Los Angeles Alzheimer's Centre finds that, despite their language dysfunction, many Alzheimer patients can still paint precisely and beautifully. Similarly, Dr Gene Cohen of George Washington University Centre on Health, Ageing and Humanities affirms that 'the inherent capacity for

creative expression exists throughout the entire life' (Cohen, 2006, p.14).

Cognitive and emotional memories are primarily registered and stored in different regions of our brain. Art, as a kind of visual thinking, relies on senses rather than rationality. It evokes and relates closely to our emotions. Recent findings in neuroscience have indicated that visual expression in art can stimulate brain functioning (Zeki, 2002). In real practices, art and music therapists working with people with dementia consistently notice that drawing, painting and music have the potential to provide meaningful stimulation, improve social interaction and improve levels of self-esteem in their patients (Killick & Allan, 2001). Art-related research programmes conducted by Alzheimer's Australia show that remaining creative helps to maintain Alzheimer's patients' well-being and promotes their quality of life (Balnes, 2007). Other researchers have also found that arts-based activities can have social and psychological benefits for patients with dementia such as increasing confidence, enthusiasm, enjoyment, social contact, mood, quality of life and ratings of depression (Moniz-Cook & Manthorpe, 2009), and that artistic creativity reduces depression and isolation in dementia patients (Hannemann, 2006).

## **Observations and Findings**

Art in a community setting provides a joyful platform for connecting people with dementia with others, especially their relatives, social workers and caregivers. As all of the creative activities in this programme were designed to stimulate spontaneous expression, the images produced were largely a revelation of the memories and emotions of the dementia patient that could be recognised and appreciated by others. Most of the elders enrolled in Colours of Dementia came to the workshops with their caregivers, who were invited to join the group. This provided the caregivers with a sharing channel with the elders that allowed them to experience emotional liberation and expression in a cheerful and interactive social setting. Significantly, the sharing activities were all explained and experienced in non-verbal ways.

## **Art induces joy and satisfaction**

Creativity, like games and play, is meant to be fun. Genuine creativity is spontaneous and self-directed. The process stimulates our senses and further excites our sensory responses through interactions with the media. This helps release inner emotions and induces joy by satisfying our senses. This is particularly precious for people with dementia, as most of their

emotional impulses are largely repressed or expressed inappropriately owing to their limited verbal expression. As observed in *Colours of Dementia*, all of the elders, even the one with advance dementia, responded increasingly well to the creative activities. Although quite a few of the elders could not explicitly verbalise their happiness, the genuine smiles on their faces were undoubtedly expressions of joy and comfort. Interviews with the elders enrolled in *Colours of Dementia* and their relatives also indicated that the elders enjoyed the workshops. As the programme progressed, the workshops increasingly overflowed with dynamic interactions and delight. The last workshop was filled with a festive atmosphere and most of the elders were smiling like children as they gathered the pieces they had made during the programme.

Below are some comments about the workshops made by the elders and their relatives.

- ‘Full of fun, filled with people,’ said Elder B (female, 79). The caregiver by her side elaborated, ‘She would ask when she can attend the workshop at home as she is confused with the dates.’
- ‘I’d give the workshops full marks,’ said Elder C (male, 94).
- ‘Happy, I like painting,’ said Elder F (female, 72). Her daughter explained, ‘She was not feeling well earlier and missed some sessions. When she recovered, she immediately requested to rejoin the workshop.’ After accompanying her mother to the workshop and witnessing her mother’s joyful expression while painting, the daughter bought some painting materials for her mother at home.
- ‘Although it is a long way for us to come to the centre, we both enjoy the workshop, especially those dancing sessions,’ said the husband of Elder H (female, 72).
- ‘Her performance is very good here as she is quite troublesome at home, often cries with emotional outbursts. She [responds] well and is much happier here,’ said Elder K’s (female, 63) husband.
- ‘Very happy, many people here,’ said Elder L (female, 87).
- ‘I am very happy here. The interaction is a miracle, no angry faces,’ said Elder M (male, 70).

## **Art activates positive behaviour in elders with dementia**

The creative activities structured in Colours of Dementia stimulated the participants' feelings without their awareness. Inner feelings activated by the senses during the creative process are expressed in non-verbal forms of kinesthetic energy such as gestures and voice, body movements and choices of symbolic forms and colours. All of the responses are natural and spontaneous, relying not on cognition but rather on sensory interaction with the media. Cohen (2006) proclaims that elderly participants experience a high level of social engagement, culminating in a 'renewed sense of control' and an 'ongoing individual mastery' each time he/she participates in an art activity (p. 3). Such positive reinforcement engenders positive behaviour in elders with dementia. For the elders enrolled in Colours of Dementia, positive behaviour, including more awareness of and caring for others, self-initiation in working with other elders and less emotional outbursts at home, were clearly noted by the relatives and observers. Below are some of the examples.

- 'My mother has become more motivated and responsive after joining the programme, in the past, she was passive and now she is much more active at home. At one time, she expressed [that] she wanted to see her paintings left in the centre. Such activation can last for one to two days,' Elder A's (female, 84) daughter said.
- 'She has never painted before but it seems that she likes it a lot. She is very happy in the workshop, and the positive mood can last for a day or two,' said the daughter of Elder D (female, 81).
- 'My father enjoyed the dancing activity most. He is very active at home lately. He would respond to conversation about the workshop. Such positive mood can maintain for one to two days,' said Elder C's (male, 94) daughter.
- 'The change is quite obvious,' said the daughter of Elder E (female, 90), who participated as an observer in the programme. She accompanied her mother throughout the whole programme. She said, 'My mother has become more energetic and thinks more positively. Before, she easily got upset as she thought she was useless. She would hit others or hurt herself sometimes. And now, she seems to have gained some meaning and direction from the workshop. She enjoys doing the handcrafts, making clay dumplings, silk flowers, sticking leaves and painting trees etc. She feels more secure nowadays and her emotional outbursts have largely subsided lately. She smiles a lot. Even her health has got better.'
- 'My mother has become more talkative at home. She would mention things about the

workshop,' the daughter of Elder F (female, 72) explained.

- It was noted and documented in the session observation that Elder G (male, 59) became increasingly passionate in offering help to other elders as the programme developed. In his own narration to the social workers, he explained, 'I am a volunteer in the group.'
- 'He has become more child-like and happier. The programme has ignited his passion for writing poems. He recalled quite a few in the workshop', commented Elder M's (male, 70) daughter.
- As recorded by the observer, Elder H (female, 72) asked the volunteer her name in Session 8. Although H kept forgetting, she tried hard to remember. She also showed her awareness of others by asking the artist if she was sick when she saw her wearing a mask.
- Later in the programme, quite a few of the elders initiated pairing up for dancing. For example, Elder M invited Elder D (female, 81) and Elder N (female, 68) invited Elder L (female, 87) voluntarily and with delight. The research assistant noted that such initiation was absent earlier in the programme.
- Elder K (female, 63) suffers from advanced dementia and her improvement was the most encouraging in the group. At the beginning of the programme, K was totally depend on her husband and displayed emotional disturbances. She hit and shouted at others in Session 3 and cried in another session. As the programme developed, K had fewer emotional outbursts and more spontaneous responses to others. In Session 12, she allowed the artist to hold her hand with direct eye contact. In Session 15, when the group was forming a circle, she voluntarily put her hands on the artist assistant's and smiled. She could even respond to questions with simple but relevant answers. For example, she said yes when asked whether she was happy.

The release of impulses and the joy experienced by the elders in Colours of Dementia certainly improved their quality of life. It provided them with a new platform for experiencing self-direction, satisfaction of the senses through the beauty of forms and colours, free movement of the body and rhyme and rhythm in singing. The programme was not concerned with whether these elders were cognitively aware of what they did, but rather with the positive effects of creativity on these elders.



## **Art distinguishes individuality**

Genuine creativity allows one to express the inner self and therefore expresses one's uniqueness. Observers in the Colours of Dementia programme noted that they could identify the distinct personal character of each elder as it was expressed in the process of creation and in the final products. For example, Elder D was very meticulous and she drew very carefully with many details; Elder M had his own ideas and would only listen to others selectively; whereas Elder C was sociable in nature, as he was a teacher of social dance when he was young. The very different presentations of their works visually expressed their individuality.

## **Art engages and connects**

The engaging nature of art is dearly explained by Ellen Dissanayake (1995) in her exploration of art as a uniquely human behaviour. She contends that various forms of artistic activity involved in rituals 'unite participants with one another, performers with their audience, the community as a whole. They facilitate a mood in which attention is focused, aroused, moved, manipulated and satisfied' (p. 24). The creative activities structured in Colours of Dementia had three phases: warm up (preparing both individuals and the environment for the actual creation that followed), actual creation and group sharing. As indicated by the observers and feedback from the participants, the warm up and sharing sections successfully built strong group cohesion.

'Various forms of creativity work very well in the group,' the social worker commented. 'Some elders are more sensitive to specific media that can get them engaged easily. It is amazing to see how the group unites as a whole dynamically as the elders are getting more and more engaged with the activities. Even the relatives are benefitting. Elder M's daughter used to cry but has become happier and more positive after accompanying her father to the workshop, M's son purposely came to the workshop during his visit to Hong Kong from abroad.'

The real human connection was not confined to the elders and the observers; it included the relatives and volunteers. The programme successfully created a harmonious social atmosphere and a great social network among the elders, volunteers, artist and social workers.

'Getting these otherwise quite isolated elders together, doing some collaborative creation is

great,' said Elder E's daughter. 'The elders have better support and encouragement in seeing others in similar situation,' the daughter elaborated. The artist assistant noted that the programme established some great connections between the elders and relatives. The relatives would share their feelings and support each other. Some of them even became friends and invited each other for dinner at their homes.

Elder M's daughter found that the group interaction motivated her father, 'He loves to play with the youth volunteers,' she explained.

The university student also reflected that the programme connected her to the elders, giving her a better understanding of ageing and dementia care. These are examples of experiential learning outside the classroom setting.

Bernfeld and Fritsch (2006) in their research on using art and creativity for dementia care confirm that well-designed art projects can invigorate and revitalise the human capital of any age care facility.

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