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Life-long creativity

**Also inside
this issue:**

- Singing in a dementia-friendly community
- Cogs Clubs
- Dementiaville: is this controversial?
- Better mealtimes

Hand i Pockets: creativity, playfulness and fun



The authors of this article are John Killick, a writer, and Gail Kenning, research associate at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) in Australia. Gail is one of the two designers whose work is discussed; the other, Cathy Treadaway, is professor of creative practice at the Centre for Applied Research in Inclusive Art and Design (CARIAD) at Cardiff Metropolitan University in Wales. If you are interested in being involved or would like further information, contact Gail and Cathy through their website www.handsproject.info

A project that engages the creative side of ordinary people is bringing playfulness and fun into the lives of people with mid to late-stage dementia. **John Killick** and **Gail Kenning** describe how volunteers taking part in arts and crafts ‘funshops’ have made objects that are helping to improve people’s wellbeing

Where people have severe communication difficulties, opportunities for creativity are often neglected. Playfulness is an essential part of being creative and here we will focus on the work of two design researchers who are showing how creativity can make a real difference for people whose communication is impaired.

The two designers, Gail Kenning (one of the authors) and Cathy Treadaway, know first-hand the benefits of engaging in life-long creativity and the importance of play and playfulness in the creative process. They have both worked as art practitioners for much of their careers, and are collaborating on a series of design research projects that aim to promote playfulness, fun and ‘in the moment’ joy for people with mid and late-stage dementia.

Cathy explains: “As children we spontaneously play, create and are playful. It is part of the experience of living and learning and of having fun. However, as we get older we are expected to focus on work, and play is viewed as unimportant or even trivial. We need to give, not only ourselves, but others permission and encouragement to play and be playful.”

A key factor underlying the duo’s focus on creative and stimulating play is that people experiencing mental and physical limitations as a result of ageing, and particularly those with conditions such as late-stage dementia, often have nothing to do.

“Opportunities to do productive work have dissipated and opportunities to play and have fun are disregarded. Many people facing physical or mental limitations as a result of the ageing process and with dementia have fewer and fewer chances to touch, fiddle, feel, experiment, and play,” Gail argues.

Gail and Cathy’s projects involve making objects for people to play with or simply to interact with in ways that afford comfort or pleasure. Cathy explains: “We particularly want to make things for people with advanced dementia, as this group are often overlooked and bypassed because of the nature of their perceptual disabilities. While there has been considerable work on design relating to care environment, architecture, interior furnishings and furniture and so on, there has been little focus

on making personal things for these people to increase their stimulation and pleasure.”

Both designers are keen that their projects are in keeping with person-centred approaches to care and design – that is, they treat every person as an individual with capacity and possibility (as suggested by Kitwood (1997)) and place people and personhood at the centre of their art and design. Their design projects create customised objects for specific people.

In June 2014, Cathy organised a collaborative co-design workshop in Wales in partnership with Gwalia Cyf, a leading provider of residential specialist dementia care units (Treadaway et al 2014). The workshop, retitled “funshop” brought together carers of people with dementia, health care professionals, representatives from government health bodies, and artists, researchers, designers and technologists with the aim of ensuring that the process of making was fun and enjoyable rather than work, as previously advocated by the other author of this article, John Killick (Killick 2013).

The participants co-designed a series of ‘dementia aprons’ for specific individuals at Gwalia Cyf dementia care homes. Dementia ►



Dr Gail Kenning (centre) with participants making personalised ‘aprons’ for people with dementia at the ‘funshop’ workshop in Wales in 2014



Some of the Hand i Pockets were given to people in dementia care facilities in India. Photo: Courtesy Katy Fitzgerald, 2014



Participants thought about people they knew when making the i Pockets, such as this one featuring bright pink tulle because "granny would like that"

Participants made more than 70 'Hand i Pockets' during the Sydney 'funshop'



► aprons are sensory textiles made to sit on the laps of people with dementia and are embedded with objects to touch and play with, such as shells, buttons and threads. The aprons were also discreetly embedded with electronics to make sounds or vibrations that would be stimulating or comforting, such as a cat that purred when stroked (see picture opposite). The embedded objects,

sounds and vibrations were chosen to reflect the likes and preferences of the particular person with dementia for whom the apron was being made.

In recent years there has been an increasing focus on enabling people, not just to live longer lives, but to have a good quality of life and to experience wellbeing, engage in meaningful activity, and have pleasure at all stages of their lives (Brodsky 2014). With the increase in the incidence of dementia, care can no longer be considered the exclusive domain of gerontologists, clinicians and care facilities because it also has implications for families and society at large (Kitwood 1997).

For Gail and Cathy this provokes the question how do we engage the public, or those not yet affected by dementia, in thinking about the welfare and care of people who do have the condition?

Creating bespoke and customised objects can be time-consuming. However, the designers argue that much of the arts and crafts making can be done by volunteers such as family members, community groups, and elderly people themselves, particularly those still in good health or in the early stages of dementia. So, Gail and Cathy support Kitwood's call to engage the public in activities.

Cathy went to Australia as visiting scholar at UTS's Faculty of Arts and Social Science in August-September 2014 and the design duo organised a "Hand i Pockets" funshop at the Powerhouse Museum during Sydney Design week. "Maker Faires" are growing in popularity and becoming a worldwide phenomenon. They are opportunities for people who like to make things using electronics, robotics, computer code, or textiles and craft materials to come together as a "celebration of community and creativity" (Powerhouse Museum, 2013).

Hand i Pockets

Hand i Pockets were the first such proposal for designing and making things for people with dementia received by the Maker Faire. The organisers gave the workshop prime position and promoted the event in all the marketing literature. It was aimed at raising awareness of dementia, highlighting the lack of objects or activities for fun and enjoyment, and giving makers the opportunity to contribute their expertise and enthusiasm for making in a meaningful and useful way. The funshop was supported by Alzheimer's New South Wales (NSW), and a counsellor was present at the event to answer questions about dementia, to hand out leaflets, and to provide information.

Members of the public attending part of the fair, the Mini Maker Faire, were asked to make a 'pocket' for a person with late-stage dementia to touch, feel, fiddle with, put things inside, or simply hold for comfort. Gail explains: "The idea of making pockets came from the funshop we did in Wales. The pocket seemed to be an intrinsically human idea that elicits thoughts of fun and enjoyment in putting your hands in a pocket, hiding personal items, or keeping things secret. The idea was raised time and time again by participants and so we decided to make it the theme of the Sydney event."

Workshop participants were given a range of materials including fabric, threads, electronic devices and things to vibrate, make a noise, light up, or smell. They were asked to make, decorate and put something inside a pocket that they thought would give pleasure to someone with dementia. Gail explains "We collected a range of brightly coloured and sensory materials and simply asked people to have fun while making objects for other people to have fun with!"

The pockets were made very simply from two squares of fabric sewn together. Most of people's energies went on the decoration or on what went inside the pocket. The pockets were decorated with, for example, lace "which was like the lace my mother used to make" (one participant told us) or in bright pink tulle because "granny would like that!" Participants frequently "hid" things in the pockets, such as bells that tinkled at the slightest touch. Some pockets had simple finger puppets inside them. Feathers were very popular items for inserting; many people liked the idea that they would tickle somebody as they put their hand in.

Those making pockets as part of the Hand i Pockets funshop were asked to hang the pockets they made on a banner. However, some people took their pocket away to give to a person they knew with dementia, and others, particularly children, became attached to what they had made and did not want to part with it. More than 70 pockets were made and displayed during the event. Frequently makers left notes inside their pocket. One note read: "This is for my Dad, the blowy thing would have made him laugh". Another note explained: "This is for my grandmother in the US".

The two-day Mini Maker Faire attracted more than 5,500 visitors. The funshop was prominently placed and most people would have seen us. While the exact numbers who participated in the workshop are not available, there was no period when the workshop was without participants and frequently potential participants were waiting for a place to become vacant at the making table.

Hand i Pockets makers represented the broad spectrum of the population and were truly cross-generational. Many participants expressed joy at the range of brightly coloured materials and the vibrancy around the table, suggesting that they had initially been drawn to participate because "it looked like fun!" Some were crafts people who liked working with textiles and others said they had come because they wanted information about dementia. Everyone we spoke to responded positively to the event, not just because it aimed to promote enjoyment among people with dementia but also because it made the issue visible.

Many conversations took place around the maker table and these frequently extended to other parts of the museum and even to coffee shops and into the street. The information in and around the funshop prompted passers-by to talk about dementia, Alzheimer's, and the ageing population. These conversations involved people of all ages sharing experiences and empathising. Makers and passers-by included people with professional experience of dementia care and they were able to



provide further information about organisations that help and provide support.

The event may also have had a lasting influence. Primary and secondary school teachers frequent the Maker Faire exploring new technologies, materials and concepts to introduce to their students. Several teachers expressed deep interest in the project and sought advice on how they might do something similar in the classroom as an awareness-raising exercise. Facilitators of other workshops and stalls at the fair showed interest in the Hand i Pockets project and began thinking about how they could bring their various communities of makers together around making for a particular cause. These communities of makers included those working with interactive electronics, computer coders, knitters, embroiderers and hobbyists.

Conclusion

Some of the pockets made at the Sydney fair were taken to India in October by a counsellor from Alzheimer's NSW, where they were given to residents of a dementia care centre. While this was very rewarding for those residents, the thinking behind the project went beyond the giving of enjoyment. It was also about raising awareness; about bringing discussion of dementia into the public domain; about airing conversations and normalising discussion about difficult issues relating to dementia; and about breaking down the stigma associated with the condition. Cathy has now received a major grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council to continue this research in both the UK and Australia.

A new series of funshops has begun in the UK that will refine the Hand i Pockets model and provide further opportunities for the public to participate. Gail is also planning another funshop at the Maker Faire in Sydney later this year and is working directly with residential care centres to set up customised events to suit their needs. This is a truly innovative international project that has the potential for improving the lives of people with dementia in exciting ways. ■

Discreet electronics were embedded in the aprons, including this 'cat' that purred when stroked

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