Painting workshops for people living with dementia as a means of expression and communication: revelations from our elders

Megan Wyatt and Paula Boddington

Abstract

Purpose – *This study aims to explore art workshops for people living with dementia as a process enabling creative expression and fostering communication with others.*

Design/methodology/approach – *To enable detailed exploration of the expressive powers of painting and drawing, the authors draw several examples from a series of painting workshops for people living with dementia, which formed part of the PPI for research into experiences of restraint within care.*

Findings – *Artwork enabled personal expression, facilitated conversation with others and revealed hidden knowledge and abilities, but also revealed dangers of miscommunication, specifically here related to technological changes and spirituality.*

Research limitations/implications – *Individual differences in responses to painting will exist meaning that the specific findings outlined here are unique to individuals and not always generalisable. This follows from the quality of the individual communication that may be enabled by painting, meaning that close attention to each person is both fostered and required.*

Practical implications – *Art activities can provide a means to enable deep personal expression and agency in people living with dementia, which can contribute to countering dehumanisation.*

Social implications – *Attention to the process of painting can be beneficial in fostering verbal and non-verbal communication with individuals who have difficulties in communication. Attention to cultural issues in care needs to incorporate understanding of spiritual and religious issues and take note of gaps in understanding related to technological as well as cultural changes between generations.*

Originality/value – *Much work in this area explores art activities for people living with dementia in terms of beneficial outcomes. This work explores the creative process inherent in painting, drawing upon insights from art theory and providing in-depth individual insights through case studies. Both researchers in this study are artists and the work drew upon their understanding of the processes of painting.*

Keywords *Religion, Technology, Older people, Communication, Dementia, Painting, Arts and health*

Paper type *Research paper*

Megan Wyatt and Paula Boddington are both based at the Geller Institute of Ageing and Memory, University of West London, London, UK.

Received 19 June 2024
Revised 22 August 2024
Accepted 5 September 2024

This project is supported by the NIHR [Understanding the everyday use of restrictive practices in the care of people living with dementia during a hospital admission: reducing inappropriate use, identifying good practice and alternative approaches to reduce risk and improve care (132903). The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

Background into dementia

People living with dementia may be subject to dehumanisation, often inadvertently (Mitchell *et al.*, 2020). Those challenging such dehumanisation note that capacities, including fine-tuned social awareness, may persist even after the deterioration of linguistic and other abilities (Kontos, 2004, 2005; Mitchell *et al.*, 2020). A diagnosis of dementia may however overshadow the person, with global lack of capacity often assumed. Behaviour, emotional responses and difficulties in communication may be misinterpreted as a sign of the severity of dementia, rather than as a rational response to circumstances or as a misunderstood attempt to communicate (Boyle, 2014; Featherstone and Northcott, 2021).

New models of working are needed to improve quality of life for people living with dementia (Gross *et al.*, 2015, Zeilig *et al.*, 2014). Among different initiatives, the value of the arts in the care of people living with dementia is increasingly recognised, with numerous studies reporting on the positive benefits (Windle *et al.*, 2018a; 2018b; Algar-Skaife *et al.*, 2017). Research suggests that the arts can "improve the recall of personal memories" and "enhance the quality of life of people living with dementia and their carers" (APPGHAW, 2017, p. 12). Further benefits include a promotion of sense of purpose, access to creative abilities, freedom (Zeilig *et al.*, 2014) and the recollection of episodic memory (Young *et al.*, 2016). Art can provide a meaningful and mutual reciprocal exchange within care dyads (Mondro *et al.*, 2018). Confidence of care staff and communication between care partners and people living with dementia can be improved through purposeful interaction (Windle *et al.*, 2020).

Existing research in arts for dementia largely focuses on tangible outcomes in relation to specific benefits (Zeilig *et al.*, 2014). For example, a facilitator delivers an arts session to a group of people living with dementia with the aim of improving their mood (Schall *et al.*, 2018). Little research focuses primarily on the creative processes of people living with dementia during the act of making. Newman *et al.* (2019) explored the benefits of the creative process in art workshops among other factors contributing to the development of resilience in people living with dementia, although the creative processes *per se* was not the main focus of their work. Overlooking details of the creative processes may constitute a failure to recognise skills that a person living with dementia may indeed retain (Newman *et al.*, 2019). Understanding and valuing such creative processes acknowledges the agency of people living with dementia, who may feel unsupported in exercising their agency within care (Armstrong and Byrne, 2011); the skills that individuals still possess should be recognised and enabled (Basting, 2009).

We approach arts facilitation aware of the need to value agency and the creative process, and to enrich the opportunities for reciprocal exchange between care dyads. This paper offers insight into how the processes and expressions within the act of making can form lines of communication and reciprocity between artist facilitators and individuals living with dementia, through exploring several examples in depth, in response to the need to recognise the individuality of creative expression and resulting communications, which cannot adequately be captured within reporting of aggregated findings.

Some participatory research may neglect differences between ways of thinking, hence overlooking the knowledge of certain groups (Fletcher, 2023). The authors are exploring a novel approach in which engagement with the arts, in this instance, painting but also drawing, can be used as a way to facilitate expression in consultation on specific topics for those who may have difficulties in verbal or written communication (Wyatt and Boddington, forthcoming).

The context of painting

We chose painting for its extensive expressive and spontaneous capabilities. This research locates its approach to painting with the "Modernism" movement especially its tendencies towards self-expression and the role of personal experience when painting (Ring Petersen, 2010), whereby individuals have the opportunity to engage in a way that is individual to them. There are no imposed limits in their painting engagement, something which can provide a transcendent and individual experience (Kuspit, 2004).

Some Modernist thinkers also discuss the expression of spirituality which may also be of relevance to our findings. Modernism provided a new focus on experimentation of form and materials whereby artists communicated their own subjective experiences and expressions (MOMA Learning, 2018). Numerous artists focused on such expression of their own feelings and ideas through painting, through gestural brush strokes and non-realistic uses of colour (Tate, 2018). Crucially in this way, painting can provide non-verbal routes of expression and embodiment.

Kuspit (2000) affirmed painting's potential to conjure a mode of immediate awareness and transcendence specific to the creator or viewer. Kuspit described these experiences as "spiritual" and argues for the necessity to experience these dimensions through modern painting: painting's capacity to promote these feelings can facilitate a unique experience often denied by modern and secular society. These expressive, transcendent qualities of painting allow it to continue to remain the primary visual art (Kuspit, 2000). Likewise, Kandinsky wrote of the spiritual in art, whereby artists can express their inner experiences and lives through non-representational forms of art (Kandinsky, 1977).

Here, we leave open the precise meaning of the "spiritual" in artistic expression. Kandinsky used the hard-to-translate German word "Stimmung", approximating inner feeling or sentiment, expressed by art: "such harmony [. . .] cannot be worthless: indeed the *Stimmung* of a picture can deepen and purify that of the spectator" (Kandinsky, W. (trans. Sadler, M.T.H.), 1977, p. 2). He wrote: "In each picture is a whole lifetime imprisoned, a whole lifetime of fears, doubts, hopes and joys" (Kandinsky, W. (trans. Sadler, M.T.H.), 1977, p. 3).

We draw upon such thoughts in our approach to art engagement with people living with dementia, considering painting as a potential means of inner expression while keeping an open mind about the nature and forms of such expression, which may or may not be representational, and where "spiritual" may be variously interpreted. Through supporting individuals to engage in this mode of painting, new insights develop into individuals' experiences, wishes and thoughts.

Methods

The researchers used painting as a technique to gain understanding of how people living with dementia might understand experiences of freedom. This was part of a larger project exploring experiences of restraint during care and formed part of the Patient and Public Involvement work for this project. Findings from the wider study will be published once data collection and analysis have been completed in 2025.

In total, the researchers held five painting workshops for people living with dementia over an 18-month period. The individuals we focus on here were recruited through a day centre which they regularly attended. Each workshop had about six to eight participants, was 1.5 h long and was timed to suit the needs of the participants and care centre. Participants were all over the age of 65 and were living with dementia in an area of the UK with an ethnically mixed population. Participants had varying degrees of dementia and all had some ability to verbally communicate but this fluctuated throughout each of the sessions.

Ethical approval given by the University of West London before commencement. Consent was obtained for each participant and was a continuous process over the course of the five workshops. The researchers worked closely with the day centre to clarify whether each participant was deemed to have capacity. Where required, appropriate gatekeepers were sought. The researchers conducted *in situ* interviews. Voice recordings of the workshops were transcribed *verbatim*. Researchers recorded observations through field notes, which were added to corresponding sections of the interview transcripts. A thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2012) was then adopted to allow for new themes to develop.

Participants were provided with a wide choice of different watercolour paint, different sized paintbrushes and watercolour paper. All materials were non-toxic and washable.

Discussions around freedom were held at the beginning of the session. Participants were then invited to paint whatever they wanted. Researchers supported individuals throughout the session. Verbal prompts and reassurance were provided if necessary. Support provided was intuitive and dependent on each participant's needs and behaviours.

The role of the painting is grounded on the basis that knowledge can exist outside of language and present itself in different ways (Polayni, 1966). Words were used within the

sessions to elucidate the paintings and provide support for other's understandings (Eisner, 2008). Furthermore, both researchers are practicing artists and had a deep understanding of the creative processes. This allowed for primary insights into the creative process, which can be used to offer insight into others' creative engagement (McNiff, 2008).

Findings

Because our focus is upon the details of the painting process and the communications that may arise, we present a few case studies only. All names were changed for privacy.

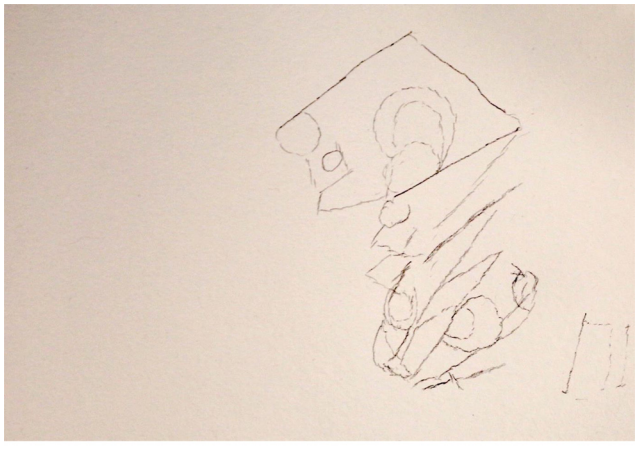
Iris appeared to have very little language and at first she was reluctant to use the paints supplied, instead asking for a pencil. She spent about an hour looking intently at her paper, making slow, very faint lines on her paper with slightly trembling hands. These appeared at first to be mostly a series of repetitive lines forming no discernible pattern or image. Underneath these lines, she then slowly and methodically made a series of square shapes in what appeared to be unsuccessful attempts to form letters. After the workshop had finished, however, on close inspection, Iris had drawn, very faintly, a recognisable bird with a head and beak, body and legs, with wings raised, and the repetitions of lines appeared to be a representation of fluttering repeated beats of the wings. In response to thinking about "freedom", Iris had drawn a bird in flight (Figure 1).

June and Nancy both sought additional support while painting. Fruitful dialogues ensued which informed their painting process, elucidated their finished work and raised topics of concern to each.

One researcher gave an account of an interaction with June:

> I sat next to June for some time. June said she was "no good" at painting. Very carefully, in a neat row, with a thin brush, she painted three small objects, one red and two blue, possibly representing people, arms outstretched, legs together. She then painted a blue shape like a fat banana with a line through it. "What's that I've painted?" she asked me. "Could be a boat?" She seemed happy, and added a triangle with a vertical line connecting it to the boat shape, which appeared to represent a sail. Underneath the boat was a horizontal blue line representing the sea.

Figure 1 Iris's drawing



Source: Figure courtesy of Iris (pseudonym) reproduced with permission

We chatted about where the boat might be and what else she could paint. She painted two small blue recognisably human figures, with outstretched legs and arms. “They are getting on the boat and going to where the others are”, explained June. I asked her where the boat was, and she named a country overseas, where she had been born. June said that she had come to Britain on the boat. She wanted to know what else she could paint. I suggested she could paint the sand and the sea, and asked her what colour the sand was where she came from. “Brown and white”, she said.

“Did you come here with your family?”, I asked. “No”, she replied. June had come alone as a young woman to London to stay with her uncle. She knew shorthand so she could easily get a job.

“My mother came to London from Wales and lived with her aunt, and knew shorthand so she could easily find a job too”, I remarked.

June was very interested in this.

“Where in London did your uncle stay?”

June could not remember.

“My mother got a job in a hospital and lived in the nurses’ home. She was so slim because they weren’t going to stay in to wait for dinner, they were all out dancing and enjoying themselves!” I told June.

June laughed at this. She said she likes dancing.

“If you could do shorthand you could get a job anywhere”, said June.

“When did your mother come?” June asked me. My mother came in 194*, June came in 195*.

June painted something that might represent sand, but perhaps resembled an anchor, in red.

June now told me that the first figures are airplanes.

June wrote something in shorthand under the picture.

“What does that say?” I asked.

“Thank you for talking to me.”

She wrote something else. June told me what it meant. “It is lovely talking to you.”

“You still remember shorthand after all these years”, I remarked.

“Shorthand is very useful”, said June.

June then told me she was writing a poem. I misheard her and thought she was writing a Shakespeare poem.

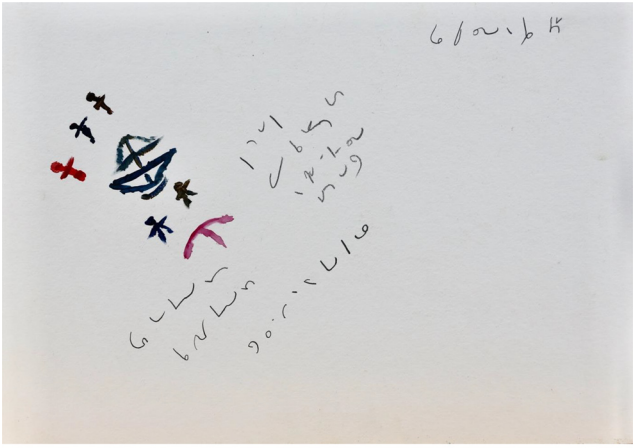
“That’s amazing, I never saw Shakespeare written in shorthand”, I said.

“That’s not Shakespeare, that’s my own poem”, said June (Figure 2).

Nancy produced three paintings over two workshops spaced a few weeks apart. In both, Nancy clearly demonstrated her religious faith.

In the first workshop, Nancy firstly painted a yellow flower in a pot on the left side of the paper, and on the right side an open book, outlined in pale pink, with a blue ribbon through

Figure 2 June's painting and shorthand



Source: Figure courtesy of Iris (pseudonym) reproduced with permission

the centre. She explained to us that this was her Bible, which she read every day, and pointed out the ribbon used as a page marker.

In her second painting, Nancy painted using Brusho paint which produces mottled sprays of colour. She painted a green-blue cross shape, perhaps resembling a tree, perhaps a person with outstretched arms. One researcher asked what she was painting. Nancy replied, "A cross". Above the cross, she later neatly painted the letters "INRI". The same researcher again inquired with curiosity what that meant. Nancy replied, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Nancy's painting of a cross

Source: Figure courtesy of Nancy (pseudonym) reproduced with permission

In the second workshop, participants were asked to think about what freedom meant to them as they painted. Nancy immediately confidently painted what she explained was a Bible, and said, “Look, there is the ribbon again”. The Bible was painted as open. On the left side, Nancy painted a page showing the first chapter of the Bible: GENESIS written at the top, then the numbers 1 2 3 4, painted underneath each other. Nancy painted a simple tree shape with two branches, with a small red circle at each end. She painted two stick figures, lacking arms, with head shapes at the top, one with long hair. The researcher recognised she was painting Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, from which Eve, when tempted by the serpent, picked an apple which both she and Adam ate. Nancy pointed at the tree saying “Look at that tree”, and laughed at the fact that it only had two branches, giving it the shape of a “Y”. The researcher noted that nonetheless it clearly looked like the tree from the Garden of Eden, and joked, “Where is the serpent?” Nancy laughed cheerfully at the suggestion that she would actually paint the serpent.

On the right side, Nancy wrote the word REVELATION and slowly painted a series of small horses, one under the other: the first one black, then brown, then red, another black and the bottom one white, all neatly placed on the page. She decided the black horse was the wrong colour, then painted over some of it in yellow and also decided the brown horse was the wrong colour. “I can’t remember the colour of the other horse”, Nancy explained, suggesting it might be grey and asking one of the researchers what the colour of the fourth horse was. Here, Nancy is assuming that the researcher will understand the context of the four horsemen of the apocalypse which are described in Revelation (see below for further discussion). The researcher could not remember but suggested painting over it to try again, and Nancy blocked it out completely in yellow. They then had a discussion about the four horsemen, with Nancy trying to recall what each symbolise: famine, war, pestilence and death. At the bottom of the paper, Nancy wrote in red paint “Rev 21.1.5”. Nancy then told the researcher that she believed we were living in the end times now. “All that’s happening around us, it’s the Apocalypse”. She was perfectly calm and at ease with this, which came across as a matter-of-fact reflection on the world (Figure 4).

Figure 4 Nancy’s painting of the Bible

Source: Figure courtesy of Nancy (pseudonym) reproduced with permission

Discussion

We set out to explore how participation in painting might facilitate expression in people living with dementia. The findings demonstrate that it was not simply the painting itself, but the conversations and engagement that ensued which also produced further expression. In these three examples, individuals demonstrated otherwise hidden capacities including meaningful biographical details. It also became clear that rich possibilities for expression may go along with the possibility of misunderstanding, with potential for negative "looping" effects and assumptions of lack of capacity.

Iris's application to her drawing revealed capacities for concentration and thought that, given her difficulties with communication, may otherwise have been hidden – indeed, we almost missed them. A lazy assumption that she was engaged in meaningless repetitive movements, rather than painstakingly representing the fluttering wings of a bird, may easily have led to an affirmation of reduced capacity. Indeed, from a casual glance, her drawing looked like a barely used piece of paper with scribbles on it. To realise that Iris had represented "freedom" by a bird in flight that had taken nearly an hour to draw was a salutary and moving lesson and a revelation to us.

June and Nancy both had more capacity for language, and we discuss further two emerging themes related to potential for understanding and misunderstanding: changes in communication technologies and religious and spiritual expression. June was hesitant about painting and required encouragement. Yet the possibilities of painting seemed to have assisted expression and creativity, with June changing her mind about the meanings of her work. In contrast, she showed strong confidence when writing in shorthand. In this case, the dialogue about the painting enabled June to demonstrate that she had persisting skills and to use a preferred method of expression – shorthand (and poetry), rather than painting.

Among many in the mid-20th century, shorthand represented economic and social freedom regardless of background. The connections between the participant and the researcher's mother enabled further communication, including several periods of laughter. The session thus enabled June to express a rich picture of what it meant to escape from restraints through the freedom and choices she had gained by her skills. The dialogue that arose from the painting was rich, unexpected and may well never have occurred without the starting point of the painting.

June's confidence in using shorthand, over 60 years after first learning it, was something we may not have anticipated. Moreover, we, the researchers, were dependent upon June to tell us what her shorthand meant. June did not merely possess hidden skills; these skills exceeded the ability of the two researchers. (June's shorthand was independently checked by a fluent user of shorthand who verified its meaning.)

Shorthand once in common use is now less widely practiced except in specialist professions. Hence, this ability may be both unrecognised and unappreciated given technological changes. Moreover, the ability even to recognise the writing June produced as shorthand may even be lost. The symbols on the page could easily have been interpreted as deconstructed attempts to write in English longhand, and hence as demonstrating not capacity, but its loss, maybe seen as meaningless behaviour indicative of dementia, as perhaps Iris's faint repetitive pencil marks may have been. We became acutely aware of the unexpected limits in understanding the participants and in interpreting their artworks. An opportunity to recognise capacity could rather represent a barrier to understanding, which could potentially reinforce perceptions of the severity of an individual's dementia.

The two researchers differed to each other in age. The younger researcher was unfamiliar with shorthand, whereas the older had started to learn shorthand at school, so recognised June's script as shorthand but could not read it. The "digital divide" between older and

younger generations may be popularly presented as a deficit on the part of older generations (Van Dijk, 2020). However, this case illustrates that as technology advances, there are losses as well as gains: the converse of the digital divide is the failure to appreciate the skills lost through technological change, creating culture gaps, which may add to difficulties in communication and understanding.

We set out to elicit responses on certain questions from participants for our research, where we might easily have unconsciously positioned ourselves as the "experts", yet were made to realise how much we may learn from them. This brought to mind Kandinsky's notion that "the *Stimmung* of a picture can deepen and purify that of the spectator", and the broad ways in which both Kandinsky and Kuspit spoke of the power of art in relation to the spiritual. This can be seen in an explicit form in Nancy's work.

Nancy's painting was representational, and was primarily concerned with religious expression. Modernists were writing of a time of loss of religion. Given the decline of formal religious adherence within certain societies including the UK, loss of knowledge needed for understanding religious or spiritual expression may likewise represent an inter-generational and well as inter-cultural issue for interpreting expression of weighty, deeply personal issues given the evidence of the importance of religion and spirituality for those living with dementia (Stuckey and Gwyther, 2003; Lawrence, 2003; Agli *et al.*, 2015; Regan *et al.*, 2013).

The expression afforded by Nancy's paintings was still evident. Her diligent and careful concentration on painting, attention to the smallest detail, and attempts to get all the details correct, spoke to and expressed her convictions. Hence, we can see again the importance of the painting process in and of itself, and what can be learned from paying attention to both the paintings themselves, and the manner in which they are executed by the person living with dementia as artist.

Nancy's painting was conducted with calmness, humour and showed awareness of limitations. For instance, she herself joked about her own simplistic (but easily recognisable) representation of an apple tree. She realised she could not remember the colour of the fourth horse and asked for help in remembering this, and was very much engaged in conversations around the horses' meaning.

As with June's use of shorthand, there was considerable opportunity both for connection and communication, and conversely for miscommunication. Consider Nancy's painting of a cross with the letters "INIR". Among those familiar with Christian culture, the shape of the cross is very readily recognisable; one of the researchers asked Nancy what the shape was, whereas the other immediately assumed it was a cross. The letters "INRI" are also familiar within a Christian context, although more commonly used in certain denominations. INRI is an abbreviation of the Latin "Iesus Nazarenus rex Iudaeorum", or "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews". Without this knowledge, the letters may have seemed meaningless, especially if Nancy had lacked the verbal ability to explain what they meant; indeed, an explanation without the corresponding Latin may have led to an assumption the letters were meaningless: one might expect the initials to read "JNKJ". The second researcher was aware of their origin and was able to explain this further.

Nancy's painting from the second workshop also shows the potential both for close communication but also for misinterpretation. The context of the painting of an open Bible with Genesis, the first book of the Bible, and Revelation, the last book of the Bible, suggested that Nancy was capturing the Bible as a whole in her work. Does this picture represent for Nancy, as Kandinsky, W. (trans. Sadler, M.T.H.) (1977) suggested, "a whole lifetime [...] of fears, doubts, hopes, and joys"? Likewise, did June's painting of the boat from the home of her youth travelling "to where the others are" also represent this? We are perhaps gaining insights into the lives of the person seen as a whole through these artworks.

The researcher to whom Nancy spoke was familiar with the book of Revelation. Nancy showed astute familiarity with Revelation, a complex book that is understood in different ways among different Christian traditions but which is often interpreted as symbolising events at the end times. Nancy's careful painting also indicated its meaning for her. However, her painting, discussion and questions might well have been met with a different response. Nancy was concerned to get the colour of the four horses correct, but someone lacking the cultural familiarity with the subject matter might be confused that she had first painted five horses, or perhaps conclude that the horses were the product of Nancy's imagination and be puzzled about her question about what colour a fourth horse should be. Her continued quest to remember could have been interpreted as a persisting delusion rather than a determination to express her beliefs.

Consider the Bible reference that Nancy painted, Rev 21.1.5. On the assumption that this is a version of the more usual notation, Rev 21: 1–5, we give the extract in full for further understanding of Nancy's work:

> 1. Then I saw new heavens and a new earth. The former heavens and the former earth had passed away; and the sea has ceased to be. 2. And I saw the Holy City, Jerusalem, descending new out of heaven from God, like a bride adorned in readiness for her husband. 3. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, which said – 'See! The tent of God is set up among people. God will live among them, and they will be his Peoples, and God himself will be among them, 4. And he will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, nor will there be any more grief or crying or pain. The old order has passed away.' 5. And he who was seated on the throne said – 'See, I make all things new!' And he said – 'Write this, for these words may be trusted and are true.' (Open Source Bible, Revelation 21:1–5)

Given Nancy's familiarity with the Bible, there seems no reason not to suppose that she chose this frequently quoted passage purposefully. Likewise, under GENESIS Nancy had written the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4. Chapters 1–4 of Genesis tell the story of the creation of the world and of the creation of Adam and Eve, the first humans, again demonstrating Nancy's accurate Biblical knowledge.

Nancy's talk of the end times could easily have been interpreted in different and indeed, diametrically opposed ways: alarming or comforting. It might be taken to indicate distress and fear; to indicate concern with fringe views, the occult, conspiracy theories; or to suggest religious extremism. It could possibly be seen as an indication of a deteriorating state of mind, loss of touch with reality, or even delusion. However, whilst painting, Nancy showed no distress but was calm and rational and had a good level of satisfaction with her art work, coupled with a comfortable self-criticism and a drive for improvement. Her announcement that we are now living in the end times was made with calm acceptance. Moreover, Revelation 21:1–5 does indeed present a picture of the future that, if accompanied by sincere belief, could be a source of profound comfort: "He will wipe away all tears from their eyes".

"Apocalypse" is popularly taken to mean a time of widespread and devastating destruction, or the absolute final end of the world, but the literal meaning is "uncovering", "unveiling" or "revealing". This encounter with Nancy's work, as with the work of both Iris and June, acted as a "revealing" to us as researchers. We were profoundly moved by the peaceful way in which Nancy discussed her religious convictions and faced the future without fear. Again, we had set out as researchers to explore how participants who were living with dementia might understand the notion of freedom, but the lessons taught were far different from those anticipated. Nancy's painting might have seemed irrelevant to the theme of freedom. But a woman with a firm religious conviction, painting the Bible from the very beginning to the very end and facing what she considers to be the end times with calmness: could this represent, not a time of fear as the prospect of the "end times" would for many, but a vivid vision of freedom for her?

These examples show painting's potential as a tool for communication and expression of views, feelings and biographical information for people living with dementia, especially if both the process and content of the painting are heeded and if communication during and after the process of painting with carers or others is enabled. However, it also illustrates the need for careful interpretation in communication about paintings, demonstrating a number of missed opportunities for communication and understanding. In particular, there is awareness of the need for cultural sensitivity in care, but technological change and gaps in spiritual and religious understanding may also be at issue.

Implications for practice and some limitations

Detailed examination of a few cases can illustrate the depth of creativity and communication possible when people living with dementia engage in artistic practice, and the importance of attention to the process of creativity itself not just the end result. However we acknowledge that there will be great individual variation; different participants in the workshops responded differently and with varying levels of engagement. It is also possible that we overlooked opportunities for engagement and understanding, given the rich creative potential found within artwork.

A key lesson is to challenge existing assumptions and widen perspectives on the possibility for creative thought and expression. Although here we focus on specific individuals, art workshops have the potential to promote individual creativity and expression within a group session. The conversations described here were conducted as part of wider engagement with the entire group. Moreover, understandings of the participants can deepen with continuing sessions, as can be seen in the case of Nancy who demonstrated the importance of her religious beliefs over different sessions.

Both researchers here are artists, but we feel that anyone paying care and attention not just to the finished product but to the process of painting or drawing can gain insights from engaging in art. There is potential for a wealth of new understandings to emerge from the experiences, wishes and perspectives of people living with dementia. We found however a potential for misunderstandings, specifically here noting issues related to technological and cultural change between generations and different groups. However, within a care setting, an open attitude towards the potential of art for expression and communication between different carers could be a means of widening understanding by sharing skills and experiences in responding to the art produced by participants, just as here communication between the two researchers deepened our understandings.

This research adds to existing literature that demonstrates the beneficial outcomes of art practice for people living with dementia by emphasising the potential for such practices to provide opportunities for creative thought and expression of individual identity. Art work can deepen our understanding of a person's hidden abilities and foster deepening relationships between carers and people living with dementia. This may then allow for more individualised and sensitive care practices, as well as providing satisfaction for both the person living with dementia and their carers.

References

Agli, O., Bailly, N. and Ferrand, C. (2015), "Spirituality and religion in older adults with dementia: a systematic review", *International Psychogeriatrics*, Vol. 27 No. 5, pp. 715-725.

Algar-Skaife, K., Caulfield, M. and Woods, R. (2017), "cARTrefu: creating artists in residents", Bangor University, available at: https://research.bangor.ac.uk/portal/files/20294465/Age_Cymru_English_FINAL.pdf

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing (APPGHAW) (2017), *Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing – Inquiry Report (2nd Edition)*, available at: www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/appginquiry/Publications/Creative_Health_Inquiry_Report_2017_-_Second_Edition.pdf

Armstrong, D. and Byrne, G. (2011), "Improving person-centred care in dementia", *Nursing Times*, Vol. 107 No. 46, pp. 12-14.

Basting, A.D. (2009), *Forget Memory: Creating Better Lives for People with Dementia*, JHU Press.

Boyle, G. (2014), "Recognising the agency of people with dementia", *Disability & Society*, Vol. 29 No. 7, pp. 1130-1144, doi: 10.1080/09687599.2014.910108.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2012), "Thematic analysis", *APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology*, Vol. 2 No. 2, pp. 57-71, doi: 10.1037/13620-004.

Eisner, E. (2008), '"Art and 'knowledge", in Knowles, G. and Cole, A.L. (Eds), *The Handbook of Arts in Qualitative Research Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples and Issues*, Sage Publications, CA.

Featherstone, K. and Northcott, A. (2021), *Wandering the Wards: An Ethnography of Hospital Care and Its Consequences for People Living with Dementia*, Taylor & Francis.

Fletcher, A. (2023), "And (epistemic) justice for all: a cautionary tale of knowledge inequality in participatory research", *Quality in Ageing and Older Adults, (Ahead-of-Print)*, Vol. 25 No. 1.

Gross, S.M., Danilova, D., Vandehey, M.A. and Diekhoff, G.M. (2015), "Creativity and dementia: does artistic activity affect well-being beyond the art class?", *Dementia,*, Vol. 14 No. 1, pp. 27-46.

Kandinsky, W. (trans. Sadler, M.T.H.) (1977), *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Dover Publications, New York, NY.

Kontos, P.C. (2004), "Ethnographic reflections on selfhood, embodiment and Alzheimer's disease", *Ageing and Society*, Vol. 24 No. 6, pp. 829-849.

Kontos, P.C. (2005), "Embodied selfhood in Alzheimer's disease: rethinking person-centred care", *Dementia*, Vol. 4 No. 4, pp. 553-570.

Kuspit, D. (2000), *The Rebirth of Painting in the Late Twentieth Century*, United States of America: Cambridge University Press.

Kuspit, D. (2004), *The End of Art*, 1st ed. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Lawrence, R.M. (2003), "Aspects of spirituality in dementia care: when clinicians tune into silence", *Dementia*, Vol. 2 No. 3, pp. 393-402.

Mcniff, S. (2008), "'Art-based 'research", in Knowles, J. and Cole, A.L. (Ed.), *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research*, 1st edn. Sage Publications, pp. 29–40.

Mitchell, G., Dupuis, S.L., Kontos, P., Jonas-Simpson, C. and Gray, J. (2020), "Disrupting dehumanising and intersecting patterns of modernity with a relational ethic of caring", *International Practice Development Journal*, Vol. 10 No. 1.

MOMA Learning (2018), "What is modern art", available at: www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/what-is-modern-art/

Mondro, A., Connell, C.M., Li, L. and Reed, E. (2018), "Retaining identity: creativity and caregiving", *Dementia*, Vol. 19 No. 5, pp. 1641-1656.

Newman, A., Goulding, A., Davenport, B. and Windle, G. (2019), "The role of the visual arts in the resilience of people living with dementia in care homes", *Ageing & Society*, Vol. 39 No. 11, pp. 2465-2482.

Regan, J.L., Bhattacharyya, S., Kevern, P. and Rana, T. (2013), "A systematic review of religion and dementia care pathways in black and minority ethnic populations", *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 1-15.

Ring Petersen, A. (2010), "'Painting 'spaces", *Contemporary Painting in Context*, Museum Tuscalaneum Press, Copenhagen.

Schall, A., Tesky, V.A., Adams, A.K. and Pantel, J. (2018), "Art museum-based intervention to promote emotional well-being and improve quality of life in people with dementia: The ARTEMIS project", *Dementia*, Vol. 17 No. 6, pp. 728-743.

Stuckey, J.C. and Gwyther, L.P. (2003), "Dementia, religion, and spirituality", *Dementia*, Vol. 2 No. 3, pp. 291-297.

Tate (2018), "Modernism", available at: www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/m/modernism (accessed 3 July 2018).

Van Dijk, J. (2020), *The Digital Divide*, John Wiley & Sons.

Windle, G., Algar-Skaife, K., Caulfield, M., Pickering-Jones, L., Killick, J., Zeilig, H. and Tischler, V. (2020), "Enhancing communication between dementia care staff and their residents: an arts-inspired intervention", *Aging & Mental Health*, Vol. 24 No. 8, pp. 1306-1315.

Windle, G., Gregory, S., Howson-Griffiths, T., Newman, A., O'Brien, D. and Goulding, A. (2018a), "Exploring the theoretical foundations of visual art programmes for people living with dementia", *Dementia*, Vol. 17 No. 6, pp. 702-727.

Windle, G., Joling, K.J., Howson-Griffiths, T., Woods, B., Jones, C.H., Van de Ven, P.M., Newman, A. and Parkinson, C. (2018b), "The impact of a visual arts program on quality of life, communication, and well-being of people living with dementia: a mixed-methods longitudinal investigation", *International Psychogeriatrics*, Vol. 30 No. 3, pp. 409-423, doi: 10.1017/s1041610217002162.

Young, R., Camic, P.M. and Tischler, V. (2016), "The impact of community-based arts and health interventions on cognition in people with dementia: a systematic literature review", *Aging & Mental Health*, Vol. 20 No. 4, pp. 337-351.

Zeilig, H., Killick, J. and Fox, C. (2014), "The participative arts for people living with a dementia: a critical review", *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life*, Vol. 9 No. 1, pp. 7-34.

Further reading

Gove, D., Diaz-Ponce, A., Georges, J., Moniz-Cook, E., Mountain, G., Chattat, R., Øksnebjerg. and L., European Working Group of People With Dementia. (2018), "Alzheimer Europe's position on involving people with dementia in research through PPI (patient and public involvement)", *Aging & Mental Health*, Vol. 22 No. 6, pp. 723-729.

About the authors

Dr Megan Wyatt is a Research Associate at the Geller Institute of Ageing and Memory, University West London. Her current work focuses on how the arts can be used to promote new avenues of expression and co-production for people living with dementia. This also offers new perspectives of how methods associated with both the arts and social sciences can be used in collaboration to provide novel contributions to the field of dementia research.

Dr Paula Boddington is an Associate Professor of Philosophy and Medicine at the Geller Institute of Ageing and Memory, University of West London. She has worked extensively in moral philosophy and applied ethics, including medical ethics. In her current work, she works in an interdisciplinary context focusing on improving the humanity and dignity of care of people living with dementia. Paula Boddington is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: paula.boddington@uwl.ac.uk