

‘Shared narratives: Museum, memory boxes and art therapy’

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Abstract

The therapeutic art project and showcase, ‘Shared narratives: Museum, memory boxes and art therapy’, was a collaboration between LASALLE College of the Arts, the National Museum of Singapore (NMS), and St Luke’s ElderCare Centres (SLEC), with funding by The Ireland Funds Singapore. It was based on a shared belief in the benefits of and connection between heritage, narratives and well-being when working in the field of art therapy with older people. It drew on findings from an extensive three-year research study by Todd, Camic, Lockyer, Thomson and Chatterjee (2017) at the School of Life and Medical Sciences at University College London, that studied how museum-based interventions offered participants a soothing and calming environment to develop narratives that can promote social inclusion and positive well-being. The therapeutic art project and showcase described in this discussion paper offered a unique, community-embedded learning experience for LASALLE Master of Art Therapy enrolled in a research-led teaching module and for a small group of Bachelor of Arts Management students. As the project leaders and key educators, Reedy and Wong offer an introduction to this project and the associated major public exhibition and flag some emerging insights.

Introduction

‘Shared narratives: Museum, memory boxes and art therapy’ was a therapeutic art project which culminated in a showcase at the National Museum of Singapore (NMS) from 16–24 February 2019. A series of four workshops provided a safe art-

making space for older people to come together and explore memories and the telling of personal stories through the use of art therapy in a museum. The project aimed to improve the quality of life and psychological well-being of the elderly

participants, who may have been feeling isolated or living with mild dementia, by engaging them with self-narratives through the construction of their own memory boxes. The project was conceived as part of a teaching module



Figure 1. ‘Shared narratives: Museum, memory boxes and art therapy’ showcase at National Museum of Singapore, February 2019.

for our first-year students in the MA Art Therapy programme at LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore. Participants included two lead art therapists/educators, 22 art therapy students, and seven BA Arts Management students, as well as 24 elderly participants and their caregivers from St Luke's ElderCare (SLEC).

Over a two-month period, from October to November 2018, this group of educators, students, elders and caregivers toured and made art within the inspiring National Museum of Singapore, which served as a therapeutic and social space for exploring the elders' personal histories, as well as shared community experiences and connections through the themes of art, identity and heritage. The elders were able to engage with artworks, artefacts, sounds and even smells, as they moved through the themed galleries. The MA Art Therapy students guided them in exploring their creativity by using a diverse range of mixed-media materials that were new to them, as well as supporting them in the process of reflecting on their lives. All of these sensorial experiences helped to trigger the elders' flow of memories and stimulated animated intergenerational conversations between them, the students and attending staff.

The showcase at the NMS in February 2019 featured an installation highlighting the collection of 24 memory boxes made by the elders from SLEC with organisational help from seven LASALLE BA Arts Management students. Over 60 people attended the opening launch, which was officiated by Ms Denise Phua, Mayor of Central Singapore District. Over the following week, nearly 1,600 people visited the display.

During the curatorial process, each elder chose to either close or leave open the lid of his or her memory box for display. The elders reported that they felt validated as they engaged with their memory boxes and the viewing public on the opening night. It gave them the opportunity to share their life stories. The opening night was a celebration of and with the elders, who are as unique and individual as the artworks they created!

A public forum was held on 16 February 2019 for a crowd of 48 people, consisting of art therapists, museum staff, caregivers and personnel from several eldercare agencies, to discuss the theme of therapeutic art interventions in museums. In addition, Kelly Reedy conducted three mini-memory box workshops for over 30 family

members and their children during the course of the showcase.

The benefits of creating memory boxes for the elders, with feedback from caregivers and family members, were also captured in a short video developed by SLEC and aired during the opening at the NMS. Response artworks from the MA Art Therapy students were featured on a wall installation to show the public the importance of self-reflection in our profession. A pack of 24 postcards was designed by BA Arts Management student Vanessa Chew, highlighting the artwork of each elder. In addition, a series of short video narratives was scripted and produced by the arts management students to create intergenerational awareness about the project on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. They



Figure 2. Mr Lim Sin Aik, *Boy on a chair*, 2018, clay figurine in memory box.



Figure 3. Mdm Goh Lian Siow, *Listening to my favourite songs as a child*, 2018, collage in memory box.

also set up a visitors' board for people to write their comments on the showcase, for example:

I love the thought behind it! Engaging seniors and promoting intergenerational dialogues! It really made me think about how little I know about my grandparents and parents too.

I feel inspired and honoured looking at all the different memory boxes. It is incredible how the elders are open and willing enough to showcase personal objects, pictures and other elements about their private lives.

The elders' memories and stories

This project really appears to meet the needs of the elderly, there was some amazing discussion and sharing going on in museum galleries.

Caregiver from St Luke's

The museum collections sparked visible and expressed interest among the majority of the visiting elders, supporting them to make connections between the past and present, their own personal histories and the collective history, and, as we induced, helping them to orientate themselves and gain a sense of perspective. Indeed, the boxes were literally filled with the possibilities of making connection and orientating in time and space, in the form of old photographs of Singapore's changing landscapes, of memories of places and people. There was a box created in the colours of the rainbow to reflect an elder's previous job running an ice kacang store; a number of women reminisced on their time spent in the kitchen and their role within the family. Several recalled memories of the now defunct Gay World Amusement Park, a time filled with music, dance and dates with their late spouses.

Emergent insights from 'Shared narratives' began to coalesce around themes. The first of these was the significance and positive benefit for most elders of the opportunity to relive and recreate memories of home or past experiences from their years of growing up. The second was the need to allow and create a supportive context for, but not necessarily pursue, the negative experiences that arose for some elders – tenuous memories that a few had trouble recalling, or would have rather forgotten. The third was the importance of the present moment, as for a small minority of elders, their focus was on the present rather than the past,



Figure 4. Mayor Denise Phua, artist Mdm. Tjia Jok Tjie, and A/Prof Kenny Tan, CEO of SLEC at the opening launch at NMS, 15 February 2019.

on creating new memories and relationships with the students and caregivers.

Going to the museum was experienced as a 'treat' by some elders as it was not something they would and/or could do on their own. Mr. Lim Sin Aik enjoyed looking at the exhibits, which presented Singapore's history. He was drawn to the exhibits from the 1960s, showing what school was like then. The Chinese school uniforms, report cards, and graduation certificates were of most interest. They reminded him of his school days in Ai Tong, which inspired him to make the clay figurine that symbolised for him a boy's coming of age, coming from a village in Penang to live in a big city like Singapore.

Remembering Rediffusion, Singapore's first cable-transmitted, commercial radio station, Mdm Goh Lian Siow created a brightly coloured memory box which contained her treasured memories of listening to songs from her favourite artiste, Teresa Teng. The box reminded her of the times when they had few sources of entertainment and the Rediffusion radio brought the outside world to her.

Well-being and social outcomes

Students and SLEC's staff members reported a number of noticeable changes in attitudes among the elderly participants. Many spoke of increased confidence and outlook, with some participants

expressing that they “now have something to look forward to”. Staff and students noticed increased awareness and flexibility among the elders in dealing with artistic problems, which was reflected in the impact on the participants’ attitude to art. There was also a movement observed, from being overwhelmed and having issues about artistic ability, to a new-found confidence in technical skills and a sense of ownership.

Increased social interaction was another interesting outcome, observed by Kelly and Daniel, and corroborated by the SLEC caregivers, and by the students’ written accounts. Many of these written accounts documented observations of the support provided to elders by caregivers, staff and students, and of the way the elderly participants were having fun in the gallery environment and interacting when making their artwork.

Many elders expressed delight in the new experience. Others said they felt privileged to be able to enjoy such a beautiful environment. Moreover the elders involved in the project have each experienced something they told us they never thought possible, having their artwork displayed at NMS. There was a palpable sense of achievement and pride when they saw their memory boxes showcased in a public space.

Conclusion

As lecturers in the MA Art Therapy Programme at LASALLE College of the Arts, our research interests have led us to explore the relationship between art therapy and museums, as related to the themes of art, identity, and heritage in eldercare. One of our aims, in this project, was to make a real difference to and empower the elders from SLEC to share their life experiences through active engagement with our art therapy students, the museum collection, and the creative process. We hoped that the participating elders would embrace this opportunity to reflect upon and safely explore their shifting identities in response to the NMS’s collection. This project also gave our first-year art therapy students a unique opportunity to work alongside the elders within the therapeutic space of the museum. It introduced a range of dynamics and a platform to learn a mix of skills and garner experiences that could have not been replicated if the project had been initiated in a traditional art therapy setting. Through participant observation and continuous reflection, responses from the elders and their

caregivers, and a public consultation, we gained a strong sense of how this project mattered to elders and the wider community. Deep reflection on our part as art therapy practitioners and educators, the students’ reflection notes and response art pieces, as well as the artistic creations in the form of memory boxes from the elders, can all contribute to a growing body of knowledge attesting to the benefits of using therapeutic art interventions in museum spaces.¹

For more information on the project, please visit ‘Shared narratives’ on Facebook² and Instagram.

Endnotes

1. The ANZJAT external reviewer for this short discussion paper noted its strong potential to be expanded into a full research article, wherein the authors would have sufficient space to elaborate upon their methodology and findings and further locate their work in a scholarly research context. ANZJAT will be inviting Kelly Reedy and Daniel Wong to submit a full paper to be considered for the next issue of the journal.
2. See <https://www.facebook.com/National.Museum.of.Singapore/posts/shared-narratives-museum-memory-boxes-and-art-therapy-is-an-installation-featuri/2159051580822209/>

Reference

Todd, C., Camic, P.M., Lockyer, B., Thomson, L.J., & Chatterjee, H.E. (2017). Museum programs for socially isolated older adults: Understanding what works. *Health & Place*, 48, 47–55.

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AUSTRALIAN AND NEW ZEALAND JOURNAL OF ARTS THERAPY

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Full-length articles 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, and 14 were double anonymously peer-reviewed.



Published by the Australian, New Zealand and Asian Creative Arts Therapies Association

ACN 63 072 954 388

PO Box 2391, North Brighton, VIC 3186, Australia

www.anzacata.org

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ISSN: 1833-9948

Design and production Vic Šegedin