

European Reminiscence Network 'RYCT' Training Programme

Evidence of my understanding of the programme and my suitability to deliver the RYCT training programme as a certified facilitator

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Introduction

In the spring of 2014, I had the pleasure of participating in the Remembering Yesterday Caring Today (RYCT) training programme run by the European Reminiscence Network. The training involved a two-day experiential learning style programme in which course leader Pam Schweitzer (PS) guided participants through some of the creative reminiscence activities which form the bedrock of the RYCT reminiscence programme. Following this two-day course, I joined an 11 week apprentice-led RYCT programme at Hider Court with the aim of learning to deliver the course in my home area of Hampshire.

The apprentice-led programme provided a positive and supportive environment in which eight apprentices could learn to deliver therapeutic reminiscence work by co-facilitating alongside experienced ERN practitioners and eventually leading activities with people with dementia and their carers. I hope through this essay to evidence what I have learned about delivering the RYCT programme and to reflect upon my practice in carrying out creative based therapeutic reminiscence activities to aid memory recall and well-being.

What is entailed in making activities relevant and enjoyable for group participants?

In consideration of this first question, the most important factor, in my opinion, is for the facilitator team to get to know the group participants (pwd and their carers) at the earliest stage so that activities can be developed to build upon individuals' skills, interests and life experiences. This can be achieved by fostering good relationships with health and social care staff involved in the referral process and by putting measures in place to ensure sharing of case notes prior to the first session. In the case of the Hider Court group, case notes were not shared with apprentices and the frustration of not knowing much about individuals' lives in the early weeks was voiced in de-briefing sessions. However, I would assert that in this case it was sensible to withhold confidential case notes from relatively untried and untested trainees. It did, though, create an interesting scenario in which some apprentices wrongly assumed that a carer with speech difficulties was the person with dementia when in fact the pwd was actually her husband. Again, this was probably a good occurrence in the training scenario because it forced trainees to evaluate how they relate to pwd. If everyone is treated with equal value and integrity then the carer shouldn't even have been aware of the mistake (which, to my knowledge, she wasn't).

A second way to get to know and understand the needs of pwd and their carers is to put measures in place to ensure that everyone feels comfortable from the very first session and to create the space for

each person to introduce themselves and express something about who they are to others. This cultural dynamic starts from the moment of arrival, ensuring that every couple is met at the door, welcomed to the session, helped to take off their coat and find a comfortable place to sit and has a name badge so that they can be addressed by their name by everyone who talks to them. It is also equally important for facilitators to wear name badges too, so that a sense of familiarity is achieved quickly.

At the first session of the Hider Court apprentice-led programme, participants were invited to introduce themselves to the whole group and share something that they liked doing. This was gently handled by the course leader, Pam Schweitzer (PS), so that everyone felt confident to speak out and everyone's story was listened to, amplified and valued. Next people were invited to get up and talk to someone who shared their interest or someone who said something that they would like to find out more about. Facilitators aided this process by highlighting connections and assisting individuals to get up and go and talk to someone else. This exercise represents a very simple and effective way to quickly put participants at their ease and to lay the foundations for friendships to be formed.

Ensuring good use of the creative arts

One of the strengths of the RYCT programme is the opportunity it affords for varied use of the creative arts in the processing of aiding reminiscence. Creative art forms including drama, mime, singing, art and craft, and even activities such as cooking and gardening, are used as enablers, stimulating people to recall their memories and communicate them to others.

Mime was used to great effect on the RYCT apprentice-led programme. At the start of each session people would often be asked to mime a particular aspect of their past as an opener for discussion. In Session 4, people mimed their first jobs and the rest of the group had to copy the action and then try and guess the job. The benefit of this activity was threefold; firstly, it was a simple and effective means of physically warming up body and mind for the session ahead, secondly, it brought the group together and encouraged pwd to interact with each other, thirdly, it enabled people with limited capacity to vocalise their stories to communicate by another means.

Mime worked particularly well for some of the men in the group. In particular, a man named Chris, who had expressive dysphasia, was able, with the help of his wife, to convey through mime key memories of his childhood. Chris was unable to vocalise his story, but with gentle prompting from his wife, he was able to act out how he hid behind a shelf in the family hardware store and shot a pea shooter at unsuspecting customers, causing much hilarity between himself and his brother, and also how he helped on his dad's round pouring the paraffin into customers' tins. The mime was acted out to the group – Chris taking an active role - and this stimulated further exploration of Chris' past. Facilitators agreed in the debriefing session that Chris was 'glowing' when he heard his memories repeated. It was also a positive experience for his wife, who enjoyed helping her husband tap into his memories and present something of his personality to new people.

Singing is another creative art which was utilised to great effect on the RYCT programme. Song, perhaps more than any other expressive art, has the power to transport people back into their past and to prompt the experiencing of strong emotions. Songs worked best when they arose organically out of a group discussion and everyone participated in singing along. One particularly memorable occasion was during the School Days session of Week 3 when individuals recalled and sang their school songs for each other and then the whole group joined together in a rendition of 'Morning Has Broken', a well-known classic school song. At this moment, as everyone sat side by side in the school hall of our creation, it was quite possible that each and every person had been transported back to the school halls of their own childhoods.

Art and craft activities are an important element of the RYCT programme. In the apprentice-led sessions, art activities presented opportunities for the drawing out people's memories and stories on a one-to-one basis. These stories were then reflected back to the whole group, either through the facilitator prompting the pwd to tell their story, or through facilitators amplifying stories back to the wider group. Amplifying someone's story is not the same as telling their story for them, rather it is the process of a facilitator echoing words which are quietly spoken so that the whole group can listen and respond. It is an empowering experience for people with dementia to hear their stories amplified for others to share, and entirely in contrast to the disempowering experience of having one's story edited and retold, which facilitators were mindful to avoid doing.

There are just three examples of a wide range of creative arts activities which can be used to aid the process of reminiscence and to help people recall and convey their memories. It is important to note that not all activities will suit all people and so it is advisable to mix a range of activities and approaches within each session.

Reflection upon my own strengths and areas for development

The aim of the apprentice-led programme is to give potential practitioners the opportunity to develop and strengthen their own practice in a safe but real environment where the potential to do harm to the client group is limited by virtue of the professional support and guidance available. I found this process incredibly useful and have learned a lot about where my strengths and my areas for improvement lie.

I particularly enjoyed using my drama and communication skills to enable pwd to tap into their memories and share them with others. I was very comfortable with initiating mime warm-ups and with helping individuals to perform their memories (through mime, tableaux and devised scenes) in small group work. I found speaking up so everyone could hear me relatively easy and I also feel I am able to establish rapport through body language, eye contact and active listening skills to people with dementia and their carers.

Where I feel I need to develop my skills and confidence is in recapping activities: I panic if I am not able to make notes to aid memory, and making notes during sessions is not conducive to creating positive

interactions, so the only solution to improve my memory recall through practice. Also, if leading an activity, I need to ensure that everyone is equally included as I naturally gravitate towards vocal people and this means that I could inadvertently exclude quieter and less confident participants. I am aware that in my group's apprentice-led session, I inappropriately focused the street party activity around one particular couple, Alan and Patricia. This was partly because it was Alan's birthday but also partly because they are a couple with whom I had built a strong rapport. My error really hit home when I attempted to build a group tableaux recreating Alan's 18th birthday (assuming he spent it with his family) and he reminded me that he was an orphan and spent his 18th birthday in the army. I learned a valuable lesson about retaining what participants share throughout the sessions and being mindful of making careless assumptions. I was pleased to have made such an error in a training environment and was relieved that Alan was not unduly upset by the episode.

Working with people with dementia to support their well-being and maximise their gains

The RYCT affords much opportunity for facilitators to work closely with participants to maximise the benefits they gain from reminiscence activities. In carrying out the facilitator role, I endeavoured to adhere to the established good practice guidelines. The benefit of such a large number of facilitators meant that I was able to positively support a number of couples on a one-to-one basis throughout the ten week programme.

One couple that I feel particularly benefitted from interactions with apprentices and facilitators was John and his daughter Susan. In the early weeks, Susan cited that she was very stressed by caring for John, he wasn't sleeping through the nights and, added to this, her husband was also very ill. Susan was clearly tired and depressed and had a pressing need to off load her feelings in the RYCT sessions. On one occasion Susan asked her father to tell me when he had injured his leg. He told me it was whilst working as a docker in his twenties. Susan then said, with a touch of triumph, "he was actually in his fifties." In this situation it was important to recognise that Susan did not necessarily wish to humiliate her father, she just had a pressing need to share her feelings of despair at how her father's memory had deteriorated. I responded by saying to John, "you probably felt like you were in your twenties, you would've been so fit." This way I valued the story John had told, made light of the factual error and avoided colluding with the carer who would not wish to upset her father had she not been so tired and stressed.

As the weeks progressed, John and Susan's relationship notably improved. John responded particularly well to sharing his memories through mime, tableaux and small group role plays. One particular highlight was creating a tableau of the holidays in Dubai which John and Susan used to go on. This elicited much positive reminiscence about the times when Susan and her husband had invited John to accompany them abroad in his later life.

By Week 8 (The Next Generation session) John had ceased to make the odd comments about fat women (Susan is a large lady) and Susan no longer seemed despairing of the home situation with her father (he lives in the flat opposite so she is a full time carer by default). I was keen to see how John would respond in the baby bathing activity, and so I opted to work with him and Susan. John bathed the baby with real tenderness and care and did indeed refer to it as baby Susan and later on as Johnny (his other child). I entered into the role play with John talking about baby Susan and observed that he seemed to have entered into the 'flashbulb' memory state, where he was not only remembering events but he was re-experiencing the emotions he felt towards his babies. This episode prompted some real moments of tenderness and connection between John and Susan. John held the baby doll and said, "I love you." Susan then said "What did you used to say? I was the apple of your eye?" John turned to Susan and said emphatically, "yes". This moment represented to me the immense impact on well-being (both for pwd and their carers) that a well-orchestrated RYCT session can achieve.

The benefit of the RYCT programme is the comprehensive framework it provides for enabling people to recall memories from birth to retirement. However, it is also important when delivering sessions to allow space for spontaneity, to develop and explore individuals' contributions, to promote connections and to encourage friendships to flourish.

One particularly memorable example of spontaneity was in the 'Holidays' session when John and Lily decided to take an impromptu stroll along a seaside promenade. The group leader spotted what John was trying to do and apprentices supported John and Lily to get up and recreate a generic shared memory.

Promoting friendships is an important aspect of the RYCT, not least because carers cite it as one of the main reasons for coming to the group when they are asked to fill in the their hopes and fears sheet at the beginning of the course. Facilitators can enable this process through highlighting connections between people, providing opportunity for mixing in the various activities and carefully structuring sessions so that occasionally pwd and carers are separated for activities. It was gratifying to note that towards the end of the course, two men, David and Alan, struck up a rapport and chatted with each other when seated next to each other. Alan's wife Patricia concurred that the course had had a tremendously positive effect on Alan and really brought him out of himself.

Group drama activities were employed to great effect within the RYCT programme serving to build a cohesive group atmosphere through collective reminiscence. The positive impact was most notable in the wedding ceremony (Week 6) when real-life couple Chris and Christine acted out the role of the married couple and everyone else took on other roles. This session created an environment in which people could bond as a group, friendships could be established and it also established mixing between couples which continued in following weeks.

It is worth noting that group drama has to be delicately handled, as it can be rather overwhelming for less gregarious or confident individuals. The Schools Days group drama in Week 3 received a more mixed response from participants. In fact, in this session, two members of the group expressed their discomfort with the role playing activity. One expressed that he felt he was being interrogated and the other felt that the activities were childish. Both had had negative experiences at school and being asked to revisit this era of their lives was clearly painful for them.

This experience taught me that it is important for the facilitating team to keep note of individuals' responses to one particular form or another and to be hyper-vigilant in monitoring any occurrences of discomfort, especially with the more expressive art forms, such as group drama.

Working with carers in a supportive way

Whilst many of activities on the RYCT programme are designed to be shared by pwd and their carers, it is also an important aspect of the programme to give carers the chance to talk with each other away from their loved ones. In the separate carers' talks, space was created for carers to support and advise each other (as in the case of daughters of Keith, Michael and Chris in Week 3) and to express their concerns. One example of this was when Alan's wife Patricia shared her fear that Alan may become violent as his brother had done in the end stages of his own dementia. Community Psychiatric Nurse Adrian was able to reassure her that Alan had a different type of dementia to his brother and it was more likely that he would revert to a childhood state, which, since Alan was a mild and good natured man, was very reassuring for Patricia to hear.

Conclusion

I have whole-heartedly enjoyed the process of learning to deliver the RYCT programme through the apprentice-led sessions and, despite some minor concerns about my areas for development, I feel enthusiastic about delivering a RYCT programme in my home area of Hampshire and positive about the validity of the well-being benefits that the programme has to offer.