

Using poetry to bring back memories for people with dementia

May 16 2017, by Charlotte Anscombe



Credit: University of Nottingham

Students from the School of English at the University of Nottingham have been helping to bring back the memories of people with dementia by reading poems aloud to them.

Under the guidance of Dr Kevin Harvey from the School of English, six students from the University have regularly been visiting care homes in and around Nottingham where they read well-known poems aloud to groups of residents.

The aim of the scheme is to connect people to literature, and each other, and crucially, it also has the potential to unearth memories which might otherwise never resurface.

Emerging theories on dementia treatment

Connie Baird, 20, is one of the students who took part in the scheme. She says: "I've worked with children before, but I'm interested in speech and language therapy generally, so thought it would be interesting to see what kind of care the homes offer and also to look into emerging theories about how to treat [dementia](#)."

"One of the main things I noticed was the level of interest in what we were trying to do. There was a man who had suffered a stroke and the carers said he barely spoke on a usual day. But when we started to talk about poetry – he came alive and was really interested in listening to us read. It was really satisfying to see."

Shared reading has already proved popular in [care homes](#) and day centres around the country, and there are hundreds of groups now in operation. The therapeutic benefits of this kind of reading are being increasingly recognised: not only does it provide pleasure and bring people together, but it also promotes physical and [mental well-being](#).

'Enjoyable, stimulating and calming'

Dr Harvey said: "Typically, people with dementia have short term memory problems, so they may not be able to remember what they did a short while ago, but they may well be able to remember things from a long time ago, such as a [poem](#) they read 50 years ago at school."

"One thing that is repeatedly demonstrated through shared reading is that well-known poems that have a regular rhythm and rhyme are particularly effective for various reasons. They tend to be the kind of poems that are remembered at school, but there may also be something about a regular beat and a chime that galvanizes the brain and neural networks."

"I think this is one of the reasons that poetry is so effective and useful and enjoyable in this kind of setting – and also because people are so

familiar with poetry. And even if people don't respond, just listening to poetry is enjoyable, stimulating and calming in itself."

'Coming alive' through words

Daisy Edwards, 19, is another [student](#) who took part in the scheme. "I found that although the residents might not have remembered us by face each week, they remembered the feeling they had when we visited the time before. They remember that they were happy and that feeling seemed to stay with them, even if the memory doesn't."

An activities coordinator at one of the homes said: "It has been truly inspiring to watch and listen [to the students read] and there have been some real successes. Such as a lady who initially rejected the session but who has returned each week and has been one of our most avid listeners. There was also a gentleman who does not have dementia but suffered a stroke and rejects any form of organised activity: he sat with the students for 20 minutes chatting about his life and interests. The staff here were absolutely amazed."

Due to the success of the scheme, Dr Harvey hopes to expand the project in the autumn.

Provided by University of Nottingham

Citation: Using poetry to bring back memories for people with dementia (2017, May 16) retrieved 12 July 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-05-poetry-memories-people-dementia.html>

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