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Making makes me feel better: Designing for wellbeing and social values.

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a design-led inquiry, which aimed to explore the benefits on wellbeing for people living with early stage dementia through participatory handcraft workshops. The project took place in a historically immersive environment at an open air living history museum involving a dementia friendly design team consisting of researchers, museum staff, volunteers and people living with dementia. Drawing on historic themes from the museum collections a range of new co-produced items were sold in the museum gift shop.

The workshop activities enabled an understanding to be established of living with dementia, the value of making and the abilities of people with dementia. Through the experiences of this small group we unpick the rich detail of the participatory activities in terms of wellbeing. Valuing the contribution of each individual and working side by side we really got to know personalities by observing the nuances of body language, recognising abilities and shifts in confidence.

We draw out the value of being 'in the moment' and also 'significant moments of realisation'. Often the participants commented that concentrating on a creative activity in the moment could be absorbing, the close connection with materials was shown to be comforting. We observed a commitment and ownership of the project and increased levels of confidence in participants where they valued learning new skills and felt privileged to work and have access to the historic collections within the museum. The co-design project received positive feedback from the local community and visitor interest through sales.

Through the project we sought to support the voice of people with dementia as one participant put it:

'The trouble is you see, when you're working everything is fast, you don't have time to try new things and we're not in a hurry, making makes me feel better.' Participant

Keywords: Wellbeing, co-design, dementia, handcrafted, community

Introduction

This paper leverages a design-led project, which considers the role of handcrafting as a strategy for promoting wellbeing and social connectedness for people living with early stage dementia. A collaboration between researchers from Northumbria University, School of Design and the Health and Wellbeing Team at Beamish Open Air Museum, The Living Museum of the North (England). Participatory workshops took place in the historically immersive 1940's Orchard Cottage at Beamish Museum involving a dementia friendly design team comprising of researchers, museum staff, volunteers and people living with dementia. The living museum tells the story of daily life in the North East, the whole site is interactive and immersive; artefacts are not in display cabinets or behind glass. The room at Orchard Cottage is full of authentic sights, sounds and smells of the era, stimulating a range of sensory responses in participants.



Figure 1: Orchard Cottage at Beamish Museum

This project draws upon research that explores the role of having access to and of handling historic objects for a range of positive health promotion benefits, such as a sense of belonging, a sense of identity, creative exploration and new learning (Chatterjee and Camic 2015). Historic object handling and viewing can stimulate people to construct their own stories and meanings

into daily life. Objects carry memory through generations; studies into interaction with objects in museums suggest that they enhance wellbeing and trigger emotional and sensory responses (Ander et al. 2012). Objects and the practice of making may also have local significance as a symbol of community and of personal identity associated to local traditions, people and places. We may associate an object or occupation to a particular geographical region (Twigger Holroyd et al. 2017). Participants in our study responded to the museum collections by placing emphasis on objects and traditions that have meaning to them, for example the miner's cricket, a small stool associated with mining heritage of the North East of England. Working in a museum space surrounded by 1940's artefacts we took inspiration from the immersive experience, which subsequently informed the co-design activity.

'This vernacular refers to the authentic, natural voice of a community, unselfconsciously communicated through everyday things that people have made.' (Gauntlett 2011. P 47).

This was particularly important in this making process because participants made a connection to these objects in their own daily and working lives, they recalled stories of using and of making crickets that have been passed down through their own families. By exploring locally significant artefacts and contextually relevant themes e.g. 'Crickets' we place emphasis on social values, historical and spiritual meanings that a product or practice holds for a particular social group. (Twigger Holroyd et al. 2017)

Methods

The craft group started as a 10-week pilot in October 2018, participants were recruited who already had an interest in craft and making and had a diagnosis of mild dementia. Heritage craft skills such as woodworking, woodcarving and printmaking were used in the workshops and participants were inspired by the collections and responded to the locally significant historic themes to produce prototype products. A longer study took place between March – November 2019 where participants developed their prototypes into handmade products for sale in the museum gift shop. Working with participants as design partners during the design process we explored themes within the unique context of the museum to inform the end product (L. Cassim 2018). Team working in the museum context valued the contribution of each participant through meaningful making practices and social experiences for all participants in a safe environment (Kindleysides and Biglands 2015). We build on the concept of a social workshop model proposed by Cassim (2015) towards a meaningful outcome that contributed financially to the sustainability of the group. Two researchers, who were also experienced designers, drew on their existing

knowledge to plan for an inclusive context for participants' whilst carefully pacing the activity for each individual and brought a consideration of design parameters that balanced achievability with quality of outcome (J. Cassim and Dong 2015).



Figure 2: Workshop

Facilitating Social Connections

Research suggests that creative making activity can have a positive therapeutic value for people living with dementia, such as increased confidence, self-esteem and social participation (Craig 2001). A design-led making activity is also considered beneficial to support personhood in dementia, having positive affect on self-expression, communication and occupation by understanding the relationships of participation (Wallace et al. 2013). Through this process of co-design and co-learning we reflect on the experiences of the person living with dementia and the role of the researcher as facilitator. Drawing on the existing specialist abilities and knowledge of the facilitators, and with a focus on traditional craft skill sharing we adopted a person-centred approach that was responsive to the capabilities of each individual. The most common issue facing a person living with dementia is a lack or loss of confidence after diagnosis, they might stop doing

things that they enjoy because they think they can no longer do it or people around them think that they can no longer do things. This work aimed to provide opportunities to carry on or even to learn new skills, which challenge the perception that a diagnosis of dementia is a barrier to new learning. Initial sessions established methods of co-supportive, practical and meaningful work like activity rooted in community identity and distinctiveness of the setting. We invoked a person-centred approach (Kitwood 1997) to participatory making with people living with dementia by understanding specific impairments or difficulties and individually adapting to each participant based on their abilities rather than their disabilities (Kindleysides and Biglands 2015). This methodology addresses the diversity and the complexity of disabilities of people living with a specific impairment such as dementia (Hendriks, Slegers, and Duysburgh 2015). Really getting to know the person is key to this approach.

A Dementia Friendly Design Team

According to the Alzheimer's Society there are around 850,000 people living in the UK with dementia, there is currently no cure this number is expected to increase as people live longer putting pressure on services such as health care. It is a challenge not only for the person living with dementia but also for families, friends and caregivers seeking ways to help them remain active and encourage independence. Dementia affects each person differently, our participants displayed their own difficulties in various ways, for example concentrating on a task or following a series of steps in an activity, or struggling to find the right word in a sentence. They might try to disguise the difficulties they are having by not joining in with a conversation, we noticed this especially at the beginning of the pilot. Participation and team working promoted communication and relationship building over time as we got to know people and drew out the value of being in the moment (MacPherson et al. 2009). Team working aimed to empower the person living with dementia by including them as equal contributors in a design process, as a valued member of a team of co-workers. Close working methods facilitated conversations and social interactions over a period of weeks as attachments were formed through the building of relationships, trust and familiarity. Researchers cannot always rely on verbal data, as many types of impairment affect participants' abilities to express themselves (Hendriks, Slegers, and Duysburgh 2015). Observation was the primary method of qualitative data collection for this study, reflecting on informal in-session conversations and different forms of body language, humour and banter.



Figure 3: Woodcarving Workshop



Figure 4: Printmaking Workshop

'I think you were surprised today?' 'Yes, but more than that it's that I've been able to do it and it was such a big task that I felt that I couldn't do it at the beginning and I've just persevered and I thought well, it wouldn't be my thing and it turned out much better than I thought it would do, I'm proud of it. It's just something that I realised that I could do.'

Researcher to Participant Field Notes Wednesday 21st November 2018

The co-design project recognises the capabilities of people living with dementia by empowering them to remain an active part of society through social networks and learning new skills after diagnosis. Embodied learning through hands-on-making extends the experience of new learning and participation beyond cognitive processes and recognises the significance of the body in learning (Robertson and McCall 2018). Working side-by-side the facilitator and participant relationship was evident through conversations and non-verbal body language; we began to recognise when a participant needed support or guidance. We also noticed moments of participant-to-participant support. A lack of confidence in learning a new skill was apparent in early sessions but confidences grew as participants built on their skills and relationships.

Simple 'in the moment' working methods celebrated small achievements and connections as they happened which contrasted with other 'significant moments' of realisation. Participants recognised that they could achieve tangible outcomes and other people could appreciate the things they were making through the sales of their products and from feedback received at various points in the project. The method of the engagement was a valuable shared process as well as acknowledging a sense of achievement in the output of the activity was significant. Creating in-house locally relevant products to generate financial revenue through sale of products in the gift shop stimulated a sense of pride for the participants when they realised they could contribute to the sustainability of their own activity.

'I was amazed at what I had achieved. By the end I felt like a professional and it inspired me to do more. I feel more confident about doing things, I've really surprised myself.' Participant
Wednesday 15th May 2019

'Mindset' was the name given to this project by a participant at one of the first sessions, having a group identity reinforced a sense of worth and belonging as a valuable asset in the museum. The first products went on sale in the museum gift shop during Dementia Action Week 2019. Valuing the contribution of the person in the design process we made a mutual decision to identify each participant as a maker. We sought consent to use Christian names and a brief statement on swing tags for the products in the shop display. The museum communications team promoted the project on social media channels and in their in-house magazine, which contributed further to a sense of group pride.

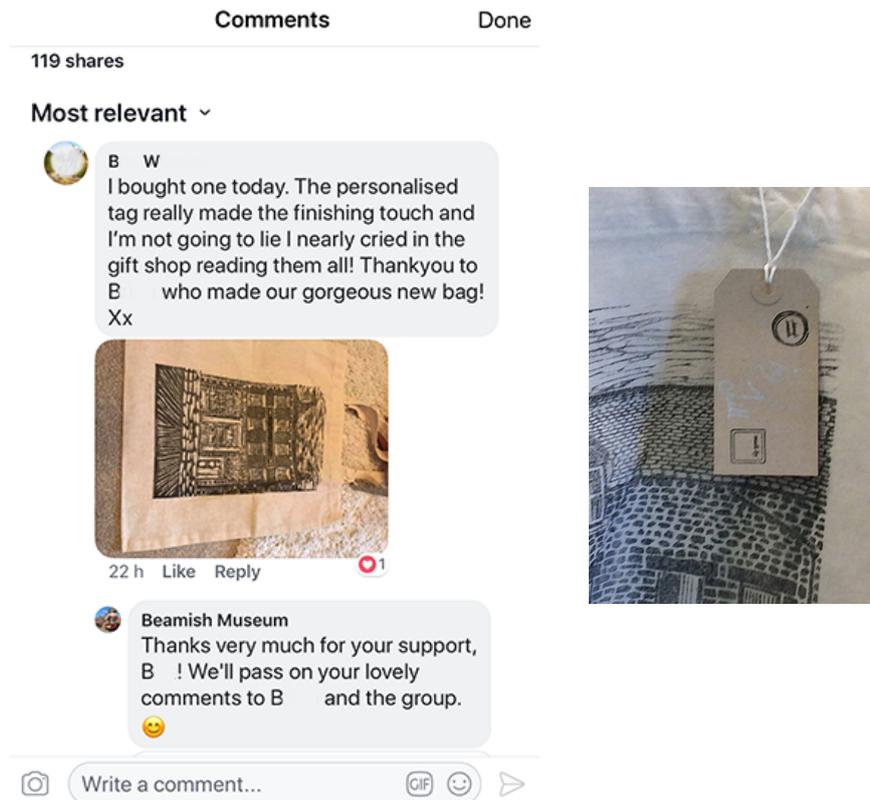


Figure 5:

Visitor Comment (2019) Beamish Museum

Facebook

'The response we've had from the public has been unbelievable. They really got behind the project and have been buying the bags in their dozens.' Retail team leader



Figure 6: Beamish Museum Gift Shop



Figure 7: Cricket Making

'I love it; I get a lot of enjoyment out of it. My dad was a miner and used to use a cricket when he was digging down the mines. His would have been a lot smaller though, and was used to protect his shoulder as he lay on the ground.' Participant. Field notes 16th October 2019

Discussion

In this paper we have reflected on the experiences of a small group of participants engaging in a hands-on making activity to consider how participation can facilitate wellbeing and support the voice of people living with dementia. The project has contributed to conversations around issues of living with dementia in society and how heritage organisations can work to support local communities through meaningful activity that challenges perceived barriers. Raising awareness through the commercialisation of the handmade products gives the project a sense of value for all stakeholders and contributes to sustainability in terms of wellbeing and financial benefit. Making in this unique setting makes historical connections with regional customs and traditions of a recent past. There is a perception of a simpler time, concentrating on an activity was seen to be absorbing, a temporary distraction from other difficulties. Creating something with the hands challenges participants to be imaginative and promotes concentration in the moment and can enrich the lives of people living with dementia.

Conclusion

Participatory workshop activities stimulated a commitment, ownership and sense of pride to work with the historic collections at the unique museum setting. This model for future activity recognises the contribution of people living with dementia to society by empowering them to remain an active part of their local community through social connections and learning new skills. Furthermore this project has helped create opportunities for people living with dementia to take part in a decision making process that builds their confidence and self-esteem over time. The role of the facilitators was to lead sessions by suggesting themes, introduce new skills and build on new learning gradually; over time participants became more confident and willing to take on new challenges. The knowledge sharing that the designer brings to the project was recognised as significant in this context by guiding non-designers to express themselves creatively. The expertise and design skills of the facilitators played an important role in identifying opportunities and developing prototypes in the workshops. The social enterprise model offers a purpose for the workshops with meaningful outcomes and contributes financially to the sustainability of the work. Although this specific scenario is situated in the North East, it could transpose to other regions or contexts by identifying the nuances and distinctiveness of a locality. Exploring the museum context to start conversations about local histories and what makes a community. This design led process contributed to a sense of pride, belonging and distinctiveness in community through a mutual appreciation of object and place.

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