



University of Brighton

Dance and Dementia Project: findings from the pilot study

This pilot study explored the role of dance in maintaining and developing relationships between people with dementia and, between people with dementia and those who care for and support them. Running between January and March 2011 it offered six weekly dance movement sessions to a group of older people with dementia who attended a local authority day centre in Brighton & Hove. The project used observation and interview techniques and was designed and carried out as a collaboration between academic researchers, creative practitioners and social care practitioners.

Key findings;

- Familiarity with the process and a sense of belonging developed within the group as the sessions progressed and participants became increasingly engaged and confident with the movement .
- The techniques used in the sessions, particularly working with reminiscence and embodied movement, encouraged the recall and expression of memories and allowed insights into the participants as the people they were and are. Interactions between members of the group increased but were not sustained outside the sessions
- The experience of the participants was very positive and there was some evidence from carers that this impact was sustained after the sessions
- Having a private, self contained space to run the group was a crucial part of its success as was the active involvement and support of the care staff and managers
- The methodology design was good although in a small pilot we were unable to include any audio visual recording and more visual feedback tools would have been useful.
- The collaborative partnership was key to the success and experience of the pilot.

**Research
Findings**

January 2012



Background

The project grew out of connections made between the research team partners during the planning and running of a Making Research Count event on Dementia at the University of Brighton in December 2009.

It sits within the context of the growing body of work and interest in the use of creative therapies and engagement with people with dementia and the recognition of the potential benefit both to people with dementia and to those who care for and work with them.

Aims of the project

- To explore and understand more about dance as a mechanism for working with people with dementia
- To consider the impact of a series of dance sessions on the quality of life for a group of people with dementia, their social interactions and their communication with each other and those who care for them.
- To consider whether any learning can be taken forward into changes to practice in providing care and support for people with dementia and their carers.

The dance sessions

The project ran six weekly dance movement sessions with a group of 12 participants. Participants self selected from those who regularly attended the day centre on the day chosen for the project.

There were three introductory sessions which included information giving, demonstration of what was involved and time getting to know the potential participants and their stories.

Each of the six weekly sessions used the same structure including taught movement, reminiscence and free movement. The sessions used a thematic stimulus and were supported with prompts. The overall theme explored was *'What does dance mean to you?'*

Research methodology

Data was collected from a number of different sources. The central source of data

for the sessions was an observation diary kept by the researcher supported by the reflections of the dance artist and the staff member involved. In addition data was collected from staff observation sheets and journals and from interviews and discussions with a third of the participants and their carers.

The data was analysed manually and thematically to consider both impact of the sessions and effectiveness of the methodology.

What we found out—participants

Familiarity and belonging

Over the period of the six sessions familiarity with the process and within the group increased and associations between members of the group and the researchers were more easily made.

A sense of belonging developed in the group with people engaging more with each other, showing more of their personalities and with banter and humour emerging.

Increased engagement with the movement

We noticed increasing comfort and freedom with the movement as the sessions progressed and an increase in capacity for more complex movement and some free movement.

There was also a progressive engagement in the reminiscence part of the sessions which, for some, then engaged them more in both the movement and the atmosphere of the group.

Interactions in the group

Initially interactions between members of the group were limited and they focused more on the dance artist. As the sessions progressed however they became more aware of each other and communicated more within the context of the session.

Whilst there was a small friendship group which appeared to continue in the day centre in general the interactions within the group were not sustained outside of the sessions.

What did sustain even temporarily outside

the group was recognition of the dance artist and the researcher. In response to seeing them members of the group would respond with songs or movements from the sessions and on occasions would appear to relate to each other again as if in the session.

Insights into the people they are

Both the movement and the reminiscence triggers enabled participants to engage with and express something of themselves. Movements that expressed their lives and experience were incorporated into routines.

For this group of people the movements reflected them having been fit and active people, many of whom had played sport and danced. There was a strong relationship with music and singing, with their memories of going out in Brighton when they were younger and for some the role of music and dance during the war years.

What we found out—process

The importance of space

Having an ideal space to work in was significant in how the group formed and the sense of belonging that developed. A quiet, separate and self contained space excluded distraction and also gave the group a sense of going somewhere different.

The time you need

We underestimated the time we would need in two key aspects of the project. We added in two introductory sessions when it became clear that we needed to show people what we were asking them to be involved in not just tell them. We also found we needed more time for the transfer of participants between the dance room and the day centre. By including the transfer as part of the greeting and leaving process rather than something separate we found participants engaged and settled into and out of the session quicker.

The importance of fully involving care staff

The time spent in preparation and consultation with staff and management at the day centre was invaluable and led to the project being well supported.

The view from others

Participants

The feedback from the participants was positive the sessions were *'fun'* and *'energetic'* and made them *'feel better'*. Some loved the exercise and would have liked more saying *'it gives you a buzz'*. One or two felt they had been lucky to be included and had felt able to express themselves differently.

Carers

Not all of the participants could remember anything about the sessions when they got home but all the carers were positive about them being included and in some cases noticed increased happiness or calmness in the participant after the sessions. They were no bad effects noticed from participation in the group. For one participant their carer noticed an increase in physical activity after one of the sessions.

In talking to one carer it was clear that the impact of one of the sessions and the memories generated had carried on and were shared with the carer when the participant returned home. This carer had also seen a difference in the participant seeing them more alive and happier when they returned each week from the sessions.

Staff

Staff noticed the positive impact of the sessions on the participants and their ongoing interest in attending.

One key member of staff attended most of the sessions. They felt having this opportunity to watch without responsibility gave them added insights into the participants. They saw more of their humour and personalities, what they could do and how they interacted and this developed their understanding and knowledge of them.

There were some day centre users who were not part of the group due to frailty and staff felt a positive outcome for them was the more focused attention they could be given whilst the dance sessions were going on elsewhere.

Reflections on the process

The importance of how we worked

We worked with movement and repeated routine progressively through the sessions so that there was always some familiarity but also some adaptation. Working with reminiscence props triggered memories and participants were encouraged to translate their memory into a movement which the group could share. Working in this way with embodied movement seemed to unlock body memory as well as emotional memory and enabled participants to express themselves. We realised early on that including the arriving and leaving as part of the session was important to being in 'their time' not ours and increased the opportunities for interaction. Working in a person centred way meant that participants could chose to take some or no part in the session but still feel included in the group.

Challenges

This was a small pilot with very limited funds. Although our methodology design was good our main challenges were an underestimation of the lead in time needed and the limitations of some of the feedback mechanisms. Working with a local authority partner was key in enabling our consent and selection processes and the fortunate combination of skills and perspectives within the broader research team was particularly important in supporting the team working directly with the participants.

Conclusions

Despite being small the pilot was an opportunity for significant learning in three areas;

Methodology and process

We needed to allow sufficient lead in time to demonstrate our work both to people with dementia and their carers as part of the process of asking them to be involved. With more resources we would include the use of visual feedback tools and explore the role of film and other techniques to assess impact.

Impact on participants

Observation and feedback indicated that the sessions were well received and progressive impact was noticeable even in a short series of sessions.

Working collaboratively

The collaboration with the day centre staff and management was key to the success of the project in enabling access to the client group, supporting the participants in the group and welcoming the research team and enabling them to work.

Research Team

Naomi Smith, Research Fellow, Social Science Policy and Research Centre (SSPARC), University of Brighton

Diane Waller, Senior Research Fellow, School of Applied Social Science, University of Brighton

Anne Colvin, Dance Artist

Jill Hayes, Senior Lecturer in Dance and Social Studies, University of Chichester

Marnie Naylor, Performance and Development Officer, Brighton & Hove City Council

Further information

For more information about the project contact Naomi Smith on 01273 644530 or by email

nms4@brighton.ac.uk copies of these findings and the full report can be found at <http://www.brighton.ac.uk/sass/research/publications/>