

Remembering Yesterday, Caring Today

Two day training course – 17-18th October 2016

12 Week apprenticeship run with RYCT at Belsize Park 24th October 2016 – 6th February 2017

Anne Williams

I came to the RYCT training scheme having volunteered with people with dementia for the past two years in an Alzheimer's Society "café" setting and assisting with "Potted Histories" - nature focussed reminiscence sessions run by the Wildlife Trust. Whilst I felt confident in my appreciation of older people's stories and experiences and practiced in assisting with craft and gardening activities. I was somewhat trepidatious of the acting, drawing and singing that seemed par for the course with the RYCT. As part of my reason for attending the course was to support PWD in a more dynamic and creative way I launched myself into the apprenticeship scheme.

What is entailed in

a) Making the reminiscence activities relevant and enjoyable for group participation

The RYCT Reminiscence in Dementia Care, A Guide to good practice suggests activities for the 12-week programme. To make these activities relevant to the group requires some initial observation and enquiry. The cultural and life experiences of the group will influence how some topics are handled. We had Jewish émigrés and people who had grown up in Hitler's Germany. School days were very different in a wolf inhabited Iran for Hussein than for Mary who trudged over the fields to get to her school in Yorkshire. To enable all to participate on an equal footing required the apprentices to listen and remember the individuals. Regular attendance and attention to the couples' record was invaluable in building up a relationship with participants.

Likes and dislikes will necessitate the activities to be differentiated. For example, in the schooldays session Len wasn't interested in recalling past teachers and did not like drawing people. Our initial conversation floundered a bit but I asked about his journey to school and he then showed he was very adept at sketching a map of his route and remembered all the road names and crossing points with relish. I was able to print out photographs of his street and school and later visit his childhood address in Bethnal Green and report back. When a participant did not like drama and seemed unsure of what was required of her we chose to recount a story using a drawing. Later in the programme she seemed more relaxed and was able to join in with a bit of acting so revisiting an activity often pays dividends.

Physical ability may influence participation. We had some participants who were sometimes in wheelchairs and so did not join in with dancing or moving around the room. Acting, changing furniture layouts and object handling around less active participants are ways of bringing the action to them so no one is excluded. The wedding session horseshoe chair layout ensured everyone had a ringside view of the ceremony. Hearing difficulties could have been a major barrier to participation but strong communication skills and a variety of ways to "feedback information" avoided this marring proceedings.

Strengths need to be drawn out. We had no idea Ursula was an accomplished piano accordion player. Mary seemed to know almost every show tune and positively shone when she launched into song. We managed to incorporate an element of singing and music in almost all of the sessions and the carers of both reported back a positive change over the course of the programme. Len, who had

not wanted to play the piano for a long time due to his declining hearing and abilities was able to enjoy playing during the cinema session.

Too much emphasis should not be invested in past prowess. Vic's wife and family were very keen for him to rekindle his artistic career but we never saw him draw. What was lovely was to see how he enjoyed the recreation of his party throwing days in the getting ready and going out session. Vic donned a stylish bandana and was quite the host. Dressing the part rather than drawing was key to involving Vic in the group.

The party atmosphere of the RYCT sessions made the programme memorable for me. This recreation of a fun family friendly event when the participants were from such a variety of backgrounds and cultures was only possible because of the attention paid to the group participants especially during the introductory sessions.

b) good use of the of the creative arts

Providing a choice of how to reminisce whether through words, acting, mime or drawing gave our participants the best chance of how they wanted to participate. Often in a "dementia group" setting there is the activity of the week with no alternative. That was never a problem with the RYCT programme. The "show me" of the miming a household task, for example, was more entertaining and accessible than having 25 people report back what they used to do. The creative arts need to be balanced between talking and doing. Even when recapping we were encouraged to vary talking about what we had done with actions, song or pictures. In this way, the recapping became far more entertaining and stimulating.

Singing and music is known to unlock past memories even if words are lost. Our acting out never strayed into more infantile "let's pretend" and was used effectively in the wedding session and in smaller group scenarios. The passing round of the "baby" was a good use of a toy where we bestowed it with a name and a wish for its future. Some of our activities felt more "risky" such as the wedding and baby sessions yet they were very successful and enjoyable.

Artistic apprentices will push creativity in different directions. David, a poetry writing apprentice, inspired everyone with his verse based on everyone's memories of keeping warm in past winters intermingled with the events of the day. Our session on winter warmers incorporates knitting since several members seemed to enjoy this and one of our apprentices is a wool artist. The emphasis must be on participation not the end result. Not wishing to exclude anyone we welcomed any pieces of fabric and found that our set "homework" had produced some beautiful reminiscence material.

Lack of artistic ability in one area need not be a barrier to expressing oneself creatively. A drawing that looked nothing like the family member being described provoked hilarity when shared with the larger group. The end results were always successful whether it was a visual portrayal of a person or the recreation of a scene from the past. It seemed natural to appreciate and even applaud everyone's contributions.

Necessary skills for group leaders need reflecting on strengths and areas to develop

Good vocal projection and the ability to hold the attention of a large group seems to be a fundamental skill for a group leader. Initially the apprentices struggled with audibility. I overcame my natural reticence to be the centre of attention through sympathising with Len and Marion's frustration about not hearing. I found I got used to speaking up which was one of the reasons that has stopped me from leading sessions in my previous roles.

Charisma and a sense of fun was exemplified through Pam's leadership. Her enthusiasm for the sessions and her interest in all the participants fostered a group spirit very quickly amongst everyone. A sense of curiosity and a good memory will enhance participants' enjoyment since they will know they have been heard. Making connections between participants early on (such as the German connection between Ursula, Winifred and Alex) creates a group rather than a collection of couples. We were very pleased to hear how many of our participants had forged friendships and attended other activities together.

Sensitivity is key when expecting people to reminisce about various aspects of their lives which may have not been happy. In our group, we had issues such as childlessness, dead children and unhappy childhoods. Sharing information about the participants allowed us to tread carefully when encouraging reminiscence. This sensitivity should not stop one talking about life events though as it may be cathartic to do so. An atmosphere of trust is important so people are supported in their reminiscing.

Good time keeping whilst being flexible seems essential. Two hours including a break for tea is a very short period. Adjustments to the plan should not fluster the leader. When we planned our session, we were a bit regimented with our time keeping as we did not want to rush activities or omit anything. I think a more flexible approach will come with practice

Delegation of tasks such as labelling everyone, writing up session documentation, producing session introductory material and roles within the session are essential to ensure the group sessions are well planned and executed. In our group, we had the luxury of an abundance of volunteers as well as the apprentices under the leadership of Pam and Caroline. In my other group work, there are usually just two workers for 8 people so the division of roles and responsibilities is key to the smooth running of activities. I think the planning of sessions and reflection afterwards allowed each session to become more successful as we shared our knowledge and built a good team. When things do go wrong (for example when people could not hear to begin with) they can be improved only if discussed and acted upon.

Keeping participants on task is an area I need to work on. I am happy to listen to people talk about what they want to and found it difficult to confine people to the subject matter. I was also very focussed on the person I was with. When I co-led the winter warmers session I saw how important it is to see what was going on in the group as a whole to ensure everyone participates. We did not manage this and some people did not join in the creative activity. Had we been confident to offer fewer alternatives I think everyone could have joined in the pompom making. This will come with practice.

Flexibility to change the session plan is necessary. When unexpected contributions were brought in Pam and Caroline incorporated them very sensitively. Hussein was given time to play his drum and

his music. Ursula's accordion was included in several sessions and Vivienne's painting was shown round with due respect.

I am not a natural actress. I must work on being a bit more uninhibited. I realise the audience isn't a critical one and that one can't expect others to join in unless totally committed oneself.

How to work with people with dementia so as to support their well-being and maximise what they get from the project

Good listening skills are essential in showing the participants they are valued and listened to. My Alzheimer's Society training has taught me how to communicate with people with dementia. I found the Count to 10 exercise from our RYCT initial training enlightening. I now also employ the phrase "You were telling me about Have I got that right?" in response to a stalled or repetitive story. Some of our participants were slower to join in yet after careful prompting Angela was able to remember wonderful details about her first job at Marks and Spencer's and Mary was able to relive her time as a nanny in London. Some participants took more time to feel relaxed in the group. Vic and Mary were anxious about coming for a few sessions and it was only by week four that we felt that everyone was fully engaged.

In any group of older people there will be certain health or frailty issues that may affect peoples' participation. We supported the hard of hearing by speaking clearly and moving around the room. We amplified contributions to the wider group and tried different room layouts. When Hussein started to speak in his native Farsi we listened to him even when we had no chance of comprehension. He was confident to either speak, dance or play his music for us. I will never forget his spine-tingling drumming whilst the night animals roamed around his tent on an Iranian mountain side.

Sometimes the person with dementia arrived leaning heavily on a stick or sitting in a wheelchair and then took a turn around the room in a waltz. Supporting the person with the dementia then became more literal but taking these chances enhanced physical participation and enjoyment. It's safer to sit down but moving around is good for people and dancing allows more sensory stimulation rather than just talking about it.

Valuing contributions brought in is important as it is more of a personal trigger than the generic reminiscence material available. Len had brought in splendid photographs of his top of the range caravan pulled by his Jaguar (a "superb model"). This led into many entertaining tales of past holidays. Kate brought in many photographs of family life which enabled conversations to flow around Vic even though he did not often join in himself.

It was no secret that Marion likes male company and her enthusiasm for the group was enhanced when seated next to the men. Working with personal preferences, as long as everyone is happy about it, is good for making connections and forging friendly relationships. Marion said she had met "friendly people she would be pleased to meet again" and had learned a lot about people from listening to them.

Recapping individual contributions often surprised participants but all enjoyed hearing about their previous week's participation and seeing the photographic evidence. Len was entertained to see he had indeed played the piano during the cinema themed week. Mary was initially quiet and seemed

confused but once we knew she liked a song her confidence grew as we asked her to lead the singing. I think photographs can be a useful way of reminding people that a good time has been had by all.

Empowering the person with dementia at a life stage when so much independence has been lost is something we achieved through the RYCT programme. Ursula rekindled her prowess on the piano accordion taking requests and accompanying songs from every genre. Initially quite reserved, end of Vivienne acted out a rather brutal medical procedure with Hyam, had knitted a beautiful square, sung Jewish childhood songs and drawn a beautiful picture of sunflowers showing she remains an accomplished artist. RYCT allowed people to shine and for everyone to appreciate this whilst having fun alongside them.

Learning from the person with dementia about their background or past careers allows that person to feel listened to and appreciated. As Winifred said prior to coming to the RYCT programme Len had been withdrawn and quiet; now she can't "shut him up".

How to work with family carers in a supportive way which helps them to enjoy the sessions and build their confidence and skill

Caring can be about existing rather than enjoyment. To throw oneself into a programme which requires commitment, much participation and some element of homework is a brave choice and this should be recognised. We all made sure to welcome and listen to carers on arrival to settle them as well as the participants with dementia into the session. Any material brought in by the participants was, as previously mentioned, appreciated. The sessions need to be fun for both participants and I think the wonderful homemade cakes made by Sue ensured there was sometime worth attending for regardless of what else happened.

Remembering names and what they have spoken of in past sessions is essential in building up a relationship with them. I made sure I took note of what was reported back on during the post session feedback and read the records for future weeks. We can show the carers we care about them.

Recognising individuals and the different relationships take time. I noted that one carer was thought not to be joining very much but after session four that she seemed to relax. Other more reticent carers started to participate more once their partner had begun to feel more relaxed. On one occasion when a participant got lost on the way in the carer was so distressed that allowing her space to sit calmly and drink tea was more supportive than encouraging engagement. The RYCT programme is probably unlike any other group people have experienced and asking someone who is usually focussed on doctor's appointments to join in a party atmosphere may be quite alien to some. In our group, we found ways to celebrate different religious and cultural backgrounds.

In some sessions carers were removed from the group and taken out to speak of their experience of the RYCT programme. This led to positive feedback about the beneficial effect on memory and mood of their partners. The chance to speak negatively was supported in these sessions and weekly on a one to one basis with the leaders. Connections made between carers forged new friendships – vital for the wellbeing of all.

The programme structure allowed couples to enjoy reliving past holidays, DIY mishaps and wedding days and seemed to reinvigorate relationships. Hyam found his second wedding ceremony very profound and moving. Winifred chuckled her way through various DIY disasters under instruction

from Len her fierce foreman. Kate amused herself and her family by remembering Vic ironing his hair and their wild parties. Revisiting these past youthful adventures has a positive effect on the carer and their relationship with partner. I think the sessions set the carers up for using photographs, postcards and the scrap books at home to prolong the benefits gained from participating.

Though usually together sometimes people will sit away from their partners. Jenny was an enthusiastic member of groups with and without her mother-in-law and seemed to enjoy having a break from her. None of the carers dominated their partners or made derogatory comments. When carers expressed doubt as to the truth of stories being recounted Pam made light of this with good humour. Allowing some distance between carers and their partners enables that person to be seen by their carer as more independent, appreciated by others and affords some relief of the tension of full time care.

I have enjoyed and benefitted from the experience of being an apprentice. I now know and care about a new group of people and am enjoying embarking on the follow-on sessions with the Camden Carers. I have already used some of the themes and techniques learned from the RYCT programme in my current roles.

Winifred miming

Len playing the piano

Angela and Winifred acting



Ursula plays the piano accordion

Len passes me the baby he named "Oh No"

Listening to others' contributions in cinema week.

