

Meeting the Creative Needs of People with Dementia through Art Activities: A Guide for Beginners

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Kirby Court, which is part of The Benevolent Society's Bexley Centre, is a dementia specific hostel that provides home-like accommodation and high quality care for people with moderate to severe dementia. Last year, I began working as a Social Worker at Kirby Court, and soon realised that the residents with high levels of dementia needed an outlet for their emotions and feelings. As a trained artist, I understand the value of creative expression, and decided to introduce a series of art therapy sessions for these residents.



Kirby Court

Pauline Mottram (2003), an art therapist who has been involved in creative work with people with dementia, believes “each individual’s personal expression through art reflects a unique expressive style that projects, reflects and reinforces the particular personality that produced it”.

As we know, people with dementia often have difficulties, but these do not change the fact that older people with dementia retain their feelings and emotions, even though they may not fully comprehend what is being said.

According to Anne Summut (2003), a Social Worker and Dementia Education Co-ordinator for Alzheimer’s Australia, there is an “awareness context” where people with dementia are aware of what is happening to them, and it is a mistake to feel they are incapable of understanding.

The Kirby Court facility has been architecturally designed to be dementia friendly but unfortunately for my first session did not offer a separate workshop area for ease of supervision. Here I would like to describe the challenges I experienced with my art activities sessions with older people with dementia at Kirby Court.

My first activity had been planned and arranged by me with help from a member of staff at Kirby Court. The activity would take place approximately one hour with the two of us assisting. On the day unfortunately, the other staff member was unavoidably called away for the day and I was 'all alone'.

Arriving there just before the session was to commence, I first borrowed the keys to the activity cupboard to prepare and check everything was there as arranged. I had brought mixing containers, flat palettes and three samples of student 'Pointilistic' paintings for visual references. As the area is in open space with the residents walking around, I was unable to take anything out to leave on the bench. I found the three primary colours plus white acrylic paint were in the cupboard with other craft materials - but no rags or paper. Panic struck!

Closing and locking the cupboard I ran back to the front area to ask if anyone knew where the paper might be? All the staff being extremely busy meant this was difficult, but eventually we found two sheets of cardboard. I then needed scissors to cut it up which entailed much door knocking to find a staff member with the keys to the kitchen drawers. On my way back to the activity area I asked a passing member of staff, if she could find three residents who might like to participate in art activities and if they could be brought around in approximately ten minutes.

I rushed back and unlocked the cupboard under the sink but could not find any plastic tablecloth or aprons as arranged. Looking at the table, which was glass with rattan around the edge (not the usual work table!), I quickly made the decision that as the paints were plastic it would remove easily if not left to cure. Thankfully, I found the plastic gloves but I had serious misgivings about their unprotected clothes.

Grabbing the three primaries I mixed the paints into shallow palettes and added two different tints – pink and pale blue. To control the paint and keep it clean, I had decided to put only one palette on the table at a time and wash the residents' gloved hands in between colours. Luckily as I just finished preparing the residents arrived, one more than expected, but all very eager! I sat them around the table and placed the pieces of cardboard in front of each person, and got out the gloves. Handing them each a pair, I asked them to put them on, as they had no doubt done many times when going to the city. They all needed some help but were aware enough to spread their fingers at just the right moment.



As quickly as possible I moved around helping each one, but by the time I made it to the final person the first and second persons had removed their gloves leaving them neatly folded and placed on the table in front of them. By this time the paint over on the bench was attracting attention with a few extra residents gathered around so I quick-stepped over to protect the paint. Luckily, within a few seconds the residents moved away, enabling me to get back to the table only to see four pairs of neatly placed gloves in front of four beaming faces!!

Recalling how the residents had been so intrigued with the paints, I grabbed the dark blue palette and placed it in the centre of the table to hold their attention as I rushed to each resident to once again put on the gloves. Once the task was completed I requested they use their fingers to apply the spots of paint and pointed to the samples I had propped on the bench. As they were hesitant, I grabbed a piece of cardboard to demonstrate, and off they went! The fusion of the participants was terrific – they actually started speaking amongst themselves about painting when they were younger. Although I was slightly flustered at the beginning, I began to enjoy the activity and interaction as the participants became thoroughly absorbed in the painting while conversing between one another about their histories.



The resident's individuality showed from their first marks and they were extremely forthcoming with requests for different colours. As some were stumbling over the names it was easier to refer to the temperature of each colour rather than using only the names. Only three residents chose to apply red, with two out of the three meticulously covering over each red spot before they felt they had finished. Blue, yellow and pink (a light value) were the favoured colours, in that order. There was much segregation of the colours rather than overlapping or blending. Each work was individual, one with dots regimented across the whole of the work, another integrated over the whole of the page, one work was applied in concentric circles of individual colour, and two chose to apply individual spots of one colour in each corner and not in the centre at all, whilst the other two were in only one colour and tended to lose their spots! Two residents used contrasting hues only, showing good contrast sensitivity, with the overall colours in the works displaying more a value of hues with varying degrees of visual attention, but with a definite aversion to the colour red.

As each person finished their works they would let me know by either stopping interaction or removing their gloves. Straight away I took each work over to the bench with each choosing to accompany their works, as I laid out their fruition of works along the bench.

My greatest problem arose after the works were finished as to how to keep them safe while they dried. As the residents walked away I rushed again to scrape any leftover paint into the containers I had brought and quickly wash and clean the palettes. Halfway through, four other residents had gathered and were amicably viewing the laid out works, when a fifth resident appeared and began to grab the works to commence 'stacking' them! I quickly dropped everything in the sink, rushed to gently remove them from her grip whilst offering to do it for her. At first there was a reluctance to let go and I felt, here is a challenge, but gratefully she relented and moved away abruptly with the others choosing to remain looking at the works.



Speaking to the four that stayed, one woman stated she "Couldn't stand the things!" - being an abstract artist I'm used to these types of comments! A more congenial male resident offered the opinion "Not bad, should be on the wall". Within a few minutes - seemed longer - I was able to continue the cleaning when suddenly a resident known for 'challenging behaviour' appeared along the bench.

The resident made a b-line for the red palette and as she grabbed it with her right-hand, I also grabbed it and calmly tried persuading her to let go. A tug-of-war commenced, my heart racing whilst trying to remain cool, calm and collected but desperately hoping she would let go. Suddenly her left-hand came up and scraped across the palette as she finally released it! She rushed away as I dumped the palette in the sink and grabbing a paper-towel (remember no rags!) from the dispenser, galloped after her left-hand visualising paint everywhere! I had to lunge forward to grab her hand without being forceful, and quickly wipe-off as much as I could before she pulled away. Relieved, I turned to go back when I noticed two more residents walking towards the sink - back I rushed but, having noticed it was lunchtime, I gently guided the residents back towards the dining area.

As the residents were now at lunch, I took the opportunity to lay the works on the floor in the sunlight. I then proceeded to finish cleaning up the equipment, put the rubbish in a glad bag and everything else into a locked cupboard. I checked there was no paint over the furniture - unlike one of the residents (won't go into that) - and straightened the chairs and table. Just as I finished a resident appeared on my right with her empty bowl so I accompanied her back to the dining area.

Unfortunately, as we were walking back the others were beginning to disperse and my heart rate started rushing as the resident ‘stacker’ walked passed me back towards the art works.

Excusing myself, I rushed back just as she was grabbing two works off the floor! Once again I went to take them from her but found her even more adamant about stacking the works. She would not let go and she was rambling and incoherent, so I quickly told her I had been told to do it!! Her reply was “Your face looks familiar, okay I trust you, you do it!” as she thrust them back at me.

By this time more residents had walked this way and I could foresee the works being trampled over. Shoving the tip of one in my mouth, four in my left-hand, I juggled the other three in my right hand, glanced to see the rubbish bag was okay, and rushed with the works to the front area where a member of staff quickly helped me find a safe area to place the works. I quickly ran back just as some residents were trying to undo the knot on the rubbish bag! Once again convincing the residents the bag was mine and only rubbish, and had to be thrown out by me.

This experience reinforced the need for two things: necessary preparation time before and after the activity, and the desirability for a separate area when using any type of messy materials.

I was fortunate to be able to hold the second and following activities in a separate room with at least two or three of the residents from previous sessions. Although one of these residents had voiced a negative attitude to a previous activity, the resident insisted on joining the session.

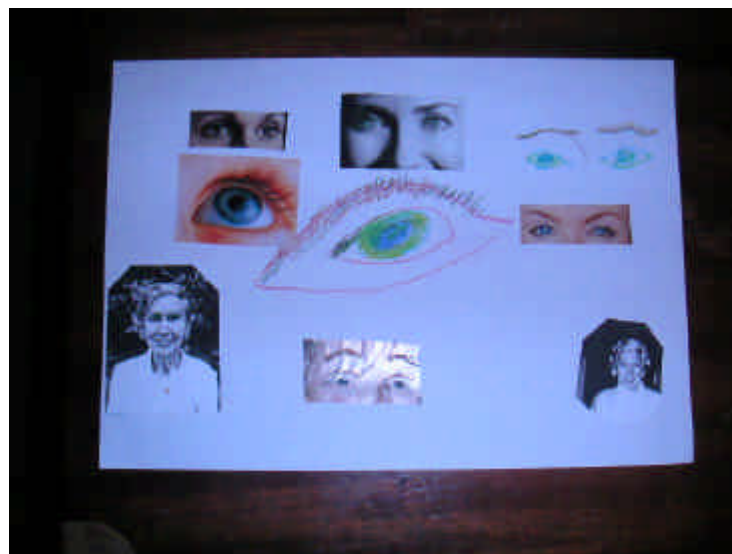


The second session involved the introduction of charcoal, where upon, with the residents hesitating in commencing, I took a piece of charcoal from the box on the table and proceeded to draw various marks onto my own sheet of paper. Imitating me, three residents began drawing with their pieces of charcoal but unfortunately, the fourth resident saw it as food and proceeded to put it in her mouth! Unfortunately within a few minutes, I found the smudging on their fingers was too distracting and distressing for the residents, so I quickly decided to remove that medium and replace it with a box of coloured oil pastels.

The resident who had very competently drawn a decorative flower using the charcoal, promptly chose an oil pastel from the box to colour in the flower. Another resident began forming the capital letter 'G' and extended it to form a continuous pattern across the paper, every now and again stopping and declaring "I don't know what I'm doing?" - I was able to reassure her from my experience this is normal for most artists!

Being better prepared and in a separate area where I had more control, the following sessions enabled me to enjoy the wonderful interaction that developed between the residents, i.e. one suggesting to another whilst pointing her finger at the work, to "Put a flower there" and another resident mumbling "I really can't do this" providing an opening for other residents to prompt her to continue. Some conversation flowed with intermittent bits fairly unintelligible to me but most amicable to the residents, allowing me to begin to relax and enjoy the moment, well, until one resident realised she didn't have her handbag! Fortunately for me, a staff member had just arrived and was able to help the resident back to her room to find her bag and choosing to return to continue her drawing within minutes.

The fourth activity was an extremely interesting session involving using oil pastels with photocopies of themselves at various ages and cut-outs from magazines of mouths and eyes in different sizes.



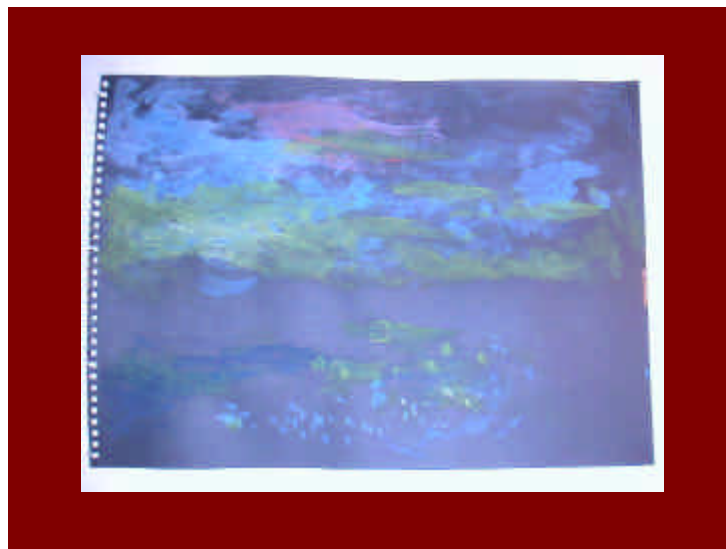
I demonstrated by drawing an oval shape to represent a face and added a mouth and eyes. Interestingly, the majority attempted to draw the eyes first that surprisingly mesmerised them and held their concentration for very long periods of time. I finally had to prompt them to choose one of their photocopies with only one recognising themselves. The other residents were adamant the photocopies must be their daughters, daughters-in-law, sons or relatives. One particular resident had not recognised herself but continually commented on how lovely the person was and remained intrigued with her image throughout the session.

There was a constant banter between the residents over the images and although there was one male resident participating, not one resident chose to use male eyes or mouths on their works. I was surprised how decisive each resident was as to where they wanted their image to be glued onto their work. Having said that, I felt the residents were finding it difficult to cope with the facial images and understanding the image concept but feel this would be very

interesting to explore further. The resident's concentration throughout the session was most astonishing, with each resident producing individual approaches quite unusual in any group art activity at any level.

The 'Sundowning Period' proved extremely challenging and difficult for one person and only lasted 15 minutes. With the 'sundowning period' the activity needed constant prompting and reassurances due to their emotional upheaval. Therefore the session did not succeed in producing social interaction nor a feeling of well-being due to the residents anxiety and stress levels.

More research on the emotional impact of colours on people with dementia would be ideal. Providing a space to encourage more social interaction through art activities is a progressive step towards avoiding social isolation languishing. Some residents may always have been socially isolated but some have become isolated due to dementia. When participating in art activities remember that each person is unique, not to expect too much, use laughter/humour to overcome a misunderstanding and demonstrate to help the person to understand what you are saying. It is a great feeling to watch older people with dementia create an artwork and make sociability more visible and accepted for older people with dementia



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ART ACTIVITIES FOR PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA

Art activities with older people with dementia should only be offered within a separate room (workshop area) with no more than four people participating at the one time. A separate area allows for:

Person-centred care that respects the older persons as individuals thereby recognising their differences and uniqueness.

John Killick (2002) observed that when involved with the arts, older people with dementia show:

- spontaneous creativity
- sustained concentration
- enhanced communication during and after activity
- sustained collaboration that breaks down isolation.

ENVIRONMENT

Room set-up:

- allow freedom of movement around the table(s) with adequate table top space between/for each participant
- easy access for each individual and ease of movement of their chairs
- a separate table within stepping/reaching distance of the work table(s) so that all materials to be used can be easily attainable
- a separate space for works to dry in a horizontal position

- comfortable temperature in the room.

NECESSARY EQUIPMENT

- Each participant must have a plastic apron (gloves also if needed for the medium being used).
- Paper towels readily available on separate table, with one or two rags.
- A hair-dryer to help speed up the drying process of the works.

MATERIALS (varies according to the activity)

- Paints, already mixed in shallow plastic containers (margarine, ice-cream or take-away packaging).
- Water, minimum of one for each colour, to be in plastic containers with extra water in an ice-cream container kept on the spare table.
- Paintbrushes and sheets of paper (no larger than A3 size) all to be stacked on the separate table for easy distribution as needed.
- Photos, images or shapes to be cut out and ready for use.
- Alternative materials must be made ready for application before the session starts.

Only after everything has been prepared and set-up should the older people be *invited* to participate in an art activity session averaging 40 minutes duration.

SUGGESTED MATERIALS

- Acrylic paints – RED, BLUE, YELLOW & WHITE basic requirement, (finger painting, brush or sponge).
- Pastels – minimum of 8 colours.
- Oil crayons – as above.
- Coloured pencils – as above.
- Photos – for montages.
- Scraps of fabrics – collages.
- Cut out or torn shapes in any medium.
- Various material remnants for variety of texture works.

Materials to avoid:

- Textas or felt tip pens (may be dangerous)
- Charcoal (not popular, difficult for use)
- Inks (too messy and uncontrollable).

SESSION

Commencing the session once the participants are supplied with aprons and seated, the materials should be named individually as you put them on the table(s) in the centre.

Refer to the individual colours as temperatures (hot, cool or warm) as well as their names.

If the participants are hesitant in commencing, demonstrate how to hold the item and how to use it on a separate piece of paper.

Let the older person with dementia know they have the choice of any / every colour and encourage them to continue if they become anxious – make sure you do not tell them what

they should paint, have patience and allow the individual as much time and at their own leisure to make their own mark(s).

AWARENESS

Be aware of a variety of factors associated with each individual such as the following:

- mild hearing impairment
- unable to hear with any background noises
- differing degrees of visual impairment
- experiencing hallucinations
- listening and concentration spans, and the individual's comprehension at times.

The pre-preparation will allow you to enjoy the interaction and creativity displayed!

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References:

<http://www.alzheimers.org.au/content.cfm?topicid=26>

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