



EXPLORING THE 'CREATING CONVERSATIONS' TOOLKIT:  
THE IMPACT OF ART-BASED ACTIVITIES ON THOSE  
LIVING WITH DEMENTIA



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**JUNE 2016**



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are indebted to the participants, facilitators and staff at the services who so willingly gave their time and support for this project. We also thank the steering group for their dedicated support: Ailidh Aikman (University of Stirling), Kirsty Banks (Stirling Town Break) and Rosas Mitchell (Dementia Care Consultant and writer of *Creating Conversations: Gardening*). We gratefully acknowledge funding from a Scottish Funding Council Innovation Voucher.

### What was the reason for the project?

Artlink Central is launching a new product *Creating Conversations: Gardening*. This is a creative activity toolkit designed for activities coordinators, care staff and volunteers to deliver group activities for older people, including those with dementia. The intended benefits include prompting reminiscence and supporting constructive conversation to engage with personal histories and build social connections in day care and residential care settings. In conjunction with staff at the University of Stirling, the current project has assessed these aspects of engagement to: evaluate whether the pilot product delivers such benefits, and identify improvements that can enhance the toolkit's impact in these areas.

### What did we do in the project?

The fieldwork stage involved observation of the toolkit in practice in two distinct case study settings during April and May 2016. The first case study took place in a day care setting, with 6 observation sessions with an average of 5 participants in each session. The second case study was conducted in a care home setting, with 4 observation sessions with 4 participants per session. This allowed us to observe the toolkit being used with a range of participants and different facilitators who were supported by volunteers in delivering the activity sessions. A total of 21 people with dementia, 9 staff and 7 volunteers took part in the observation sessions. Five staff who facilitated sessions and 2 team leaders took part in interviews.

An observation framework was used to evaluate interactions during the activity sessions and to record environmental conditions impacting on these interactions. Once the observations were complete, interviews took place with the facilitators and their team leaders. These interviews focused on the strengths and limitations of the toolkit in practice, including reflection on the practicalities, benefits and impact of its use in the care settings, in addition to suggestions for further refinement. The data from these observations and interviews were analysed to identify the ways in which the toolkit supported communication and interaction, with a report of recommendations prepared to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for developing and marketing the toolkit. This summary of findings reports on the themes generated from the observations and interviews.

## KEY FINDINGS – CREATING CONVERSATIONS: GARDENING



The analysis process involved identifying themes associated with the process of delivering the activities and the immediate outcomes of these activities as observed during the activity sessions. Some of these themes are specific to the toolkit (activity-related themes) and other themes relate to the broader physical and social dynamics (wider themes) that framed the sessions and had an impact on the delivery and outcomes of the toolkit. The interview transcripts were then analysed to identify the strengths and limitations of the toolkit in practice from the perspective of the facilitators and team leaders, including reflection on the practicalities, benefits and impact of using the toolkit. Recommendations have been provided to Artlink Central on the basis of these findings to further refine the toolkit and its marketing.

### SECTION A: WIDER THEMES IMPACTING ON THE DELIVERY AND OUTCOMES OF THE TOOLKIT

#### 1 Enjoyment – humour and engagement

Humour was threaded through the sessions and played a large part in building a natural dynamic and flow into the conversations. The most laughs were always gained when it was participant-led. Facilitators reflected on the presence of humour as evidence that sessions were going well. In nearly all the cases, the jokes and humour were related or a reaction to items or questions in the toolkit.

*Participant: The garden shed used to be somewhere to store the cans [of beer] when I went out to work and get a 'swally' every 10 minutes (everyone laughs). [Observation]*

While on most occasions the volunteers or staff members helped facilitate humour during the activity session, on occasion they tried to play it down if they saw the topic of conversation going 'off task'. This could sometimes detract from the natural flow of interaction.

## 2

## Confidence and anxiety

An individual's anxiety and level of confidence had an impact on the sessions in different ways. There were some individuals who were agitated, anxious or lacked confidence in a general sense, and who appeared to benefit from the activities. For people who were reserved or quieter, the group activities could draw them out to promote conversation and increase confidence.

*And people who are usually on the quiet side, joined in with a lot of the conversation, their stories and memories sort of thing. The group activity promotes their conversation and social skills, and gives them a wee bit more confidence. [Interview]*

Both participants and staff were worried about their abilities. Across the sessions, there were occasions when participants and staff voiced their own lack of confidence. Such comments appeared to reflect either specific worry about being artistic or general concern about not being 'good enough'. When voiced by staff, this had the potential to impact on the session. For participants, there was a risk of people feeling that they were being assessed. Moreover, for some participants, creativity had negative connotations with classroom environments.

## 3

## Impact of environment

The environment in which the sessions took place had a clear impact on the flow and conversations within each session. The facilitators experimented with different set ups and the dynamic appeared to work best at a circular table when participants could maintain eye contact with one another. Lighting, temperature, external noise and staff moving in/out of the space also influenced participants' involvement. Nevertheless, in general, participants maintained high levels of concentration, with staff commenting that many stayed engaged for longer than usual for them, even when outside distractions might have affected them.

Breaking away from the table to move into other environments, such as the garden, seemed to be helpful in stimulating interest and increased engagement. In two of the sessions observed, participants were discussing garden topics followed by an invitation to take a walk in the garden; it was noted that, when outside, some of the participants who had been less engaged indoors took the lead on walks. Furthermore, some of those who were quieter in the indoor activities were seen to engage and become more talkative with the change in environment. Moreover, in other activities, often people who were most active socially through conversation were not the most active during the practical activities which shifted the dynamic of the group to foster wider participation.

## 4

### Group dynamics

Overall, groups of 4-5 people seemed to work best, with one member of staff or volunteer per two participants. Sessions could be delivered successfully with just one member of staff, however it was more difficult for staff to lead activities and maintain the group dynamic while providing the necessary one-to-one support that was sometimes required by participants depending upon their individual abilities for particular activities. Part of building a positive group dynamic involved reiterating ongoing praise and interest in the participants' lives and activities. The encouragement given to participants by the staff and volunteers was a successfully integrated element that went hand in hand with the activities.

*Facilitator: Well done [participant name]. In all the years I have worked here, you're the most creative person I know. [Observation]*

Participants also actively motivated and encouraged each other to participate. For some participants, just watching the group participating in activities created sufficient interest for them to try a new activity, even if this was something they would normally not attempt if asked directly. Consequently, being part of a group activity session, some participants found new activities that they enjoyed.

## 5

### Creativity and aesthetics

Staff and volunteers commented on people doing well, praising and celebrating their work; however, there was less encouragement or emphasis on being creative and moving beyond the identified structures of planned activities or templates provided within the toolkit. There were occasions when participants remarked on the artwork on the tablecloth in an aesthetic sense, particularly when participants were involved in laying the tablecloth and folding it back up. Staff skilfully linked such observations with activities, for instance starting a discussion to reminisce about favourite butterflies after a participant remarked on how beautiful the butterfly on the tablecloth looked. Facilitators tended to focus on how the tablecloth could structure activities rather than reflect on the artwork or the arts as topics in themselves.

## 6

### Affirmation of identity – sharing and remembering

Activities were helpful for supporting a sense of self-worth and celebrating people's work. There were moments when the conversation surrounding activities was used by staff to

affirm identities. Validating a valued aspect of a person's sense of self – whether or not this related to current or past activities/roles – was observed as very affirming for participants.

*[During a session when participants were standing around a table planting bulbs.]*

*Participant: We'll all be gardeners now (laughing).*

*Facilitator: You told me you're a gardener.*

*Participant: Yes, I love gardens. [Observation]*

As noted above, some facilitators involved participants in laying the tablecloth and removing it/clearing up, which created a relaxed atmosphere in which participants' capacities were recognised and appreciated. The sharing of personal stories between facilitators and participants through reminiscence encouraged a sense of everyone being on the same level, rather than having a sense of clearly defined roles of service user/provider.

## SECTION B: ACTIVITY-RELATED THEMES AND OUTCOMES OF THE TOOLKIT

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### Process and outcomes of delivery – interactions and conversations

The observations allowed insight into the difference between participant-led interaction and activity-led interaction. In the sessions where participants were able to lead, the conversation generally flowed more naturally. Body language was also key to effective delivery. Staff who were observing body language had a clearer idea of the level of engagement. When people were brought into the activity physically, they were more engaged on a verbal level.

When the conversation was more activity-led, such as with the colouring, this seemed to be less effective in terms of creating conversations. However, concentration and focus was increased, evidenced by physical agitation decreasing. The value of concentration was an element of using the toolkit that featured consistently across interviews with staff.

*A service user who has very limited communication skills, and really became very animated during the session, and went on to colour several pictures. And going on into the afternoon, after lunch, went on back to the table. Fortunately, somebody realised that that's what he was looking for – the tablecloth - and that was brought back. And that gentleman coloured in two or three pictures. And he's a gentleman who's – not anxious – but quite, his concentration span would ordinarily be very brief, and who finds it difficult to maintain any conversation on any level, and there was just something about the topic. [Interview]*

Providing a short moment of conversation for someone with limited communication skills was therefore considered a particular benefit, especially the potential to extend these positive short moments using the different activities provided within the toolkit.

Positive outcomes from the toolkit could extend beyond planned sessions, with some examples of participants looking for the activities later in the day after the formal session had ended. Being involved in purposeful or worthwhile activities seemed important for some participants, creating a sense of accomplishment that could extend beyond the immediate creative activities, such as clearing up and participating in planning future activities.

## 8 Impact of props/items from toolkit

A variety of activities were undertaken, using ideas from the toolkit or ideas that had been developed independently by the facilitators. The tablecloth was a central feature of most sessions. Planning before sessions was helpful, with the preparation of props an integral feature of sessions that stimulated interaction and participation at all levels. The toolkit was perceived as beneficial in being able to facilitate participation among people with varying levels of dementia in meaningful short bursts of activity that were simple but not simplistic.

*It encourages reminiscence, so that ties in with communication. It stimulates ideas for carrying on, linking on to different activities... And it also it can bring people together as a group more. So even if people are limited in terms of the amount of input they can be quite happy just sitting back and listening and watching. Because it's a relaxing subject for a lot of people. And somebody who is further on with dementia, just the visual stimulation of seeing colours in front of them. [Interview]*

*It's a visual stimulating way to promote conversation, promote reminiscence and allowing somebody, giving somebody something tangible, you know, to allow them to communicate to the best of their abilities. [Interview]*

An hour of very engaged activity was noted consistently across sessions: this seemed the right amount of time for keeping focus. The most natural discussions involved staff weaving in their own reminiscence and reflections, and picking up and linking their own comments with the spontaneous comments and stories that participants told. Consequently, using conversation to introduce more structured activities gently aided social interaction and individual motivation, so that the transition between activities was flexible and natural. Sensory aspects of the toolkit were also important, with smell and touch found to be beneficial in connecting with participants and to encourage reminiscence. The different ways

of involving participants was viewed by staff as important in developing personalised approaches to engage a person and follow their lead in conversations.

*Because it has many different strands, because you have the option to – well, the tablecloth is the main focus, but you also have option of activity sheets and booklet, really expands the opportunity – because you are able to follow someone’s line of communication and be able to quickly identify something that is going to be able to expand on that train of thought. [Interview]*

Individual preferences were noted in relation to the different activities. On occasions when not all participants enjoyed a particular activity, the limitation of running one group activity was noted compared to sessions where participants had a choice over activities due to a higher staff to participant ratio. Smaller groups and one-to-one interactions were more beneficial for working with the different paces of individuals to personalise the experience more easily and take account of mobility difficulties and sensory impairments.

Sessions seemed to work well when there was not too much clutter on the table, such as when there were place settings for lunch over the tablecloth, or too many props or activity sheets lying around. Clearing up between activities, and lifting the tablecloth on and off at different points in the session, seemed to help participants focus on the current activity and avoid the distraction of too much visual information; it also placed the tablecloth both physically and figuratively as a central aspect of the session.

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## Facilitation process among staff and volunteers

As indicated above, the staff interactions were key to helping the flow of conversation. Skilled facilitation was clearly observed in most of the sessions, with relaxed facilitators being the most effective, particularly in blending natural conversations with the activities taking place. In later sessions, the facilitators became more relaxed and were able to draw on their previous sessions to stimulate the sessions after.

While the facilitator was leading activities, other staff and volunteers were observed helping participants engage through bringing them into conversations, helping them with activities, pointing things out to them on the table cloth and much more. Sessions where facilitators had an element of ‘back-up’ from staff and volunteers often flowed more naturally with engaged and happy participants. Despite the evidence of many positive interactions, there were some instances when activities were prioritised over participant-led conversations, and this could have a detrimental effect: when facilitation was too rigid, this could impact negatively on some participants by shutting down their chosen conversation.



The theme of gardens was helpful for facilitators to focus the session. The activities and guidance for facilitators was important in giving confidence both for experienced staff and for those less used to delivering activity sessions.

*I think it was good to have a focal point. The tablecloth was really good and they all focused on that. Rather than just sitting down and having a chat, there was a theme running right through it. It didn't matter if it went off the theme, you could easily bring it right back, and I think that helped with more structure, it was more meaningful, having that theme, and everyone was able to add something to it, I felt, the garden, the flowers, it wasn't just plants, you could bring birds, you could bring sheds, it was good. [Interview]*

Most staff used the toolkit as the basis for an activity session, and brought additional props or added activities to extend their range and personalise them to what they thought would work with their own group of clients. The toolkit was perceived as a framework that could be used with existing expertise to widen the scope of activities that staff and volunteers could consider, particularly those with less training, limited only by the facilitator's own creativity.

*It was a good benchmark for us to start from... You can start off with that as a basis, then add to it and make it bigger. I think you have to have an idea yourself, of people getting involved, of their background, to know what things to add on to make it... but the book certainly did help. [Interview]*

*I think the limitations would only be if you don't want to be creative along with it, bring your own ideas to the table. [Interview]*

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## Mobility and sensory impairment(s)

Most participants did not have significant mobility difficulties or sensory impairments that impacted on their engagement in activities. However, there were notable exceptions, with instances of participants not being fully engaged or included, which appeared to be related, at least in part, to sensory impairments. On some occasions, participants who had a hearing impairment appeared to be on the periphery of the group, having difficulty following conversations and hearing instructions. The body language of these participants was often observed to be closed - arms folded and looking at their hands. These participants' engagement increased when they had one-to-one interaction with staff speaking loudly and clearly to them. There were positive examples of people being supported well in the context of mobility difficulties, such as providing adapted gardening tools.

Using the toolkit provided an opportunity for staff to reflect on how they might include arts-based creative activities more regularly in their care settings. In some instances, facilitators linked to past garden-related activities at the start of the session, and looked forward to what was planned for future sessions at the end of the session. This process was helpful to create a sense of continuity as well as generating positive anticipation for those who had enjoyed the activities and looked forward to more. There was also general reflection on how the garden could be used more regularly and/or to greater effect by participants.

In interviews, staff described instances of incorporating new information about the person's past that had been gleaned from conversations during activity sessions into care plans.

*They gave you an idea of what they liked doing and what they might like to do in the future. Some of it deviated away from what was on the tablecloth, but it was useful to learn more about the people, that we've maybe not got in our notes. [Interview]*

In addition to learning more about a person's life history, staff described the value of being able to observe and document new interests that came from the confidence participants gained from watching others participate in an activity, especially when this involved trying something different from what they would normally choose to participate in if asked directly

Beyond individual care plans, staff discussed the value of seeing what worked or was interesting for participants in group activity sessions to incorporate ideas into their service user involvement plans for group activities. As well as being useful for finding enjoyable activities, this planning could be used as evidence for the Care Commission, reflecting on the value of the toolkit as a broader 'participation tool' for involving service users.

*It's a really good participation tool. It's one of our goals, one of our national standards, for people to participate in about the service, by getting them involved in things like that, and getting them out in the garden, participating in making the service a better place to live, so I think it's really useful. [Interview]*



The project has established that the creative opportunities provided by the toolkit ***Creating Conversations: Gardening*** have the potential to increase confidence, reduce anxiety, affirm identities, support positive social connections and provide opportunities to engage in enjoyable and purposeful activities as evidenced through the observations. Constraining factors and barriers to such positive outcomes have been observed, particularly in relation to the facilitation process and structure of activities, the physical/built environment, and the extent to which sensory and mobility impairments are accommodated. To enhance the product and its potential impact, recommendations have been made to Artlink Central to refine the toolkit and its marketing prior to the launch of the product in July 2016.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information about the project findings, please contact Dr Jane Robertson, University of Stirling, email [j.m.robertson@stir.ac.uk](mailto:j.m.robertson@stir.ac.uk) or telephone +44 (0) 1786 466322.

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