2013

TimeSlips: Creativity for People with Dementia

Anne Davis Basting
University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee

Volume 28 Number 4 Fall 2013

age in action

Activities in geriatrics and gerontology education and research

Virginia Center on Aging
and
Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services

Case Study

TimeSlips: Creativity for People with Dementia

by Anne Davis Basting, Ph.D.
Department of Theater
University of Wisconsin
Milwaukee

Educational Objectives

1. Recognize the value of creative storytelling for people with dementia, with its shift in emphasis from memory to imagination.
2. Understand the impact of creative storytelling upon facilitators, storytellers, audiences, and readers.
2. Explore the potential mechanisms at work in creative storytelling.

Background

In 1996, I began volunteering in a locked "Alzheimer's wing" of a nursing home. I had been writing extensively about the power of theatre to transform the way we perform aging (or "act our age"), and I wanted to test these ideas with people with profound disabilities. Taking on a new role through theater was clearly transforming the lives of older adults involved with the senior theater movement. Could theater have the same transformative effect with people with the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease? After many failed attempts with reminiscence exercises, I shifted toward "making it up" together. This shift toward the imagination had sudden and profound impact. My small group went from very little talking or eye contact to laughing, singing, and communicating in any and every way we had.

Those first storytelling circles revealed the power of improvisation with people with memory loss. When people feel safe to experiment with communication, they can express themselves in new ways and connect with each other. Isolated islands become connected archipelagoes. Over several years, I worked with care providers and people with memory loss to ritualize this imagination-based storytelling process until it was clear, concise, and easily replicable (Basting, 2009). This is how TimeSlips was born.

The TimeSlips Evolution

In 1998, a Brookdale National Fellowship fueled the first study on replicating TimeSlips. I taught the method to students and staff in two adult day centers in Milwaukee and two in New York. Each site yielded dozens of creative, funny, poignant stories. The teams of staff and students shared the stories with families. Teams of artists shared the stories through professional play productions in both cities, aimed at sparking dialogue about the power of creativity to reach people with dementia. Since those early days, the TimeSlips team has created in-person and online trainings, and now certifies both individuals and organizations. In 2011, we created free, web-based interactive storytelling software that enables people to experience creative storytelling wherever they live (www.timeslips.org). Our Master Trainers work with facilitators through the online training to coach them through any challenges they are having with the method as they practice it. With over 100 prompts on the website, visitors are invited to click on an image that leads them to a story page with open-ended questions. Storytellers can tell a story themselves, write one as a group, or invite a friend via e-mail

Inside This Issue:

to tell it with them. Visitors to the web site can read thousands of stories from around the world. In addition, TimeSlips has collaborated with various artists to create works based on TimeSlips stories that inspire the general public to think differently about dementia, to consider and mine the strengths that remain. Our goal is to make TimeSlips, and the open-ended, person-centered improvisational approach it entails, a standard approach to care for and living with people with memory loss.

Time Slips in Practice

TimeSlips exemplifies a participatory approach to creativity with people with dementia. It invites the person with memory loss to be the author of his or her own imagination. In groups or one-on-one, TimeSlips facilitators invite imagination-based responses to a prompt and accept any answers that are given. Facilitators are taught to ask open-ended questions based on a prompt (an object, a question, a song, and most commonly, an image) that invite imagination, rather than dictate or guide it. Facilitators echo all responses to demonstrate that they are truly hearing every component of the storyteller's answer, its tone, emotion, pitch, wording, gesture, and facial expression. Facilitators write down all responses and read them back as the story builds. It is a simple approach with considerable impact on all of those involved in the process. Over the past 15 years, TimeSlips has touched the lives of people with memory loss; those who facilitate the process (including staff, volunteers, students, and family members); and the myriad others who witness the public sharing of the stories. We have hundreds of Certified Facilitators across the world, and a steadily growing number of Certified Organizations that include a historical society, care communities, and art museums. Our eight Master Trainers are located across the country and conduct our organizational certifications and provide feedback to our online Certified Facilitators.

Sample TimeSlips Group Story in Response to a Prompt

The Golden Guitar

Portia is playing the guitar and singing! No one is listening. She is serenading herself and the birds. She is in a park in Mount Wilson. There are a lot of trees and leaves. It's autumn. She is singing "The Falling Leaves." Everybody sings, "The Autumn leaves drift past my window, the autumn leaves of red and gold." Portia lives there. It's her sanctuary. She is looking at her guitar because she is seeing bubbles coming from her guitar. She is hoping to record a long-playing CD. She is worried whether her guitar will keep working. Maybe somebody comes to teach her to play the guitar.

The birds come down and join her. She throws her guitar on the ground because it won't work properly. She jumps on it. She feels sad. She goes there to play guitar and she is waiting for her boyfriend. You can see her friend's reflection in the guitar. Her friend steps out of the guitar. She is a fairy godmother who fixes the guitar and everything is happy again. *(This story was created by Mena, Mary, Win and Elvira in the Calvary Rehabilitation Ward on July 29, 2013.)*

Because of the challenges of doing large-scale research on creative engagement interventions for people with dementia, very little data exist about the mechanisms behind the anecdotal/experiential success stories that are so clear to the people who work in the field. There is growing momentum to support research on creative engagement, which is promising. Until then, however, we can only guess. My best thoughts on the mechanisms is that creative engagement builds communication and enables people with memory loss to reconnect to others in a non-judgmental way. It can also make people feel useful and important, contributing to a sense of purpose and meaning. Improving attitudes of people who surround the person with memory loss can help enrich the environment and conditions of care. These factors can reduce anxiety and increase a sense of pleasure/purpose in life, which might, in turn, be linked to improved cognition.

Improving the quality of life of people with dementia demands that we change the way we think about and act toward people with dementia. We should certainly continue to explore bio/chemical interventions. But reducing the toxicity of the care environment can also have an immediate effect on the quality of

life of people with dementia. The following cases look at the various ways in which TimeSlips can contribute to improving the social conditions in which one experiences dementia.

Case #1: Family Caregivers

Several years ago, I conducted a training workshop on TimeSlips in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, at the John Michael Kohler Art Center. We had a small but dedicated group of folks, many of whom had flown in from other states specifically for the workshop. The structure of the training workshop (and online training) is simple. First we focus on what creativity feels like for ourselves. We play and enjoy. Then we shift toward understanding how to facilitate creative expression with people with memory loss, and practice the elements of the method. Finally, we imagine how we might share the stories with others to help them understand that the imagination can be a point of connection and communication for people with memory loss.

As we turned the corner from playing to learning the specific steps of the method, a gentleman who was part of the training group started to look uncomfortable. His grimacing continued for a few minutes until I finally had to ask him, "Are you okay?" He paused. Then he said slowly, as if discovering the meaning as the words came out, "I'm just realizing -- that for the last year I have been driving my wife away." He went on to explain that he would constantly correct the wrong words, dates, and names. He was finding a way back to her, simply by shifting to a shared sense of imagination and away from an insistence on fact and literal language. He has since gone on to work with his daughter (a pastor), to create a family foundation that models TimeSlips to other family caregivers. "Instead of insisting on calling ketchup by the right name," his daughter wrote me in an e-mail, "now we make up new names for it. Now we play together. And my son loves it too."

Case #2: A Person with Memory Loss

Roger's wife had seen a story on the local news about a new storytelling program at a day center and quickly called to see if there was a spot for him. There was, so she brought him in, driving over an hour to get there. Roger had been a postal carrier, with a pattern of enchanting his family and the residents of his delivery route with stories and jokes for years. By the time his growing changes and symptoms led to a diagnosis of dementia, he had practically stopped talking altogether. On Thursdays, however, when he joined the storytelling group, he started to open up again, adding jokes, names, quips, and votes of confidence in the answers of other participants. "That was terrific!" he told Irma when she gave a particularly witty contribution to the story. He was the life of the story nearly every week. At the end of our storytelling project, we held a celebration in which we read stories and presented hand-made books of stories to the storytellers and their family and friends. Roger grabbed my arm before the reading was to begin. "You know why this works?" he asked me with a sense of urgency. "Why, Roger?" "It ain't cheap," he replied. His meaning was clear. We took the storytellers seriously. We valued them and their answers. When we handed him the book, which had been lovingly designed by one of our art students, he teared up.

Case #3: Students

Our online training enables TimeSlips to be incorporated into classrooms as a "service-learning" element of courses ranging from Psychology to Theater, from English to Social Work. At the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, the Center for Community-based Learning, Leadership, and Research coordinates undergraduate volunteers from all across campus to train in the method and team up to practice it at six different care communities (see www.creativetrustmke.com for more information on this program). Over the years, simple pre-post surveys on attitudes toward dementia and aging have helped assess the impact of the service learning programs on students. Recently, Dr. Daniel George published a study about his use of TimeSlips in service learning with 22 fourth-year medical students at the Penn State College of Medicine (George et al, 2011). Dr. George found preliminary evidence suggesting that learning to communicate in the open, positive model of TimeSlips improved the students' attitudes about engaging with people with dementia.

"In talking with my students, they consistently express their anxieties about medical school training them to see patients as a diagnosis rather than as a fully-fledged person,"

George said. "An activity like TimeSlips, which emphasizes the creative spirit in people with fairly advanced dementia, helps give students a richer sense of who the person was and what made them tick." (*Science Daily*, June 18, 2013).

The challenge of recruiting students to work with older adults is well known in academia. We hunger for geriatric social workers, nurses, dentists, and physicians. The meager financial reward for such work is certainly a disincentive, one that is difficult to change. But the attitude that working with older adults is "depressing" can be changed by creating positive experiences through interventions such as TimeSlips for students in all disciplines.

Case #4: A Staff Member

Over the past 15 years, TimeSlips Master Trainers have conducted hundreds of training sessions. These involve an on-site demonstration of the method with residents of that care community. It can be unnerving to go into a new setting and work with people you've never met and hope that the magic of improvisation works yet again. At one training in Saint Paul several years ago, the training coordinator arranged for a live web feed of my demonstration session in the nursing unit to be screened in the training room where nearly 100 people were gathered. There was a staff member of the nursing unit who helped arrange the storytellers in a semi-circle and then helped me by echoing some of the answers that I couldn't hear from across the circle.

The magic of improvisation flowered yet again; storytellers were laughing and responding with ease as they collectively wove a fantastic story. When I went back down to the training room, I asked the trainees to tell me what they observed and what questions they had. One person asked, "How do you choose who should participate?" Before I could answer, the staff member who had helped me on the unit said, "Can I answer that? Pick the names out of a hat." She explained that she was embarrassed that before the session she had assumed some of the people in the group were "too far gone" to participate, and she didn't expect anything from the session. "But instead, they were the leaders of the whole group," she said, with a tone of astonishment. "I will never look at them in the same way again."

In a 20-nursing home study, our team of researchers found that on the 10 units in which TimeSlips was embedded, the quality and quantity of engagement between staff and residents improved. The person-centered, engagement-based approach models a positive way to engage with people with dementia that spills over to improve the relationships even of those who did not participate in the training or the storytelling groups themselves (Fritsch et al., 2009).

Case #5: Audience Members

The TimeSlips team has coached the creation of hundreds of storytelling celebrations over the years. Many are quite simple: care communities will create books of the stories and share them with families over punch and cookies. Others are more elaborate, and involve setting songs to music or collaborating with a local dance company to interpret the stories.

TimeSlips has also been involved directly in the creation of several plays and art exhibits over the years, including venues such as HERE Arts Center and the New Museum in New York City. At all of our events, we invite audience feedback to assess if the exhibit or performance changed what they thought about people with dementia. The data suggest that the performances do, indeed, improve the attitude that people with dementia can be creative, but of course, sample sizes are small and changes in attitude are difficult to link to changes in behavior. Perhaps the best evidence of larger societal changes in attitudes toward dementia is that the performances at the New York production of the TimeSlips play, staged in the month following the 9-11 disaster, were sold out for the majority of the run. And that the New Museum (Time of our Life exhibit) and John Michael Kohler Art Center (Hiding Places, Memory in Art) invited our participation in their exhibits. People are growing more open and receptive to engaging with representations of memory loss.

In the Milwaukee production of the TimeSlips play in 2000, one audience member's response suggests a reason why the work was effective. The play itself depicted characters from the stories created by a group of people with dementia at two local adult day centers. One character was Ethel Rebecca, a pilot who was flying in an open air plane all the way to Seattle with Dizzy

Gillespie in the back seat. She was singing "Cera luna mezza mara mama mia mi mari dari," an old Italian-American favorite. The character was played by local jazz vocalist Adekola Adedapo, who ran full sprint up a ramp and into the audience to belt out her first song. On opening night the husband of the woman who contributed that song to the storytelling session sat right at the end of that ramp. I was terribly nervous that the experience would be too much for him, but didn't have the time to get to him to see if he preferred to change seats. After the show, I found him and asked him what he thought. "I just loved it. It was as though she was right there with me." I was relieved. And then he asked, "Is it okay if I come again tomorrow?"

Conclusion

With appropriate study designs and adequate funding for research on creative engagement techniques in dementia care, we can work toward answering the question of what mechanisms are at play with the experiential evidence we observe in the field. For now, these easy to learn approaches have no side effects and existing data suggest that they have a positive impact on improving the entire 360 degree circle of care surrounding the person with dementia, from students, family caregivers, audience members, staff, and, most centrally, people with dementia themselves. No pill can do that.

The playfulness at the root of the TimeSlips improvisational storytelling technique can teach us to focus on the person with dementia, to recognize the person's capacity for growth, meaning, engagement, and, perhaps most importantly, their ability to teach us valuable lessons about life.

Study Questions

1. One family caregiver tells stories about things in the refrigerator. How might you incorporate imagination-based approaches like TimeSlips into activities of daily life? And what benefit do you think it might have?
2. What prompts might be around your house or work place?
3. What steps might you take to invite someone to participate in creative storytelling?

References

Basting, A. D. (2009). *Forget memory: Creating better lives for people with dementia.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

George, D. R., Stuckey, H. L., Dillon, C. F., & Whitehead, M. M. (2011). Impact of participation in TimeSlips, a creative group-based storytelling program, on medical student attitudes toward persons with dementia: A qualitative study. *Gerontologist, 51*(5), 699-703.

Fritsch, T., Jung, K., Grant, S., Lang, J., Montgomery, R. R., & Basting, A. D. (2009). Impact of TimeSlips, a creative expression intervention program, on nursing home residents with dementia and their caregivers. *Gerontologist, 49*(1), 117-127.

Science Daily. (June 18, 2013). Storytelling program helps change medical students' perspectives on dementia. Retrieved August 18, 2013 from www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/06/130618113846.htm.

Recommended Resources

The Arts and Aging: Building the Science. Summary of a National Academies Workshop, Research Gaps and Opportunities for Exploring the Relationship of the Arts to Health and Well-Being in Older Adults. Downloadable at www.nea.gov/pub/Arts-and-Aging-Building-the-Science.pdf

www.creativetrustmke.com

www.TimeSlips.org

Zeisel, J. (2009). *I'm still here: A new philosophy of Alzheimer's care.* New York: Penguin Group.

About the Author

Anne Davis Basting is Professor of Theatre at University of Wisconsin Milwaukee where she teaches courses on storytelling and community-engaged arts practices. She is the founder of TimeSlips Creative Storytelling and author of two books, including *Forget Memory: Creating Better Lives for People with Dementia*. She collaborated with Sojourn Theatre on the two-year Penelope Project (www.thepenelopeproject.com) to create and stage an original play in a long term care community inspired by Homer's Odyssey. She is currently working to develop a sustainable system to bring creative engagement to older adults living alone (Islands of Milwaukee). Contact her at basting@uwm.edu.