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**Dancing to the music of time: an experiential learning
exercise in dementia care**

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This article presents findings from an experiential learning exercise in which 34 care practitioners enrolled on a part-time BSc programme in Dementia Studies were asked to identify their own favourite music, and then to investigate the musical preferences of one of their clients with dementia. For both groups, practitioners and clients, three dominant themes influencing choice of music emerged: loving relationships; significant life events and places, and a sense of physical enjoyment. This exercise enabled the group of practitioners involved to identify commonalities between their own musical memories and those of their clients with dementia. They also uncovered considerable amount of new information about their client's life histories. On this basis they were able to make a number of new recommendations for improving care practice.

Keywords: dementia, music, choice, experiential learning, care practice

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BACKGROUND

Softly in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;

Taking me back down the vista of years....

(D. H. Lawrence, 1919, Piano)

As this quote from the poet and novelist D. H. Lawrence suggests, music has deep ties to our early emotional memories. In the case of people with dementia it often seems that memory for popular songs, rhymes and hymns learned in childhood and early youth remains intact, even when short-term memory is severely compromised and the ability to produce language spontaneously has been lost (Cuddy and Duffin 2005; Weinstein et al 2010). Cognitive neuroscience suggests that this is because our early experiences of music are 'hard-wired' into our developing brains, and cannot subsequently be lost (Andrade and Bhattacharya 2003). As a number of studies indicate, music can reduce agitation and depression in people with dementia, particularly when the music in question is the personal choice of the listener (Gerdner 2000; Sung and Chang 2005; Han et al 2010). Stevens et al (2011) found that music and movement together cue long-term memory. In their study, dance steps which the participants had not performed for decades were recalled when they heard the music to which the steps had originally been learned. Use of music is therefore most likely to be beneficial if it is personally meaningful and linked to the life history of the person with dementia. Indeed Allison (2010) suggests that music is one of the main ways that staff and residents can work together to make care environments feel like homes rather than institutions.

In spite of what would appear to be a sound evidence base for the use of music to enhance quality of life for people with dementia, however, music is still most often used as a background to dementia care practice, and tends to be chosen by staff rather than clients. There is less evidence of the use of music to initiate and sustain meaningful interaction with clients who have dementia. Organised activities based on music often have a quiz format which only serves to emphasise difficulties with recall and can lead to further stigma and social exclusion (Capstick 2011). Post (2000) suggests that one of the main reasons for this is the 'hypercognitivity' of Western societies, which place more value on the cognitive skills which are lost in dementia, than on the emotional, affective and sensory domains which are

retained, and where people with and without dementia have much in common. 'Sing-along' sessions, whilst less orientated on cognitive ability, may also fail to take account of the individual preferences of clients, or be based on a stereotypical view of the kinds of music older people prefer. This is to overlook the uniqueness of each person which Kitwood (1997) took to be the basis of person-centred dementia care. It is also to deny the person's status as a historical subject; that is, as someone who has lived through particular historical eras and events in popular culture (Baldwin and Capstick 2007). Shenk (2009) identifies the provision of choice and the recognition of difference as among the most important attributes of direct care workers, but she also points out that care workers often draw their sense of personal effectiveness from taking over responsibility from clients, rather than allowing for personal decision making on their part.

This article considers how we can move from the robust existing evidence base on the benefits of personally meaningful music for people with dementia, to forms of care practice in which the relatively small and inexpensive adjustments needed in order to integrate this knowledge into practice are made. Here we need – as Donald Schön recognised some 30 years ago now - to bridge the theory-practice divide through experiential learning (Schön 1984). I believe that three particular elements are important here. The first is to draw on learners' real-life experience in a way that is transformative. As Horwath and Morrison (1999: 47) point out, 'Learners are not empty receptacles into which teachers pour knowledge, but rather they bring, however unexplored, a deep reservoir of life experience. Therefore it is important that the facilitation of learning starts by exploring the learner's *experience, existing beliefs, theories and actions*' [emphasis added]. The second element is to develop a heightened sense of awareness of the ephemeral and often apparently trivial details of everyday care provision that are rarely acted upon because they have not been noticed in the first place. As Mason (2002: 7) powerfully suggests 'every act of caring and supporting depends on noticing'. The third element is to encourage an empathic awareness, not only of what we have in common with people with dementia, but also of what makes each person uniquely valuable in his or her own right. Lally (2009) has pointed out the most convincing evidence of the value of a particular approach, such as participation in music, often comes from accounts and observations of personal experience. If person-centred care is still, today, more widely talked about than it is practiced, it is above all else because the

individual person with dementia is not really *known* in the context of his or her own life and times.

Experiential learning exercises for care practitioners which are based on use of the arts, such as music, are particularly appropriate in this context. Not only are they inherently enjoyable, but also music is something that has meaning in all cultures; everyone is familiar with music and has musical preferences to draw on. Through use of the arts, experiential learning about dementia can progress from a focus merely on pathology, to a more creative and imaginative approach to care practice. For example, Smith et al (2006) identify the following benefits of arts-based approaches to teaching in health and social care:

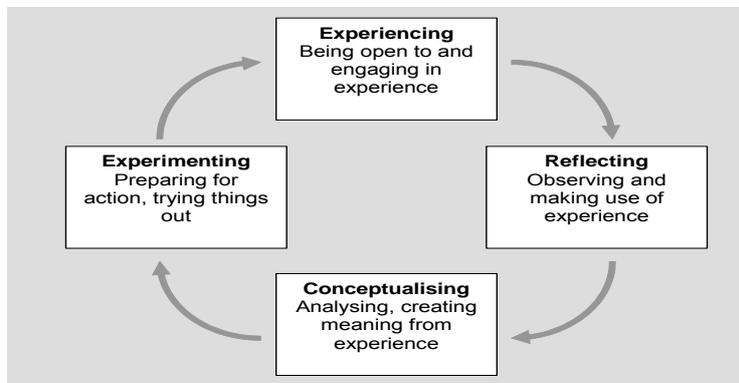
- Developing awareness of the complexity of human experience
- Promoting sensitivity toward difference
- Encouraging a more complex awareness of the meanings of illness
- Making richer connections between personal experience and professional knowledge
- The development of expressive and observational skills

The exercise outlined below was one which combined experiential learning and arts-based teaching, with a view to enhancing reflection, observation, and sensitivity toward people with dementia. Whilst it was not set up as a piece of formal research it shares many of the characteristics of participatory action research (see, for example, McIntyre 2008). It is an attempt to improve social practice by changing it; it is collaborative; it involves a systematic learning process, and it begins by making one small change, in order to identify others.

METHODS: CONDUCTING THE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING EXERCISE

The exercise described here was designed to enhance students' awareness that musical memory, and enjoyment of music, often remain well-preserved in dementia, and that people with dementia can express a choice, whether verbally or non-verbally, about the kind of music they prefer. The exercise involved 34 part-time, distance learning students who are all employed in the field of dementia care, and were starting their first year of the Bsc (Hons)

Dementia Studies programme at the University of Bradford, UK. The exercise in question was developed in accordance with Kolb's experiential learning cycle (1984), which is represented diagrammatically below.



In line with Kolb's experiential learning cycle the exercise had four stages: experiencing; reflecting; conceptualising, and experimenting. The first task students were set was to tell each other what their own favourite piece of music was. This was, in part, an ice breaker exercise for a group of new students who did not yet know each other, and it was also a chance for them to practice using the on-line discussion board for the first time. The students posted their messages to each other on the virtual learning environment (VLE). As the module leader, and facilitator of the on-line discussion, I took part on a regular basis, encouraging a light-hearted and non-academic exchange until the students were comfortable with this method of communicating. This exchange of views about students' own personal tastes and preferences in music represents the first stage of the learning cycle ('experiencing').

Students then went on to complete a further learning activity in which they each worked individually with an existing client with dementia in their own workplaces, to identify that person's favourite song, or piece of music, and the events associated with it. This stage, in which students carried out observations and examined their collective discoveries, was the 'reflecting' stage.

Once each student had discovered a piece of music that was personally meaningful for the person with dementia they had worked with, they were asked to think of ways to take their research further by, for example, using the Internet to find song lyrics, or images of the recording artists, or to order CDs or downloads. Alternatively, they might investigate the social history behind the music, and the popular culture of the era. This was the

‘conceptualising’ stage. Finally, at the ‘experimenting’ stage, students were asked to suggest improvements to care practice, and try out new ways of working with their clients, on the basis of their discoveries.

The exercise described here represents a single learning cycle. It is not, of course, the intention of experiential learning that the cycle is completed only once; it is intended to be an iterative process. If a student has engaged fully with this exercise, he or she should then continue to repeat the learning cycle, with a new phase of ‘experiencing’ based on what has been learned.

The material generated by the exercise seemed to me so interesting that at the end of the module I downloaded the students’ on-line postings in order to subject them to some further analysis. I analysed the data from the first ‘experiencing’ stage in which students discussed their own choice of music following an approach to critical discourse analysis developed by Fairclough (2001). This involves applying the following questions to ‘semantic units’ (sentences or clauses) within a student’s on-line postings.

- Content: What’s going on (activity, topic, purpose)?
- Subjects: Who’s involved?
- Relations: In what relationship?

(Fairclough 2001: 122)

For example, using Fairclough’s three questions, this sentence which occurred in one student’s posting, yields the following responses

This song brings back memories of going to parties with my boyfriend, who is now my husband

- Content: Remembered parties
- Subjects: Self; boyfriend
- Relations: Beginning of a core relationship

The three dominant themes to emerge from conducting this analysis were that the ‘content’ was very frequently a significant place or event; the ‘subjects’ were almost always romantic

attachments, close family members or friends, and the ‘relations’ between them were usually of long-term emotional significance. In addition, these relations were very often expressed by students in terms of embodied experience, pleasurable emotions or physical sensations associated with music.

Another student’s posting, for example, includes the following extract

Me and the kids dance around the kitchen to it

Content: Family home

Subjects: Self; children

Relations: Dancing together

What follows in the next section is the result of this thematic analysis of the spontaneously generated supporting detail provided by students.

FINDINGS 1: THEMES ARISING FROM STUDENTS’ MUSICAL PREFERENCES

At this point students had only been asked to tell each other what their favourite song or piece of music was. Although, they had not been asked explicitly to give reasons for their personal choice of music, it was very noticeable that almost all voluntarily provided additional personal and contextual information to explain their choices. The frequency of references to music ‘bringing back memories’, ‘reminding’ the student of something, or to things ‘coming back’ on hearing a particular song, was particularly striking.

The following sections provide representative examples of students’ responses to the on-line discussion under each of the three identified themes.

Significant places and events

Musical memories were frequently linked with significant times, places and events in students’ lives. Usually, these were positive memories, but occasionally music was linked with less pleasant events. For example

It was the first dance song at my wedding

[It] reminds me of clubbing days in my youth

I love [a song by a 1960s band from the North East of England] because I am from Greenside in the North East

[My husband] surprised me with concert tickets for my birthday

It brings back memories from school and how I hated it

Personal relationships

When referring to their own musical influences and choices, many students mentioned music associated with a close relationship; a parent, child, grandparent, sibling or partner. For example

It reminds me of the time I had with my mother who passed away several years ago

When my oldest son was a baby and this song was playing...he was lying on the floor moving his arms around. It looked like he was dancing to it

[One song] that immediately came to mind...reminds me of my grandma

This was my sister's favourite piece of music, and it makes me feel in a funny way close to her

[It] brings back memories of going to parties with my boyfriend, who is now my husband

This suggests that students spontaneously located music in the domain of significant personal relationships. Who the music had first been heard with, was often an important factor in the its memorability and continued significance.

Emotional and embodied memories

Also noticeable was a strong tendency to make reference to emotional, affective and embodied responses to music, including

I live for music; it's my heart and soul

If I feel unhappy I listen to this song to encourage myself; 'don't give up, I will come through'

It seemed very powerful and stuck in my head

I find the music a great comfort, even though it usually makes me blub (ie cry)

It never fails to get me up and dancing.

In order to make the empathic leap between their own musical memories and the similar experiences and choices of people with dementia, students now went on to research the musical preferences of one of their own clients. Findings from this part of the exercise are presented in the next section, where it can be seen that the same themes of loving relationships, significant events and places, and enjoyable physical movement also strongly influenced the musical choices of people with dementia.

FINDINGS 2: THE MUSICAL CHOICES OF PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA

Students used a variety of methods to uncover information about their clients' favourite music, including observation, direct interaction with the person in question, or consulting relatives. They did not, on the whole report difficulties in carrying out this work. On the contrary the information was often surprisingly forthcoming, given the extent of the memory and language problems experienced by the people with dementia in question.

For example students commented

An instant reaction....very positive

She [the client] replied immediately...

She sang [the song] for me word for word, which was lovely – no wrong words or mistakes

Sometimes a little more patience or alternative ways of communicating were needed. For example, it was necessary to translate the lyrics of a song Mrs G had chosen from her native Italy, before it became clear why she associated this particular piece of music with a decades-long family rift, of which the care staff had previously been unaware.

Inevitably there were a number of references to songs with which students themselves were not familiar. For example, when asked about her favourite music, Mrs J said ‘My pride was my jealousy; all over my jealousy’. The student in question was puzzled by this, but when she mentioned it in the on-line discussion, the group as whole managed to work out that Mrs J was quoting, accurately, lyrics from the song ‘Jealousy’ by the 1960s recording artist, Billy Fury.

In presenting below the findings from this part of the experiential learning exercise, I have made reference to a number of specific songs, hymns and pieces of music that were chosen as their personal favourites by people with dementia. It may, at this point, have appeared more consistent to continue to present the musical preferences of people with dementia under the general themes identified in Findings 1. I have, however, chosen to organise this section differently for three reasons. First, although the explanations people with dementia gave for their favourite pieces of music were very consistent with those of the practitioner-students it seems, to me, more in keeping with a person-centred approach to identify the piece of music actually chosen by each individual. Second, these choices are often very precisely located in a particular cultural era or period of social history, and this is important if we want to understand people with dementia in the context of their own lived experience. The musical choices of students were generally contemporary with their own youth, and this is also the case for people who have dementia. There is a point in the 1960s where members of both groups appear, interestingly, to ‘meet in the middle’. Often, however, students needed to do further research into the social and cultural history of the period the music came from in order fully to understand the significance of their client’s choice. Finally, as several students noted, it often appeared that the lyrics from certain songs had particular meaning for the people with dementia who chose them. As a result, specific song titles and lyrics chosen by the clients

with dementia whom nine of the students worked with have been used to present the findings which follow.

'Fly me to the moon'

Fill my life with song

and let me sing for evermore.... (Howard 1954)

When asked about his favourite music, Patricia's client, Roy, chose the song 'Fly me to the moon'. Patricia notes that Roy initially chose this song because he said 'it sounds nice, it feels nice...If you listen to it, it makes you feel like moving, dancing.' When she printed off the lyrics and they sang them together 'it seemed to set his face alight with a continuous smile', and when she then went on to play a YouTube clip of Frank Sinatra singing this song:

Oh my god, the reaction to it was very, very positive. Roy kept tapping on his chest and said 'yeah that's fine I enjoyed that'...He wrote the name of the first person who sang it for me on a piece of tissue, and how it coincided with the first man landing on the moon.

Patricia notes how she then went on to do further research about the moon landings and to show Roy pictures from news reports of the time. The use of photographs to enhance communication with people who have dementia has recently been discussed by Wiersma (2011) among others, and this was just one of a number of examples in this body of data of a memory related to music sparking other memories which were then followed up with pictorial images, on-line research, and the identification of new interests and activities for the person with dementia.

'Rock of Ages'

Rock of ages cleft for me

Let me hide myself in thee (Toplady 1763)

Sandra initially struggled to discover what kind of music might have personal meaning for her client, as Mrs Conroy had difficulties with verbal communication. Then Mrs Conroy's husband remembered her saying that when she was a child, her father always sung the hymn

‘Rock of Ages’ to help her go to sleep. When the title of the hymn was mentioned ‘Mrs Conroy looked up and smiled...we sang and hummed it...she looked happy’. Interestingly, Sandra then recalled that her own father used to sing her to sleep when she was a child, although in her case the song was 'Love letters in the sand' by Jim Reeves. 'It brings back such treasured memories', Sandra writes, *'I'm not so different from Mrs Conroy* [emphasis added]. This is the beginning of real empathy; an understanding that people with dementia, despite their cognitive difficulties, still have the same feelings, sensations and emotions as we do ourselves.

'You are my sunshine'

You make me happy

When skies are gray... (Davis and Mitchell 1939)

Tracey had noticed that Mrs Trent cried when the song 'You are my sunshine' was played. When asked why, Mrs Trent initially said she didn't like the memories it brought back. As a result the song was left out of subsequent music sessions. At the end of the next session, however, Mrs Trent was again crying, but now she said that

her special song had not been played, and she felt that no-one cared about her, as everyone knew what the song meant to her...She said she felt her mum's arms around her, and her arms around her son, when this song was played...

Tracey reflects that this experience has taught her to understand that tears can be 'of sadness, joy, remembrance [or] pain.' In fact Mrs A is making exactly the same point as the student mentioned earlier who noted that she found her own favourite piece of music comforting, even though it usually made her 'blub'. Whilst expressed emotion in people with dementia is often considered by care staff to be a 'problem' which they need to resolve quickly, it can in fact be recognised as a sign of wellbeing; the ability to 'express a range of emotions' (Bradford Dementia Group 2008).

'Somewhere over the Rainbow'

*Somewhere over the rainbow
 Skies are blue
 And the dreams that you dare to dream
 Really do come true
 (Arlen and Harlberg 1939)*

Unsurprisingly, given that the majority of people who now have dementia grew up and came of age during the period between the 1920s and 1940s, a number of the musical memories and preferences of the people with dementia involved in this exercise were connected with wartime events and experiences. Debby found that her client, Mrs Warner, loved the song 'Somewhere over the rainbow', and noted that

when I read the words, they are about hope and, I think, the end of the war. I could imagine that songs like this would be very emotional during a time of war and uncertainty...

Here again there is an echo from the previous student's comment about a song that was personally meaningful to her:

If I feel unhappy, I listen to this song to encourage myself; "Don't give up, I will come through"

Experiential learning exercises such as this are, then, a valuable way of encouraging creative identification, increasing respect for the tenacity and historical achievements of people with dementia, and also of encouraging students to extend their own historical knowledge.

Mendelssohn's 'Wedding March'

Just as students themselves had done, people with dementia frequently chose songs or music associated with personal life events such as births, deaths, marriages and anniversaries. Loo told how, during a 'Name this Tune' quiz, Margaret seemed pleased when the Wedding

March was played to hear a tune that she recognised. 'I know this one, don't I?' Margaret said.

There then follows a sustained chain of reminiscence about her own wedding and wedding reception, the parties she went to as a young girl and her modelling career. Loo reports that Margaret remembered how

Everyone had such an enjoyable time...We danced and danced...when I was young I went to so many parties and dances. It was such fun.

Loo found photos of the hotel where Margaret's 1930s wedding reception was likely to have taken place, and has started to develop a folder containing historical photographs of local landmarks at the time, to prompt recognition and reminiscence among other clients.

The 'Cha cha cha'

Simon had to take an indirect approach to discover his client, Mei's, musical tastes, as initially her answers seemed unrelated to the question. When he asked her what she enjoyed doing when she was young, however, she immediately said 'Dancing' and that her favourite was the 'Cha cha cha'. What follows is then a very sensual, embodied memory of how dancing made Mei feel

She would wear a pair of high-heel shoes and an A-line skirt. When she turned round and round, her A-line skirt was floating, that made her look so beautiful...She further told me she met her husband when she was working there [in a night club]. I asked her was her husband handsome, she said yes, and said if he was not handsome how would I marry him. We all laughed...the atmosphere was so great.

Simon notes that he is now planning to set up a music class to 'let other clients have more choice to listen to songs that might make them remember something they had enjoyed in the past'.

Musical careers and hobbies

In addition to specific songs and pieces of music identified during this exercise, it also emerged that a significant number of the people with dementia involved had musical careers themselves, or had been involved in music or other performance arts in an amateur capacity. In some cases this information was already on the client's case notes, but in others it had not previously been recorded. Wendy was already aware that her client Miss Montalban had been a cello teacher at the Royal Academy of Music, but commented that as a result of this exercise she had become more aware of the impact different pieces of music and composers had on Miss Montalban's mood. Abiodun discovered that Mrs Stott was an opera lover, who frequently attended Sadler's Wells Opera House. Mrs Stott had a treasured memory of sitting close to the Queen Mother ('in a blue dress') at a performance of the Mikado. Liz discovered that her client, Bea, had met the band-leader Glenn Miller when she was performing, as a singer in the 'Joe Daniels Hot Shots Orchestra', at the same venue,

In the following section I will relate both sets of findings back to the theory underpinning experiential and arts-based learning.

DISCUSSION

Inevitably, there were variations in the extent to which students engaged with this exercise, and in the quality of the information they were able to uncover. It has also been difficult to identify which particular extracts to draw on from this very rich body of data. However, the findings from this exercise appear clearly to support Schön's view that valuable learning can be drawn from existing lived experience. In this particular case, an experiential learning exercise related to personally meaningful music identified shared themes common to both people with dementia and those who care for them. It also identified some cultural differences related to age and social background, which prompted the learners to find out more. In several cases, it was the person with dementia who emerged as knowledgeable and experienced on subjects related to his or her own life and times. As recommended by Lally (2009) students drew on their own accounts, and their observations of personal experience to enhance participation in musical, and other associated, activities for their clients with dementia. The benefits of music for people with dementia were then observed directly by students in their own workplaces.

Although students had not specifically been asked to do so, when reporting on their own musical preferences they almost always contextualised their responses by explaining why a particular song or piece of music had personal meaning for them. There were many commonalities between practitioners and people with dementia, in that for both groups, music was associated with people they loved, important places and events, and sensations of physical freedom, energy and 'flow'. Moreover, students did not have to be instructed, in a didactic way, to make connections between their own experiences and those of people with dementia; instead these connections emerged naturally in the process of their separate investigations and the discussions they had with each other. There are frequent indications among the students' on-line discussions that they developed the kind of heightened sense of awareness and highly developed noticing skills that Mason (2002) believes vital to the act of caring.

A very good lesson was learned by myself and staff as we just assumed we knew what Anne was saying, when we should have delved deeper

Students also demonstrated in various ways that they had experienced the benefits of arts-based learning identified by Smith et al (2006) for example, 'developing awareness of the complexity of human experience' and 'promoting sensitivity toward difference'

After researching...the music and the time frame in Miss M's life, I have found it very thought-provoking to understand the rationale behind [her] actions

I can now apply the understanding I gained from Mr P's choice of music to meeting needs that sometimes appear 'challenging'

Finally, at the 'experimenting' stage of the experiential learning cycle, once a practitioner had identified a piece of music the person with dementia enjoyed, it was almost always possible to generate further ways of sustaining the interaction. For example, students used 'lateral thinking' strategies such as discovering where a piece of music was originally heard, who the person with dementia was with at the time, or what clothes he or she was wearing to promote further associations, and resources for care practice. In some cases this went well beyond the use of music itself, as more of the person's memories and interests were then revealed by

association. Students mention various ways of continuing the work; for example, by developing memory boxes, introducing dance sessions, making life history books, or scrap books related to particular recording artistes, and on-line research into photographic archives.

CONCLUSION

This group of 34 students associated a wide range of emotions with music, but what is particularly striking is that they spontaneously identified the same benefits and reasons for enjoying music identified in research studies involving people with dementia. For example, students made frequent reference to the enhanced mood and physical relaxation, as mentioned in studies by Sung and Chang (2005) and Han et al (2010). Like Gerdner (2000) they noted frequent associations between personally meaningful music, long-term recall and emotional memory. For the people with dementia themselves, there were a number of instances of the reactivation of remote memory on hearing recording artists from their youth, which then enabled them to then give more detailed accounts of the period in question. One of the strongest findings, for both groups, was the association between music and pleasurable physical movement, with frequent references by both groups to dancing to music, parties and celebrations. This is clearly in keeping with the findings of Stevens et al (2011) on embodied memory, and the recovery of forgotten dance steps when their research participants heard the music to which the steps had originally been learned.

Like researchers in cognitive neuroscience students also found that the music-related memories of even those people with quite severe dementia were often surprisingly good (eg Andrade and Bhattacharya 2003). In line with studies by Cuddy and Duffin (2005) and Weinstein et al (2010) this included several instances of people who had little remaining ability to produce speech, giving 'word perfect' renditions of song lyrics learned many decades earlier. An additional benefit was that valued social roles people with dementia had held in the past were often thereby rediscovered and validated.

As recommended by Allison (2010) students identified numerous various ways of using music and music-related knowledge to make the care environments they work in feel like homes rather than institutions. Several provided specific innovative and creative examples of the strategies they were now using to go about this. There was also evidence of a move away

from the generic and formulaic use of music which often characterises dementia care environments, in favour of the provision of choice and recognition of difference that Shenk (2010) recognises as vital.

Exercises of this nature clearly go some way towards combating what Post (2000) has described as the ‘hypercognitivity’ of dementia care, which attaches too much significance to the cognitive difficulties experienced by people with dementia, and pays too little attention to retained emotional and embodied aspects of the self. Above all, true experiential learning aims for an approach to care-giving, in which it is recognised that the best resources for good practice are those aspects of human experience which we all have in common with each other, rather than the diagnostic categories that divide us. Meeting each other through the arts is an important part of this project, because, here, we are all members of the same dance.



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