GOOD VIBRATIONS: HOW MENTORSHIP CAN DEEPEN UNIVERSITY LEARNING AND HOW DANCE CAN BEGIN TO ANSWER THE PRIMARY SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS OF PEOPLE LIVING WITH DEMENTIA

Abstract

‘Good Vibrations’ is a pilot project designed to deliver dance classes to people living with dementia and it is supported by Tees Valley Dance and Age UK Darlington. The project was devised by myself with the assistance of two Teesside University undergraduate students. The objectives are: 1. To identify the potential benefits a weekly dance class might have on people living with dementia; 2. To bridge the gap between theoretical and practical knowledge for university students in their final year of dance studies; 3. To use mentorship to deepen the knowledge gained in a university environment through hands-on learning and via an established feedback cycle; 4. To show the potential benefits to arts practitioners of working with people with dementia. Incorporating research from my work as an artist-in-residence for Age Concern, I worked to establish classes for people living with dementia. This came together in three parts: i) the use of Tom Kitwood’s model of the five primary social and psychological needs of people living with dementia (1997), ii) a Facebook page to share knowledge and research with fellow practitioners, and iii) a feedback cycle based on the Honey and Mumford (2012) cycle of learning between myself, the students, and key stakeholders including Tees Valley Dance and Age UK Darlington. Interviews and close observation were also used to evaluate participants’ experiences and the potential impact of the project on Age UK.

Keywords: Dance, Dementia, Mentoring, Elderly Care, Kitwood

Introduction

‘Good Vibrations’ was a five-month pilot project in which I, assisted by undergraduate students Rheannon Davies and Rebecca Ball, developed and delivered a series of dance classes for people living with dementia. ‘Good Vibrations’ was interested in identifying the potential benefits of dance classes for people living with dementia in terms of well-being. We used the Tom Kitwood model (Kitwood, 1997) to identify the primary psychological needs of people living with dementia alongside the Bradford Wellbeing index (Bradford Dementia Group 2008) to identify visual signals of wellbeing. This was supplemented by interviews with carers and participants.

As a pedagogical project in association with Teesside University, the project used the Honey and Mumford cycle of learning (Williams, Woolliams, and Spiro, 2012) to test whether theoretical learning could be enhanced by real world experience. Finally, the project sought to identify the potential benefits of working with people living with dementia for artists.

Using the Tom Kitwood model of the five primary psychological needs of people living with dementia, the team developed classes that tried to respond to these for the participants. The needs identified in the Kitwood model are: comfort, attachment, inclusion, occupation, and identity (Kitwood, 1997). Kitwood suggests that the prime task of dementia care, to maintain personhood in the face of failing mental powers, will occur through the “sensitive meeting of this cluster of needs” (Kitwood, 1997, p.84).

In order to meet the needs identified by Kitwood’s model we needed to address the issue of communication with people living with dementia. Problems with language occur in all types of dementia (Judd and Society, 2007), so we worked with non-verbal forms of communication including body language, facial expression, breathing, posture, and eye contact. Coming from a dance background gave us a certain level of expertise in reading and understanding bodies and also in communicating with our own bodies. I also sought to develop the students’ kinaesthetic empathy or the ability to intuit what others are experiencing based upon their bodily behaviour (Shaw, 2012). We developed kinaesthetic empathy through the practice of sitting with each participant before the workshop, breathing in time with them and taking note of any areas of tension in their bodies. We imagined ourselves in their bodies to get a sense through their posture and body language of their levels of energy, openness, introversion, and pain. We then took these things into consideration during our classes. This time to establish how each participant communicates and what their specific needs for the class may be was important in developing classes which could meet these needs. We sought to remain receptive to the needs of the participants expressed non-verbally throughout the class. We were also aware that our own body language would be read by the participants (Judd and Society, 2007) and therefore chose to maintain open body language and enthusiastic expressions.

Figure 1 - Mirror Exercise. Photo by Iku Tsuchiya. An example of an exercise we used to respond to some of the psychological needs identified by Kitwood is called Mirror Exercise.

Viola Spolin offers the following description in her book A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques: “A faces B and A reflects all movements initiated by B, head to foot, including facial expressions. After a time reverse the roles, calling upon B to reflect A.” (1999, p.61). Movements can be pedestrian or a more artistic expression of their emotions or experience. We sometimes repeated the exercise with scarves as props can act as a bridge between the participants and their creativity – inspiring their movement (Vella-Burrows and Wilson, 2016). The practice of creating their own movement satisfied the need for identity, and a feeling of comfort and inclusion was created from working with others. Copying each other’s movements seemed
to create a real feeling of acceptance and community within the group. A 1999 Chartrand and Bargh experiment found that even purposeful mimicry causes “greater liking and smoother interactions” (p.903). We found this to be true in our classes and used this exercise to build relationships between the participants, decreasing feelings of social isolation which can be prevalent in people living with dementia (Cook and Society, 2012).

We also used the “build a phrase” improvisation technique identified in Liz Lerman’s book Teaching Dance to Senior Adults (1984). A dance phrase was created by compiling movement ideas contributed by individuals in the class. The movements were performed one after the other and the whole phrase repeated each time a new movement was added. The need for identity was satisfied as participants were asked to create their own movement with meaning to them in relation to the day’s theme. This activity often prompted lively discussions and stories from the participants’ past. Having to remember a sequence of movements is challenging and can satisfy the need for meaningful occupation. Often the participants erupted in a spontaneous round of applause for themselves when they completed the sequence correctly.

We considered how the architecture of the seating arrangement could help us to satisfy the group’s psychological needs. The classes took place in a seated circle, answering the need for comfort, both because a circle allows participants to see everyone in the group and by having balance issues addressed via the security of a chair. People living with dementia often have a narrowed field of vision (Alzheimer’s Society, 2010) and this arrangement means there are no confusing movements coming from behind them. A circle allows everyone to feel part of the group (inclusion) and also creates a sense of equality so that leadership can easily be passed from teacher to participant. We have seen the benefits of this seating arrangement grow over time as participants are increasingly confident to lead ‘follow-me’ type movement activities. As a result of this pilot project we have developed a series of lesson plans and exercises that respond to the Tom Kitwood model (Kitwood, 1997) for the psychological needs of people living with dementia.

As language can be a barrier in communication for people living with dementia (Judd and Society, 2007), we collected visual evidence of wellbeing based on the Bradford Wellbeing Profile (Bradford Dementia group, 2008). We observed participants for signs of wellbeing including: Making physical contact, eye contact, signs of warmth or affection (e.g. holding hands, hugging, stroking, patting, smiling, gazing, kissing, blowing kisses), looking bright eyed or animated, tracking a person’s movements with the eyes, creative expression (when a person is putting something of him/herself into whatever they are doing), and showing signs of pleasure, enjoyment or happiness. We documented evidence of these signs through photographic and video documentation, as well as recording it in our sessional written reflections. We noticed many of the signs of well-being occurring in our classes, especially creative expression, making physical contact, smiling and expressing their sense of humour.

Feedback was collected from carers through recorded conversations after the sessions, providing further evidence that the classes were giving a source of enjoyment for the people living with dementia. Feedback from carers included:

“It’s an opportunity for Brian to socialise, he loves the dancing and the music. He sometimes shows us when he gets home as he can remember what he’s done on the day”

“She really missed it over the Easter break, she dances at home all the time, and Monday’s are her favourite days because of the dancing”.

Figure 2 - A participant expressing signs of well-being as identified by the Bradford Wellbeing profile. Photo by Chantal Guevara

Mentorship, feedback cycles and bridging the gap between practical and theoretical knowledge

As this project was in part a pedagogical one created in partnership with Teesside University, I will now discuss the framework of the project from this standpoint.

A reflective feedback cycle was established so that the classes developed week on week based on verbal, physical, and written feedback from participants, carers, and teachers. Each week the undergraduate students and I reflected on the delivery of the sessions in a written document shared on a private Facebook page. Using the Honey and Mumford framework both students and teachers participated in a learning cycle of doing, reflecting, forming principles, and planning (Williams, Woolliams, and Spiro, 2012, p87). The undergraduate students had theoretical knowledge of best practice and working with vulnerable adults before beginning the mentoring programme. Through working with a mentor in a real work environment and reflecting on their experiences, they developed their skills and confidence to a level where they were able to deliver the sessions independently. Through reflection they were able to identify gaps in their own knowledge and look to other authors and practitioners for solutions, which they then had the opportunity to test in a real-world context. This was a valuable learning cycle, resulting in the development of increasingly robust class plans which benefited the students, myself and the participants.

When delivery of the sessions was passed to the students they were asked on which areas they wished to receive feedback, thus identifying specific areas within which they wanted to improve. In Ericsson’s model of deliberate practice he identifies four conditions which were linked to improved performance: when individuals were 1) given a task with a well-defined goal, 2) motivated to improve, 3) provided with feedback, and 4) provided with ample opportunities for repetition and gradual refinements of their performance (Anders Ericsson, 2008). Using this model, there was a marked improvement of the students’ delivery of the sessions and their confidence.

“I was a bit apprehensive before the project started as I had never worked with people with dementia . . . After meeting the participants I began to feel excited about
the sessions and the future. I don’t think the excitement ever leaves because every session each week is so different. Different props, personalities, activities, and special moments hearing the participants tell us their stories about their lives and their past. The project has put me on a path to a career I never would have thought of and I absolutely love it. I hope to pursue and expand this project into a North East scheme and with the help of the correct mentoring, support and experience this project has provided I think it is possible.” Rheannon Davies, Teesside University undergraduate student.

Potential benefits for arts practitioners
The project established several benefits for arts practitioners working with people living with dementia. Working in this environment requires the artist to exhibit a sense of presence and openness to the moment. In order to develop this the artist must learn to understand the non-verbal forms of communication the participants are using. Through observing, assisting, and delivering the classes, the undergraduate students developed their ability to exhibit kinaesthetic empathy. Once developed the students were able to perceive and react to the micro movements and expressions of the participants. Creating a class that was responsive to the needs of the participants from moment to moment meant not only that they were more able to take into account the social and emotional preferences of people less able to verbally communicate their preferences, but also that the students learnt to be very present and adaptable. These are skills which are highly prized in the art world with “say yes” being a common tool used in improvisational training. In addition, with an increase in the division of our presence with the advancement of technology, the ability and opportunity to remain focused for an extended period of time is becoming increasingly important for our physical and mental health. “Media multitasking, or the concurrent consumption of multiple media forms...has been associated with decreased cognitive control abilities as well as negative psychosocial impacts such as depression and social anxiety, negative social well-being, and poor academic performance” (Loh and Kanai, 2014). These opportunities to listen, connect, and move together away from the distractions of email and social media are becoming increasingly rare and are necessary for our well-being.

A further positive outcome experienced by both myself and the students was an affirmation of our love of dance, something that can be incredibly valuable in this highly competitive environment. “The senior adult audience is supportive, affirming, and able to give strong, loving attention. The result is a kind of refuge from critics, which allows the dance ran emotional release and freedom of movement.” (Lerman, 1984, p.144). Professional dance is highly critical. These classes gave the undergraduate students a much needed opportunity to re-kindle their love of dance. They came away from the sessions visibly relaxed, laughing and smiling.

Conclusion
The project has shown a number of positive outcomes for both people living with dementia, artists, and the undergraduate students in terms of well-being, confidence and learning. We have succeeded in developing a series of lesson plans and exercises that respond to the Tom Kitwood model (Kitwood, 1997) for the psychological needs of people living with dementia. The classes have resulted in a reduction of social isolation and an increase in several signs of wellbeing. We have demonstrated potential benefits for arts practitioners, including myself and the students, of an increased sense of presence and responsiveness, as well an increased sense of wellbeing through time spent with a responsive senior adult audience. Through mentorship and an established feedback cycle the students were able to progress from theoretical understanding of a subject to a confident ability to deliver sessions independently.

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Bibliography
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