An Introduction to Reminiscence as a Tool for Learning and its potential use in Stimulating Conversation for Those Experiencing Short Term Memory loss

Reminiscence is a powerful tool that can be used to extract knowledge, skills and experiences held by older people, allowing them to share this with others, and to help the older person feel valued. ActiveAge believes this could be of great benefit in the workplace and in other learning environments.

Introduction

Reminiscence is the process whereby an individual recalls the past, previous events, people, incidents. It can also be used to connect the present with the past ‘an event that brings to mind a similar, former event’.

"Reminiscing promotes emotional well being and reduces isolation, loneliness and depression.”

When we ‘reminisce’ we recall memories and recapture the emotions that went with them, sharing our experience and knowledge with others. All of us engage in this reflective process from time to time. Reminiscence is seen as a normal and vital part of growing older. It becomes more important as we age, allowing us to get in touch with things and times that were important to us, memories that make us happy.

Dementia

Reminiscence is currently being used in varying capacities to help individuals suffering from memory problems such as those with dementia. Dementia causes impairment of short-term memory, which is vital for communication and helps maintain the thread of conversation, ensuring topics are fully discussed and new topics are introduced appropriately. Impaired short-term memory therefore severely affects an individual’s ability to communicate and it can be frustrating for friends and family when topics are continually reintroduced and forgotten.


2. [http://www.seniorsnetwork.co.uk/memories](http://www.seniorsnetwork.co.uk/memories)
Reminiscence is a process, which depends on using long-term memory. With dementia long-term memory is often well preserved and there are many advantages to using the process of reminiscence with such individuals.

In Norfolk, trained reminiscence tutors have been carrying out reminiscence sessions in sheltered housing for about 25 years. The tutors use memory boxes for carrying out reminiscence exercises with individuals with dementia, or those who have suffered from strokes or with speech problems.

In Norfolk they found that asking questions of individuals with speech or memory difficulties compounded the problem, but using “triggers” such as photos helped to stimulate conversation. Many of the traditional methods of reminiscence make use of physical memory prompts, such as photographs or newspaper articles, but new technologies are being developed to aid in the process (see below).

**Reminiscence Therapy (RT)**
This is often used to counsel and support individuals of all ages, but is of particular benefit to those suffering from short-term memory problems. Reminiscence activities give the individual with dementia a sense of value, importance, belonging, power and peace.

Reminiscence Therapy typically involves a discussion of previous activities and experiences with another person or group, and can include using aids or prompts that stimulate the senses, such as photographs, music, sound recording, and even smells. In dealing with grief and mourning reminiscence is very helpful as it allows an individual to access to happy memories etc about the person who has passed away.

**CIRCA Project**
Most reminiscence sessions occur between several individuals using physical aids such as photos etc but there are opportunities to develop more advanced reminiscence aids with multimedia platforms. One such project, CIRCA, was developed by the universities of Dundee and St Andrews. CIRCA explored the possibilities for an interactive reminiscence and conversation aid to help communication for elderly people with dementia. This project ran from 2001-2004. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4091516.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4091516.stm)

Some of the conclusions that resulted from the CIRCA project include:

- Computers can be used to maintain conversation with people with dementia
- People with dementia can happily adapt to the technology and quickly become comfortable using it
- A multimedia reminiscence system can assist people with dementia to talk about a wide range of topics
- One positive benefit of the wide range of material available is that care staff can use the system with little or no background preparation
Reminiscence and Lifelong Learning

Norfolk Adult Education Service has been involved in providing reminiscence services for older learners for over 10 years. One of their aims is to widen the participation to include learners who may be older or disabled and therefore find it difficult to take part in more traditional forms of learning. Participating in reminiscence allows older people to enjoy interacting with others by talking about subjects in which, they are confident of their knowledge. This results in increased self-esteem and wellbeing. Over one third of Norfolk’s population is over 50 and it is one of the oldest populations in Britain, this being partly due to the popularity of the area for retirees.

The book *Reminiscence and Lifelong Learning* is a showcase for the pioneering reminiscence work done by Norfolk County Council’s Adult Education Service. Sarah Housden, a Norwich tutor and occupational therapist is the author.

http://www.norfolk.gov.uk/consumption/idcplg?IdcService=SS_GET_PAGE &ssDocName=NCC050152&ssSourceNodeId=&ssTargetNodeId=3018

This book explains how to make use of an individual’s personal memories as a resource in learning: a source of knowledge, ideas and experiences for tutors and learners to draw on. This demonstrates good practice for tutors, other professionals and carers who use older people’s memory work in a learning context.

Storytelling/Intergenerational Learning

Reminiscence can function as a storytelling mechanism, allowing individuals to pass on oral history and can serve as a means of Intergenerational Learning. At a basic level, reminiscence is often used in the family setting to learn about our ancestors, through the stories our parents and grandparents tell us about these individuals.

In Norfolk the Adult Education Service are running an Intergenerational project called ARCH³. This is a community archiving project, which received lottery funding and is being run alongside local libraries and museums. Groups are encouraged to promote their archives through exhibitions, open days and social events, inspiring members of the community, even those who are hard to reach, to participate.

Reminiscence sessions are held in care settings to stimulate memories schools are invited to take part in intergenerational sessions, working on craft projects with older people. In addition to preserving memories of the community on the past, groups will be encouraged to record daily events, creating history for the future.

Another organization promoting reminiscence for learning is *Age Exchange*⁴. This UK charity has been working in the field of reminiscence, intergenerational learning, and creativity between generations for over

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³ http://www.commanet.org/remembernorfolk/
⁴ http://www.age-exchange.org.uk/
twenty years. The charity promotes the value of reminiscence for young and old alike and is Internationally renowned for it’s reminiscence work theatre, publishing, exhibitions, inter-generational and dementia care projects and training workshops.

There are real opportunities for intergenerational learning using reminiscence as a tool. For example, making history lessons more personable and enjoyable for children by getting older people to go into schools. Intergenerational reminiscence sessions could be used to allow older people to share experiences, their knowledge of the past, people and places with younger generations. Various aids, such as photos, music etc could be used to make learning a more sensory experience and multimedia platforms should be developed to further enhance reminiscence learning sessions.

**General Uses**

As well as being a process related quite closely with age, reminiscence is something we can - and do - all make use of on a regular basis. For example, to help overcome a current problem we recollect a previous similar scenario to remember how we solved it previously. During a job interview we may reminisce about past experiences, or explain our understanding of how a process works. We have all filled in application forms that ask us to describe a time when we participated in a team exercise, solved a difficult problem or showed our leadership skills. All of these require us to reminisce on past experiences and use these in a current scenario to demonstrate our skills and knowledge.