

Fine Art and Dementia: Looking at Paintings and Assessment for People with Dementia

Chris Russell and Dr James Fisher

University of Worcester

(c.russell@worc.ac.uk, j.fisher@worc.ac.uk)

Keywords: Dementia, Art, Innovative Teaching, Collaborative Teaching.

Abstract

This article describes an innovative teaching session designed and implemented at the University of Worcester, on the Foundation Degree in Dementia Studies. The class utilised teaching from art that was not linked in any way to the dementia context to promote learning for the students in a clinical aspect of their studies, that is assessment of need. Students reported that the approach enabled them to reflect upon their learning and engaged them in original learning, specifically new ways of thinking about aspects of their clinical practice. Additionally, new insight was provided into the value artworks may have as 'creaturely objects': as companions we have in our lives in a similar way to having animal or human companions. The article suggests that this pedagogic technique has wider implications; the approach of using fine art could be employed within a range of academic disciplines to encourage reflection upon learning and generate new insights.

Introduction

This article describes an innovative teaching session designed and implemented at the University of Worcester. The session formed part of teaching on the new Foundation Degree in Dementia Studies. The course supports students understand how to enable people to live well with dementia.

The class utilised teaching from art that was not linked in any way to the dementia context to promote learning for the students in a clinical aspect of their studies, that is, *assessment of need*. Additionally, as a result of the class new insight was provided into the value artworks may have as “creaturely objects”, specifically as companions we have in our lives in a similar way as we have animal or human companions. The benefits that this class contributed to student learning are explored here. It is suggested that our findings might be useful to academic colleagues from a range of backgrounds, offering an opportunity to enhance their own teaching using a similar approach.

Background to the Teaching Session

People with dementia and carers supported the design and development of the Foundation Degree. They gave advice upon approaches to teaching and learning. These suggestions included adopting imaginative approaches to encourage students to be curious about their studies, and to emphasise that every person with dementia is different and has different needs. These priorities were especially relevant to the Module ‘Enabling People to Live Well with Dementia’, where students learn how to conduct assessments of need for people with dementia and their families. Assessment is the process through which individuals with dementia, and/ or their family carers, are enabled to express and detail their needs and ambitions so they can live well (Mast, 2014).

An opportunity to adopt the advice about using imaginative and person-centred approaches to teaching and learning presented itself at week 6 in the module’s teaching schedule, where the class was devoted to reflect upon learning thus far. Various academic devices were considered, for example, case studies and the use of reflective tools. These, though, seemed to inadequately fulfil the ambition to be creative and imaginative.

How and why exploration and analysis of fine art was included within teaching on the Foundation Degree in Dementia Studies

As the plans for teaching on the module developed it became evident that there were similarities (and differences) with the process of constructing an accurate and person-centred assessment, and of creating a unique item of art. This led to reflection on the part of the Course Leader for the Foundation Degree to the teaching he had received whilst at school on one memorable occasion, when a painting was appraised and discussed in class.

The history of the painting, the context of the painter, and the meaning of the painting's contents were explored and analysed. The potential for enabling students to examine congruence between the process and discipline of assessment within the dementia context, and the construction of a piece of fine art began to emerge. This appeared to lend itself to the opportunity to reflect upon learning at the mid-point in the module. These aspects were enhanced by the Course Leader's belief that the University learning experience should be a transformative one, and that this should offer students opportunity to learn from other disciplines. In this case, fine art.

This tentative consideration led to contact by the Course Leader with the co-author of this article, a senior academic in the field of fine art. In discussion together some more specific objectives of a possible class were established.

- Presentation of a piece/ pieces of fine art for students to consider in class.
- Description of the history and context of the art.
- Exploration of the levels/layers/ depths contained in the art itself and its creative process.
- Encouragement of the students to examine the similarities and differences between the artistic process and the practice of assessment in dementia, with the aim of

enabling them to reflect upon their learning, and encourage them to engage in original learning so ideas for innovative practice might be stimulated.

The Class on 5th November 2015

The class was composed of ten students, all studying the Foundation Degree in Dementia Studies. At the outset of this collaboration, the colleague with expertise in fine art was to discuss the process of looking at art, and in particular painting. The proposed task for the students would be to talk about a specific painting with the goal of highlighting what that painting immediately appears to depict in relation to what could be revealed from a closer, more considered engagement. Additionally, how the artist might have developed the painting, how their ideas about and for it emerged, and how the painting itself was completed over time would be speculated on.

Primarily, the task would focus on a theme of assessment for people with dementia in that it is an on-going, dynamic process, where it is necessary to keep returning to the person to enable the assessment to be accurate. It is also a process where the assessor needs to understand the person (subject matter), to adopt their perspective, and that of others around them. The aim of the activity would be to encourage students to consider the similarities and differences between creating and looking at a painting with undertaking the assessment with a person living with dementia, or a family carer.

The approach to developing the session within this context was to draw upon existing strategies of observing and encountering paintings that have been established for the Fine Art course at the University of Worcester. These strategies centre on ideas of encounter and the agency of paintings as objects. They are a key feature of reflective practice in Fine Art

and fundamental to the pedagogy Fine Art has espoused, regarding the roles of the art object, its viewer and its maker.

Sometimes, partnerships with art subjects are invited by other disciplines, based on a misunderstanding of the Fine Art as a subject. What is often expected is a crafts centred activity that in some way provides a therapeutic or 'creative' learning experience. This misinterprets research in Fine Art and bypasses to content of the subject matter. Collaborative partnerships are difficult to foster in such circumstances.

In this case, however, the proposed collaboration grew out of the Course Leader's experience of looking at paintings as a pedagogic exercise. As well as the potential benefit to students on the module, this collaborative partnership was seen as an opportunity to represent Fine Art and in particular research by practice in painting, as having relevance and application outside of the subject area, beyond the familiar and rather limited ideas of art as a therapeutic or illustrative adjunct.

The approach to the session was to introduce two examples of works of art and to discuss them in terms of an encounter. A particular focus was drawn on the relationship between the art object (the painting), the viewer and the maker. It was intended that the students would observe the differences or similarities between the mechanics of these relationships and relationships that are active in an assessment with and for a person dementia. This then offered an arena for reflection and reflective practice.

Example 1: Diego Velazquez's *Las Meninas* (1656)



This example was introduced with a straightforward exercise in observation. The group were invited to look at a projected image of a painting for several minutes. The students were not asked to interpret the picture, but to simply record what they could see being depicted. They were introduced to the idea that after they had looked at the picture from their perspective, that the senior academic in the field of fine art would discuss the painting from his point of view as an artist. A discussion around the differences and similarities between what each perspective revealed about the picture took place. Particular attention was paid to the distinctions and parallels between the methodologies of looking represented.

The academic colleague pointed out that at first sight the painting appears to depict a girl, Margaret Theresa. Either side of her are two servants, the meninas of the title, and to the right is a pair of dwarves and a dog. To the left is Velázquez himself. However, on further inspection, Margaret is facing the wrong direction for Velázquez to be painting her. She isn't looking at Velázquez, she's looking out at us. In fact, all of the characters in the painting are looking at us; Velázquez, the meninas, the figure lurking in the doorway. Eventually we perceive that the king and queen, Margaret's parents, are standing where we are standing - we see them reflected in the mirror on the back wall. Perhaps we are the audience and also the royals.

But that explanation doesn't work either. The reflections of the king and queen are too large for them to be standing where we are. Even if they were, the mirror would also reflect the back of Margaret's head. Perhaps, then, Las Meninas depicts Velázquez painting Margaret while looking at a giant mirror where we stand, which would mean that the painting-in-the-painting is Las Meninas itself.

Example 2: Sequence from Alfred Hitchcock's Vertigo (1958)



The group were then invited to watch a short clip from Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* - a work made 300 years after *Las Meninas*. In the scene, Kim Novak's Madeleine is seated on a bench in an art gallery. A painting, *Portrait of Carlotta*, apparently transfixes her. Alongside James Stewart, we watch her looking intently. We watch James Stewart ask the museum guard about the painting Madeline is looking at. Hitchcock directs the camera over details in the painting - the style of Carlotta's Hair, the bouquet of flowers she is holding – and shows us that Madeleine emulates these details.

After watching the clip, the academic with expertise in fine art re-interpreted what was seen from the point of view of someone who makes paintings. He suggested that Madeleine, as part of a vignette, with the bench she is sitting on and the bouquet beside her, sitting in front of a picture, behaves like a painting. He explained that in this scene he saw Madeline and the *Portrait of Carlotta* as a single agent that functions as a painting and we, with James Stewart, are the spectators. It was pointed out that this interpretation is reinforced by Madeline's behaviour: in the film, Madeleine is pretending to be a ghost. At this stage she

does not expect the audience to believe she is a ghost, but simply to enjoy the game. She is hoping that Stewart's character will be fooled. James suggested that encountering a painting is like watching Madeleine in this scene. The real content of a painting sits in front of its own picture, gazing at it with you. Despite being motionless and having its back to us, James proposed, there is a particular sensation that a painting brings about by pretending to be its picture, and, this is what makes painting so compelling and mysterious.

Following these two examples, there followed an informal discussion in the class around the distinctions between the apparent content of an image and the content that emerges on repeated or closer observation. The conversation led onto connecting these ideas to experiences of assessment within the dementia context, and spending time with people.

Another part of the discussion interrogated the academic with expertise in fine art on the differences between the intentions of an artist and the perceived content of a painting. It was apparently reassuring or interesting for the students to discover that while a painter may have a particular set of starting points and areas of interest when making a painting, the point of making the painting was not to communicate this specific content, but rather to make an image in which there is enough space for the spectator to enter and inhabit the picture for themselves. This seemed to provide a useful insight in terms of the groups' own experiences of working with and encountering people.

Outcomes

This was the first time the initiative had been employed. There was a potential risk that students who had enrolled on a vocational course related specifically to dementia would be at best confused about the nature and purpose of this exercise, and, at worst, frustrated that

their studies had taken a path away from their chosen topic to one that, at first sight, was unrelated. However, the reality was positive. Students reported that they did understand the nature and purpose of this intervention. They related that it enabled them to explore their learning in a manner that was different and interesting.

A tool had been designed to facilitate reflection upon learning to this point in the module, a one-page template where students could record similarities and differences between 'assessment of people living with dementia and their families' and 'the process of constructing the painting.' This worked well as it provided a focus and structure to the reflections of the students.

Feedback from students included:

Respondent 1: 'I thought Fine Art in... (The module class)... was ingenious... the analogy was powerful i.e. the illusion of identity, a recognition of common humanity and respect for differences... It presented a different way of seeing and receiving.'

Respondent 2: 'I think the session was good exactly how it was. It is good sometimes to reflect on our own part in the assessment and how this may be different for all of us. I am a constant analyser others are more reflective etc. I think the creativity of the session enabled insights in a different way. Just talking about pictures was a brainwave - well done!'

Respondent 3: 'It was a fantastic bit of intellectual stretch, provoking us to challenge the way we see and judge and I thought the discussion it created was of use to everyone. It was a privilege to have... (an academic from the field of fine art)... help us think in new ways and

reflect on the work on assessment so far, and I really enjoyed something different that came in from the side!'

Discussion

The feedback received from Respondent 1 was pleasing because it identified features congruent with effective assessment of need within the dementia context. For example, understanding of identity, common humanity, and respect for difference (Mast, 2014; Sanderson and Bailey, 2014). Respondent 2 noted the opportunities the approach to learning afforded to students to consider their own place as 'assessors' within an assessment context, and the significance of 'agency'. Agency, that is the ability to continue to actively influence one's own destiny, is an essential component of living well with dementia (Sanderson and Bailey, 2014). Taken together, this indicates that the aim of the class was achieved; the approach taken facilitated the ability of the students to reflect upon learning up until that point in module teaching.

It appeared, however, that feedback from Respondents 2 and 3 was potentially even more encouraging. This is because what they reported potentially offered value to academic colleagues beyond the dementia setting, and even beyond social care and health contexts. For example, Respondent 2 related that it was the creativity of the session that enabled them to formulate insight in a different way. The approach could be adapted to other different academic fields, for example, using an object of fine art to consider and analyse planning of a field trip, or a scientific experiment. This suggestion is not offered as a fully developed approach to learning and teaching throughout different disciplines, but rather as an invitation to colleagues to harness and adapt the approach described here so that it adds value within their own context.

The value of this ambition is strengthened by elements of what Respondent 3 reported. The student related that the approach created discussion amongst the class that was beneficial to intellectual stimulation and learning. This would not have happened in this way without the approach taken in class. Learning happens in different ways, but it is suggested that a method of teaching that ignites and stimulates intellectual debate in class amongst students, leading to reports of new insight, is of significant pedagogic value to a multitude of academic contexts.

Conclusion

This article reported on a class where an innovative approach was taken to learning and teaching within the specific context of assessment for people living with dementia. In its inception the hope was that the session would motivate students to reflect on their existing learning, and engage them in original learning. By mixing disciplines, by introducing art, the ambition was to intrigue students, and enable them to reflect more creatively than they would, had a traditional tool been employed to reconsider practice, for example, a case study.

It is suggested that all of this was achieved. The class were interested and engaged in the exercise, they demonstrated useful reflection within discussions, and reported they gained new insight. However, as outlined in the earlier discussion, an additional benefit might be the ability to adopt this approach within other academic disciplines.

Finally, this cross-disciplinary project was a very useful opportunity to consider ideas that are being developed by the University of Worcester Fabrication Research Group in an innovative and applied context. In the Fabrication Research Group inaugural event, *Ghost Train*, one of the group's principal premises was introduced: that artworks are mysterious and unknowable objects to think with.

This teaching session enabled some of the ideas emerging from the Fabrication Research Group to be tested in a setting outside of teaching in Fine Art and Art and Design. The particular example of the scene from *Vertigo* was selected to focus on the fairly new assertion that artworks are creaturely objects. They can be thought of as creaturely companions that we have in our lives in a similar way to we have animal or human

companions. Much like the other creaturely companions we have, they share our lives and, at the same time, have another, more mysterious, existence in another sphere that we are unable or don't always make time to witness.

'All I believe, and therefore, all I teach - which is why I don't need a book any longer than this, though I could talk a *very* long night on the placing of 'the' - is that the form and tone and pitch of any poem should coherently express the presence of a human creature...in such a way that your meeting with a poem is like your meeting with a person.' (Maxwell, 2012: 29 & 33)

It was apparent that it was through an expounding of this idea that the students found helpful stimuli. By examining specific examples of looking at paintings and discussing approaches to making paintings, the students were introduced to new ways of observing and new ways of thinking about looking and assessment.

This study is based upon a small cohort of responses, and around a pedagogic intervention of a highly specific nature. Thus, its conclusions must be treated with caution. However, it would appear that the class was successful in enabling students to reflect upon their learning, and encouraging them to consider future practice in an original manner. In these senses it was a transformational educational experience for the students.

References

- Mast, B. (2014) Whole Person Assessment and Care Planning In: M. Downs and B. Bowers (Eds.) *Excellence in Dementia Care: research into practice*. 2nd Edition. Berkshire: McGraw Hill Open University Press.

Maxwell, G. (2012) *On Poetry*. London: Oberon.

Sanderson, H. and Bailey, G. (2014) *Personalisation & Dementia. A Guide for Person-Centred Practice*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Note:

All quotes have been anonymised and the consent of everyone providing such information has been obtained. All of the photographs used are in the public domain and are freely available.

Biographies

Chris Russell is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Worcester, where he leads the Foundation Degree in Dementia Studies. His research interests include dementia, citizenship, and identity. Chris is undertaking a PhD exploring these features within the context of sport.

Dr James Fisher is Course Leader for Fine Art and Research Coordinator for the School of Art at the University of Worcester. He completed a practice-based PhD in Fine Art in 2010, following a series of exhibitions that explored relationships between painting, music and text, with specific reference to *John Clare's Journey Out of Essex* and Franz Schubert's *Winterreise*. Recent exhibitions of his paintings include *Doppelgänger*, at the Eagle Gallery, London.