**Title:** Care Home Residents as Artists: Digital Connections in the age of Disconnect.

**Abstract:**

*Throughout the current global pandemic, many people have had to adapt to new ways of interacting through virtual platforms. For those with access to new technologies this transition has been straightforward, but not easy and for those without it, life has become socially isolating, frightening, and lonely. The impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of older adults is a serious concern, particularly for those living in care homes who have been forgotten or neglected by exclusionary government policy. Amnesty International’s 2020 report ‘As if Expendable: The UK Government’s Failure to Protect Older People in Care Homes During the COVID-19 Pandemic’ provides analysis of the neglect to care for and sufficiently support older adults living with dementia in supported living. The results of this inaction to provide care has led to many avoidable deaths and caused fear and heartache for those who have lost family, friends and colleagues. It is at this moment, during the third UK lockdown that we would like to share a narrative of hope about the actions that we have taken within care home contexts to provide relief, reconnect residents safely with their neighbours, and found creative ways to inclusively provide care, support and celebrations of the identities of people in these contexts who have become statistics in news reports.*

*Between January and March 2021, undergraduate and postgraduate Applied Theatre students from The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in partnership with Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust collaborated with residents from One Housing Association to create and develop bespoke films, poems, songs and virtual reality 360 videos from the safety of their homes to bring to life their stories, hopes and inner artists. In this presentation, we will explore the impact of these projects on the participants’ wellbeing and examine the importance of providing older adults opportunities to be creative. We will additionally offer insights into the relationships that were made and developed during the projects, including family connections, intergenerational connections and playful relationships that emerged between the residents themselves and their Carers.*

**Conference Paper:** *15mins is approx. 2,250 words.*

**Introduction:**
The pandemic has revealed inequalities across the globe, not only in relation to the spread of COVID-19, but also through the availability of vaccines and decisions governments have made in relation to PPE distribution in addition to the way countries have treated older adults. A 2020 Amnesty International report called ‘As if Expendable: The UK Government’s Failure to Protect Older People in Care Homes During the COVID-19 Pandemic’ demonstrates the devastating consequences of policy maker decisions, which have impacted the death rates of older adults in care homes across the country. Blanket Do Not Attempt Resuscitation (DNAR) orders, lack of PPE and late implementation of testing for patients returning from hospital to care homes are just a few areas of neglect evident in the report. Detrimental rhetoric around older adults was additionally evident within social media, that perpetuated blame for lockdowns, attributing the cause to the health vulnerability of older adults. Research into ageism during the COVID-19 pandemic has been provided by Enrique Soto-Perez-de-Celis reporting that:

Negative social media messages about COVID-19 and aging often characterize older adults as helpless and expendable individuals. Existing hate speech and intergenerational resentment can be exemplified by the “#BoomerRemover” Twitter hashtag (user-generated metadata term), which was widely shared in social media at the beginning of the pandemic (Soto-Perez-de-Celis, 2020).

Blame culture that exacerbates social constructs is not new or unheard of, on the contrary ageism is prevalent and has been present in policy and social response for a long time. Sheila McCormick (2017) warns that though perhaps life expectancy of people is much improved in the West in comparison to previous points in history, there is also emphasis on the need to live well. McCormick, drawing upon Lynne Segal (2013) equates this perspective to neoliberal notions of society that place blame on individuals if they are not able to live well suggesting that an ‘inability to do so (through illness or environment) is vilified’ (2017:26). We can see this happening in social media and policy responses to the pandemic that expand ideas illustrating what Tom Kitwood (1997) terms Malignant Social Psychology (MSP). MSP describes moments of dehumanized treated, which Dawn Brooker (2016) elaborates on:

MSP includes episodes where people are intimidated, outpaced, not responded to, infantalised, labelled, disparaged, blamed, manipulated, invalidated, disempowered, overpowered, disrupted, objectified, stigmatised, ignored, banished and mocked… The MSP list is a depressingly familiar one to people working in care (2016:19-20).

Challenging MSP and its impact on older adults is paramount if we are to begin to undo dehumanising treatment and address the importance of valuing the identity of older adults in society. Working responsively with older adults in care homes is then essential if we are to offer meaningful interventions that place importance on the ideas, thoughts and feelings of older adults, particularly those living with dementia.

Creative practice offers us an opportunity to position each individual participant as lead artist to locate joy in collaboration, and to feel valued through understanding, active listening, and a pedagogy of reciprocity that isn’t extractive, but sharing and supportive. Jill Hayes (2011) advocates for the integration of the arts in dementia care arguing that creativity can lead to person-centred practice.

When we are creative, we lose our sense of criticism, frustration and despair. When we are creative we are filled with love and acceptance... If we are in touch with our own spontaneity, flexibility, sense of fun and feeling, we can respond to idiosyncracy with love (2011:23-4).

If we see creativity and expression as opportunities to communicate our thoughts, ideas, desires and interests, then we may view the arts as a means of humanizing a person by complicating perspectives and expectations of identity constructs: No longer can a care home resident be seen as passive when they are active artists generously sharing ideas to celebrate their own views of the world. This approach relates to active citizenship, a concept explored by Gail Mitchell et al. (2020) who propose to advance person-centred care through the employment of a relational ethic of care. In this sense, encouragement of interconnections through arts activities that rely upon forming relationships through collaborative creative tasks, can provide an ‘offer of imaginative possibilities, and support of reciprocal playfulness [to] form significant dimensions of relational citizenship in the context of the interpersonal mutuality of caring’ (2020:9). This reciprocity is at the heart of applied theatre practice that is heavily influenced by the work of radical Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Freire advocates for a sense of mutual exchange or reciprocity where the knowledge, experiences and ideas of teacher and student are equally valued. This exchange, he terms co-intentionality, and advocates for its implementation to address power inequalities, a similar aim for arts practice in health contexts. Nicola Abraham (2021) explores further aspects of what might constitute a pedagogy of reciprocity in digital applied theatre practice advocating for the integration of reflexivity for practitioners to consider their subjectivity and response to people living with dementia. Additional emphasis is similarly placed on the importance of always viewing patients as artists, engaging in narrative exchange to build connections between facilitators and participants, and to follow the values of Dawn Brooker’s (2016) VIPS framework to ensure participant needs and inclusion are individually tailored and supported across digital divides without compromise.

The values we have discussed are inherent within our digital applied theatre practice in both hospitals and care homes and have been born out of consistent learning and advancement in the iterative design of our evolving practice to address dehumanisation. To illustrate the roots of this learning, we will now share with you vignettes of a range of our digital applied theatre projects undertaken with participants in a supported living care home between January – March 2021, in the peak of the third wave of UK COVID-19 cases.

**Practice in Action**

At the beginning of the year, we began our journey with the residents from a care home in north London. We had four projects to offer so we sent a summary of each one with a sign-up sheet to their Activity Coordinator, Adela, who advertised our projects to the residents. The zoom-based interaction that was required to ensure we could collaborate safely with residents was a new experience for everyone and an unusual way to communicate. Consequently, some of the residents were quite suspicious of what the projects would involve. The project team facilitating online explained that the residents were the artists, and we would support them in making their vision in music, film or any other type of artefact requested. For some, this was exciting, but for others, particularly one resident, this was a daunting prospect. She always enjoyed seeing the team and having a chat but whenever she was asked for her creative ideas or feedback, she would often say “whatever you think” or “I’m not much use I’m afraid”, or “I don’t know much” (Resident, 2021). The team were very aware of her lack of confidence and would plan sessions to be more relaxed for her, focusing on her interests and family who she enjoyed talking about during conversations. This gradually built a strong relationship between Pearl and the team, and over time she felt comfortable enough to share a poem with us that her granddaughter had written. She was so proud of the poem that it became the inspiration for her final artefact. By the end of the process Pearl had written a response poem to her granddaughter, which she recorded herself reading and it was then turned into a virtual reality 360 video that she shared with her family.

The shift in her confidence was amazing to see and she was much more willing to contribute her own ideas. In the final sharing, her son, who she had not seen for nearly a year, joined the zoom call to watch the video and see his mum’s work being presented. Adela, the Activity Coordinator onsite stated, “we were able to build a relationship over zoom and be taken on journeys. The students provided space for self-expression for the residents which was a big deal, they were made to feel special” (Activity Co-ordinator, 2021). This is valuable feedback that evidences the impact of the project for Pearl and her family as a way of making digital connections and finding meaning in longitudinal digital collaboration.

The facilitation team built connections and relationships with all the participants involved in the projects. Through reciprocal exchanges of ideas and stories they were able to rapidly learn the interests of the participants and offer similar points of connection from their research, personal experience or creative responses to celebrate the ideas that had been shared. However, this wasn’t always a simple process and though some residents were very keen to engage from the start of the project, others were more tentative initially and understandably needed time to get to know the team and trust the process of the creative projects they were involved with. Winnie, was one of our participants and a well-known local artist who advanced her comfort working over the medium of zoom over the course of the project. At the beginning of the process Winnie was unsure about our intentions for the collaboration and was keen to know what she would be getting out of it, however, she very quickly settled into the sessions and took the opportunity to share her specific interests and talents in art, music and critical analysis of equality, climate change, and use of diverse materials in creative work. Art is her passion, and soon became the focus for each of her workshops. She would bring a new piece of art she had created to show and discuss with us each week and then challenge us to create our own artwork based on a brief she would set us. This is one of the many examples of reciprocity we experienced during the process of the project, which was the most important element of the sessions for Winnie. Adela reflected on the value of this type of exchange between residents and student facilitators:

[…] the students allowed the residents to rediscover themselves and go on journeys, delving into their memories and imagination. It was quite spontaneous, and the residents really enjoyed that. The visuals made it interactive and participatory, particularly using the storyboards (Activity Co-Ordinator, 2021).

Connecting with the team, even through a zoom screen, gave Winnie and the other participants, a space to share their expertise and continue doing what they loved – creating.

All the participants had a creative mindset, and ideas were forthcoming as the weeks progressed. Additionally, the residents became more comfortable and confident with the process. We found that residents awaiting their turn were so keen to be involved that they would sit in on each other’s sessions. Participants were still encouraged to maintain a social distance within the care home at this point but were able to socialise safely within the large open communal area where the sessions took place. This unexpectedly brought the residents together and created a sense of community that had been missing during the lockdown period. As Adela reported in her evaluation of the projects “it’s been a difficult time with restrictions - even though the residents have their own flats they have been encouraged not to mix in groups and can’t go out” (Activity Co-Ordinator, 2021). The collaborative film project we implemented offers a useful example of how the community worked together and rebuilt connections between residents and staff.

Two residents, Max and Finn were the creative minds behind the collaborative film, developing the script and characters over the course of the project. However, when it came to filming, some of the other participants were keen to be involved and play the characters that had been created. Additionally, the intrigue of the film spread throughout the care home engaging other residents who also requested to take part and were able to participate without being involved in the projects on a weekly basis.

**Conclusion**

Though the digital world can feel unfamiliar and uninviting as a virtual space to occupy, it has been a lifeline for our digital applied theatre projects and allowed us to continue our work offering bespoke practice that values the inner artist of all our participants. It is important to remember that is it a privilege to hear someone’s stories, and we see it as an honour and a duty to do all we can to represent the fantastical ideas of participants with respect, creativity and flair. In the age of disconnect, we have managed to bridge the physical divide that separates us to create meaningful connections with older adults, who have, through their determination, experience and creativity generously chosen to engage with us to bring their ideas to life. There are always going to be challenges in the implementation of participatory interventions whether in-person or online, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try regardless. Perhaps it’s just a change of perception that we need to adopt that will enable us to view technological ‘blocks’ simply as opportunities to adapt our practice, and the newness of the virtual as a chance to embrace what’s possible rather than fixate on what’s not. This is how we were able to create connections in the age of disconnect.

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