

Book review

Creative approaches in dementia care

Edited by Hilary Lee and Trevor Adams

Foreword: G. Allen Power

Chapter Authors (in order):

Jane Verity and Hilary Lee, Peter Spitzer, Joanna Jaaniste, Richard Coaten, Kirstin Robertson-Gillam, Patricia Baines, Kirsten James, Trisha Kotai Ewers, Pam Schweitzer, John Killick and Kate Allan, Elizabeth MacKinlay, John Killick and Kate Allan, Hilary Lee.

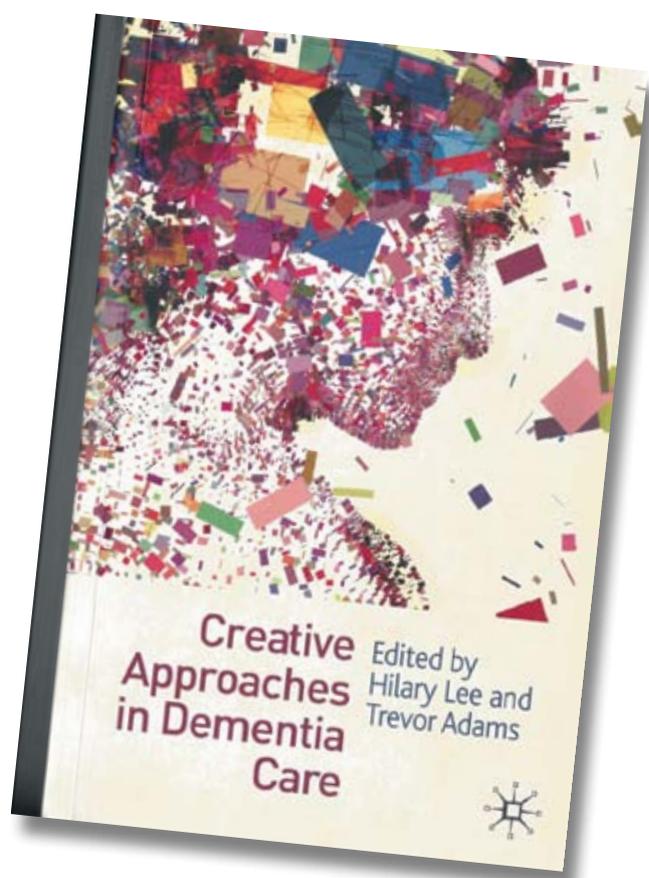
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Reviewed by Heather Hill

Creative approaches in dementia care adds to the growing list of publications which offer non-medical perspectives on working with people with dementia. It is encouraging to see so many Australian contributors in this collection, and to be made aware of the range and depth of practice in our own backyard.

The foreword by G. Allen Power, author of the excellent book *Dementia beyond drugs: Changing the culture of care* (2010), sets the stage by identifying and discussing key aspects of creativity and of culture change perspectives on dementia care. Power is one of the visionaries in the person-centred care field and he gives a valuable introduction to person-centred principles. He describes how far the field of dementia care has come in shifting from a focus on attempting to humanise the medical to a focus on totally reconfiguring the priorities of care. He explains the nature of this shift as beginning with a changed perspective on the experience of dementia as “a shift in perception of the world” (2010, p.10). This in turn requires that we as professionals move from a ‘disability’ focus to one of ‘possibility’; we need to develop approaches that reflect and capitalise on how the individual with dementia sees the world.

Citing Jones (1999), defining creativity as “a moment where we look at the ordinary, but see the extraordinary”, Power enters territory



we, as artists, know well. This territory is one which ‘transcends language’, is in the moment, gives energy, focuses on strengths, enables people to transcend their limitations and contributes to well-being. Thus he brings together person-centred perspectives on dementia and creativity, and the creative arts.

The individual chapters present diverse ways of working with people with dementia, and appear to fall within two general categories:

those working with artforms as a specific mode of therapy (creative arts therapies); and those working in more broadly creative ways within a person-centred framework (who may or may not draw on the arts). The former category includes chapters on: humour therapy through the Laughter Boss program (Spitzer); dramatherapy (Jaaniste); dance/movement psychotherapy (Coaten); music therapy (Robertson-Gillam); art therapy (Baines), while the latter includes the Spark of Life program (Verity/Lee); complementary therapies (James); the importance of story (Kotai-Ewers); reminiscence (Schweitzer); spirituality (MacKinlay); creative communication at the end of life (Killick/Allan), as well as photography, video and visual material (Killick/Allan).

While the chapters vary greatly in philosophical orientation, style and content, they highlight a number of important issues in dementia care. For instance, Spitzer in his chapter addresses the need to distinguish between the particular skills of the specialist practitioner and those skills that can be transmitted to general staff. Recognising that the skills of a professional clown go beyond what can be gained through a short training course in humour, his organisation has set up a mentoring process whereby Elder Clowns support the in-house Laughter Boss, who is a member of the regular staff.

There is also the recognition that the arts are not “stand alone” (p.50), and the work needs to be done in a supportive context for it to have best effect. This indeed is the message of person-centred care: that while isolated activities may offer something, they are only a small (though valuable!) part of an overall person-centred approach to care. Recognition that there are specialist skills is a challenge for arts therapies practitioners, and James in her chapter on complementary practices shows that if the specialist skills are not recognised, then general staff may go beyond their expertise, sometimes with negative consequences. The role that the arts may play in training others is noted by Coaten, a dance/movement

psychotherapist, who points out the relevance of embodiment (without the dance) to the staff giving everyday care. This is an aspect usually neglected in training, yet so vital to the people with dementia who live mainly in the non-verbal, affective world.

How do people with dementia reminisce? This is a question posed by Schweitzer in recognition of the fact that the person transcends the label. Arts therapists are often asked, ‘How can people with dementia dance, make art, make music?’ The message is that if we see the potential, it can happen. This primacy of relationship, and the importance of being present and listening, is addressed by Kotai-Ewers who gives some practical guidance on how we may still be able to hear the stories of people with dementia, for instance by recognising the metaphorical use of language that occurs in dementia. Killick and Allan, in their chapter, give moving accounts of being present to people at the end stages of dementia. The importance of creating a particular social and emotional environment, whether in the context of an hour’s session or in the overall environment of a nursing home, is further addressed by Baines in her chapter, ‘Creating a space’, making clear that the space is as much a mind/feeling creation as a physical arrangement – the latter often being less than ideal in care environments. And, with a focus on meaning, MacKinlay provides a useful schema to describe a spirituality which is not limited to religion, but which equally may be sustained through relationships, nature and the arts. The need to address the person’s desire to be meaningfully engaged in life is emphasised throughout.

The editors, Lee and Adams, state their aims for the book as giving health care practitioners reference to a range of creative approaches, offering them the possibility to draw on some of the elements presented in their everyday care, and demonstrating the importance of bringing in professional creative artists and practitioners specialising in the field. They have accomplished these aims to a degree, but not in a completely satisfying way for the

reader. With different authors from varying professional backgrounds, one neither expects nor desires uniformity, but one needs a degree of shared focus to create a coherent narrative. The lack of this shared focus, together with an ambiguity concerning the intended audience, diluted the impact of the book as a whole.

The title *Creative approaches in dementia care* allows for creativity in its broad sense as well as in the form of creative arts therapies, and the book's chapters reflect the entire spectrum. However, in their discussions, the editors and Power seem to slip between the terms 'creativity' and 'creative arts therapies'. Given the title of the book, one would expect its central concept might be teased out and more clearly defined. Creativity is more than creative arts; creative approaches to care are not restricted to specific arts therapies or arts experiences, but encompass the broader creativity demonstrated in the ways professional carers care for and interact with people with dementia. This in turn relates to the issue of distinguishing creativity in its broadest sense as accessible to all, as well as those practices for which special training is required.

The ambiguity in terms of audience makes it difficult to say who exactly should or will read this book. Different chapters will satisfy different audiences. It is a book, however, which arts therapists working in the aged care/dementia field should read. There are good references and other resources for readers to follow up, insight into a variety of ways of working with people with dementia, and, at least in some of the chapters, an orientation to the meaning of person-centred practice in dementia.

For the reasons mentioned above, I found an unevenness in the quality of the contributions, and not all chapter authors did justice to their particular area of expertise. The chapters which seemed to work best were those whose authors articulated their theory and practice in an integrated way and were able to breathe life and heart into the work.