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The Best Care Is Like Sunshine: Accessing Older People's Experiences of Living in Care Homes Through Creative Writing

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The best care is like sunshine: accessing older people's experiences of living in care homes through creative writing.

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Abstract

This study explored the value of creative writing as an activity in a long term residential setting. A series of seven workshops were facilitated in a nursing home in the United Kingdom by a professional writer. Eight older women in their 80s and 90s with varying degrees of physical and sensory impairment participated in the workshops. A thematic analysis of the women's work identified five key themes: Being confronted by loss, Unlocking memories, Re-discovering the self, Change and adaptation, Giving and receiving care. Their writings provide unique insights as to how older women reflect on their lives and experiences, following their move into long term care.

Keywords: *creative writing, long term care, active aging, older people, nursing homes.*

The promotion of active aging in response to the challenges of population aging has been identified as an issue requiring global attention (World Health Organization, 2002; Department of Health, 2006; Walker, 2009). Studies of health and wellbeing in later life have, however, noted that health promotion activities with older people tend to focus on increasing levels of physical activity and fail to recognize that social, creative and arts-based work can also improve individual's lives and well-being (Glass et al. 2000; Litwin & Shiovitz-Ezra, 2006). The lack of creative and arts-based work for health and wellbeing in later life is interesting as in contrast, over the last ten years, there has been increased interest and research around the use of creative writing as a therapy within mental health and mental wellbeing services (Hart, 2002; Bolton, Field, & Thompson, 2006).

In the context of UK long term care policy, all care homes are expected to have a policy for activity provision as part of the service for older residents (Department of Health, 2001) delivered by a dedicated member of staff often termed an activity coordinator. However, the range and nature of activity provision was not stipulated in legislation. The process of translating this policy into practice has therefore varied enormously from one home to another, which has more recently prompted the development of benchmarks for activity provision in care homes. (College of Occupational Therapists, 2007). These benchmarks highlight that 'activity' is not exclusively about leisure past times or physical activity but also reflects daily activities of living as well as engaging the senses, emotion, the spirit and intellect , possibly leading to creative expression. This has also been underpinned by national clinical guidelines (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence [NICE] 2008), which reflects evidence that one of the factors affecting the mental health and well-being of older people was their access to and participation

in meaningful activity. Using these guidelines, a project was developed with two broad objectives which were to:

1. explore how a creative writing intervention in a care home might contribute to the development of meaningful activity and activity work in a long term care settings,
2. involve service user voices and accounts to influence education and practice in the training of future health and social care professionals.

This project was viewed to be of additional importance as there are very few accounts where older people in care homes have been given the opportunity to inform the development of the health and social care education or practice (Reed, Cook, & Cook, 2004). This situation may have arisen due to the physical and cognitive difficulties many older people living in care homes experience. The use of creative writing to access the experiences of older people who have moved into long-term care was seen to have additional benefits in enabling the voice of older people to be heard by care workers and students using a creative medium. However, for the older people themselves it was seen that creative writing was also an activity that had the potential to provide enjoyment, a new skill and a level of self actualization. In this way we were able to explore creative writing both as a product and a process.

Support for the use of creative writing to access the voices and experiences of older people was found in other studies and reports in this field. In using creative writing as a therapy Bolton (1999) identified that working in this way provided people with an everyday medium to access parts of the self and experiences that were not necessarily articulated (Bolton, 1999). The art of writing has also been found to provide individuals with an opportunity to externalize their thoughts and feelings whilst retaining control over who else they share these feelings with

(Shapiro, 2004; Synnes, 2004). It has therefore been argued that writing a short piece of prose or a poem can also give form to otherwise previously unconnected thoughts and feelings which in turn can lead to new insights for the writer and reader (Bolton, 1999; Sampson, 2004; Bell & Magrs, 2001). Images and metaphor conjured up in poetry for instance can enable an individual to see experiences or self in a very different way (Darling & Fuller, 2005). For example, older people in nursing homes in the United States (US) have been encouraged to use ordinary speech, finding music in the words when speaking their poetry aloud or in having others write it down (Warren, 2004). Further work in institutional settings suggests that new insights can assist in a person's ability to make sense of their reality and restore a sense of self and identity in this context (Harthill et al. 2004).

Using creative writing to gain a richer understanding of how older people perceive their lives and experiences, following their move into a nursing home, was also seen as a way in which the often unheard voice of older people could be accessed, valued and shared to constructively inform and develop practice and education. This is important as there is a developing body of evidence to suggest that people who have moved to a care home often feel marginalized from the decision-making processes that affect their lives and living conditions contributing to a feeling that they have nothing to contribute (Reed, Weiner, & Cooke, 2004; Cook & Stanley, 2009). Moreover, changes to physical and cognitive health that often precede the move to a care home can create practical difficulties for older people accessing opportunities for engagement in activities (Brown Wilson, Davies, & Nolan, 2009). The use of supported creative writing was therefore identified by the project team as a means that could inform the development of education and practice, acknowledging that older people in care homes have the

same right to contribute to the development of a knowledge base that will inform and support the development of health and social care services (Reed, Cook and Cook, 2004).

The aims of this project were therefore to:

1. explore how the use of creative writing might contribute to the development of activity work in UK long-term care settings
2. support older people in sharing their experiences of living in a care home
3. share the often unheard voice of older people, informing education and practice.

While it was hoped this study might show how creative writing could improve the health and wellbeing of older people in care homes, this was not an explicit aim of the project.

Method

Fitting with the aims of the study a narrative approach was used to frame the writing workshops. In its most simple form a narrative is an account or description of an event or experience that requires a story teller and a story (Scholes, Phelan, & Kellog, 2006). The form of a narrative can be varied and examples include: personal and social histories, novels, everyday stories of our actions or the actions of others, myths and fairytales (Polkinghorne, 1988). However, there has been a developing interest in narrative as an approach, not just a method. In this respect Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou (2008) argue that a narrative approach can provide a framework within which to study the structure of people's experiences and stories, consider how they work, who produced them and ultimately explore how individual narratives are used, silenced, contested or accepted. Using this framework enabled us to consider more carefully how we might think about the stories and experiences generated by the older people who participated in the creative writing workshops. The literature on narrative ways of working supports the use

of guided creative writing, using elements of poetry in the workshops. Indeed Thody (2006) supports the use of poetic narrative working suggesting that this enables people to convey emotions without having to focus on factual data

The narrative approach framed the writing workshops in the following way. Each session consisted of a regular format. The professional writer introduced and explained the exercise verbally and then wrote starting points or prompts on a flipchart where it could be seen. Each session started with an introductory short exercise, for example: one thing you'd never guess about me; the best and worst thing that happened this week. Each week there was a central theme for the main writing, for example: food and cooking; coming to the home for the first time; the best and worst kinds of care. Half-way through, at the arrival of the tea trolley, there was a tea break, followed by a poem read aloud by the professional writer (sometimes accompanied by participants who knew the poems by heart). Poems used in this way included: 'Sea Fever' by John Masefield, 'Everyone Sang' by Siegfried Sassoon and 'The Isle of Innisfree' by WB Yeats. The final exercise of the session was usually based on a theme or line from these poems.

Participants

The project was based in care home in an affluent suburb of a large city. The care home is a two storey purpose built nursing home and provides care for up to 62 people including 22 people with physical disabilities. The care home is currently rated as 'Good' (out of a rating range of Poor, Adequate, Good and Excellent) by the Care Quality Commission, the independent care regulator for England (<http://www.cqc.org.uk>).

Seven workshops were undertaken over an eight week period (see Table 1).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The sessions were led by a professional writer. Participants were recruited by the activities coordinator, who used the following inclusion criteria to recruit people to the group:

- residents with an interest in storytelling,
- residents who expressed an interest in creative writing,
- residents who were able to give informed consent to being involved in the workshops.

Eight participants were recruited, all of whom were white British females between 80-90 years of age. Each participant had previously owned their own home prior to moving into long term care. Two participants came from the locality and five participants had moved from other areas to be nearer their families with one participant moving away from her family for access to the specialist disability unit. All participants had difficulties with hearing and sight and one woman had a significant speech impairment. Six participants had physical impairments requiring the use of wheelchairs. All residents had good memory and recall ability, although this was not objectively assessed. Only two participants were able to write independently for some or all of the sessions. One participant had previous experience of writing workshops while the others were trying creative writing for the first time. Each creative writing session was two hours long and took place in a lounge of the care home in which they lived..

Ethical Issues

Participation agreements were signed by the seven older women who were able to give permission for their writing to be used in publications generated by the project. One woman was not able to sign the permission form; whilst her family supported her involvement in the project the authors felt it was not appropriate to use her writings in the context of this paper. Issues of confidentiality, anonymity and copyright were discussed with each participant. Following this,

five women stated they were happy for their real name to be used alongside their work; one woman stated that she only wanted her first name to be used with her writing extracts and one woman stated that she wanted a pseudonym to be used alongside her work.

Managing the Workshops

The sessions were led by a professional writer River Wolton [RW] with support from volunteers experienced in working with older people, and in using creative writing as a therapeutic medium. Volunteers were primarily students undertaking an occupational therapy degree at the university. The students were known to one of the project team and recruited support to the study as they had undertaken a module on creative writing as part of their course. The role of volunteers was to work with the women to support the creation of a written account based on their involvement in the workshop activities. The professional writer noted that neither she nor the volunteers asked for details of participants' disabilities beforehand. Instead it was felt more appropriate to find out on a one-to-one basis in the workshop settings how best to support each person's communication and writing.

Each participant chose, or was given, a hardback or ring-bound notebook to write in. Some kept the books with them between sessions, and some gave them to the activity coordinator for safe-keeping. Participants were invited to write in the books in between sessions, though in practice they did not. Some retained the books after the group finished and with their permission their work was photocopied. During the workshops the older women wrote or dictated their thoughts in response to these prompts in notebook. Two participants wrote independently, the remainder each had a volunteer to scribe for them. The volunteers also helped to prompt the writers, reminding them of the focus of each writing exercise. The process of responding to the prompts, writing down responses, reading them back to the participant, and

reading them aloud to the whole group (with the participant's agreement) was therefore a collaborative process. Following discussion of issues of confidentiality, anonymity and copyright with each participant, participation forms were signed. This identified if they wished their real names to be used and gave permission for the use of their work in future publications. Following this process, where permission has been granted, the contents of each notebook was copied so the content could be analyzed on completion of the project.

Analytic Strategies

Following the completion of the workshops, a thematic analysis was undertaken while attempting to retain the original context of the writing. Thematic analysis was chosen to analyze the creative writing outputs as this approach is particularly appropriate when the aim of the analysis is not to generate theories but to report the experiences, meanings and realities of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was undertaken independently by two of the authors Christine Brown Wilson [CBW] and RW reading through all the creative writing outputs and inductively coding the raw data (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). The codes were then compared and agreed before being grouped into broader themes. These themes were discussed with the wider team with changes being made to include all codes. Braun and Clarke (2006) further suggest that when using thematic analysis with raw data, the key themes should capture something that is important in relation to the main aims of a study. As the study had used creative writing as a way of accessing, valuing and sharing the experiences of older people following their move into a care home, these considerations were held predominantly to the fore whilst the older women's creative writing outputs were being analyzed. Further thought was then given as to how the findings might constructively inform education and practice.

Results

The analysis of the older women's writings generated by the creative writing workshops revealed five key themes: being confronted by loss, unlocking memories, re(discovering) the self, change and adaptation, giving and receiving care.

Being confronted by loss

One aim of the creative writing sessions was to engage people in both individual and shared explorations of their experiences. Whilst there were many positive experiences, participation in the workshops sometimes reminded residents of their failing abilities, or the loss of familiar activities which previously gave them pleasure. This resulted in some initial anxiety and hesitation in engaging with creative writing:

On reflection, I can see how strongly the writing group confronted participants with the loss of their abilities to write and to read. At the beginning several expressed their frustration at not being able to read books any more, and their keen sense of having lost the literature they loved.

River Wolton - workshop facilitator

In this sense there was a level of risk in undertaking an activity such as creative writing with one resident describing this as feeling out of her depth:

Today I am amazed to find myself here

Today I feel out of my depth

I want to be like I used to be (Joan)

There was sometimes a strong sense of all the memories that had been lost:

I hear it in the deep heart's core
But it's not something I can remember offhand – it's in a memory
It's in many memories
They make me feel sad
It lasted for a long time
We don't really know how we feel. (Anne Smith)

As the workshops developed the loss of independence was a significant feature of the writing.

I must go down to the shops again
To see what points are on offer
For an ounce of cheese
And a lonely egg
And what else they can proffer.
It's not much fun when you're all alone
To think what you can make
With a meal for one, like
A tasty pasta bake.
I must go down to the shops again
If only I could get a lift
I could get a bit more
To stock my bare shelf
And maybe get myself a gift.
All I ask is a helping hand

To carry my 'bounty' home
A cup of tea would go down well
Wherever I may roam. (Joan)

Unlocking memories

One workshop started with a plate of keys that was passed between participants. Each older person chose a key and using their key as a prompt, was asked to describe what it might do, first in a concrete sense, then in an abstract sense. This invited the participants to engage with the concept of a key as a metaphor in a way that was familiar, connected directly to the nature of memory, and the layering of past and present:

This key opens the gate to a beautiful garden, stirring memories of past times spent sitting there, in happier times, the sun on my back (Joan)

This key opens a heart.

I've still got a heart for helping people

I feel for people and I love children

I have seven great grandchildren (Doris Reynolds)

Memories featured strongly in much of the writing, with stories that may well have been told many times. The session on cooking and food brought out a wealth of humorous and poignant memories:

Monday was always bread-making. Friday was scones – fruit scones. Christmas and New Year cakes were made six weeks ahead, because as mother used to say 'they'll come again', which meant they had to cool off before they could be put in tins. We used to

come home, running to Mum shouting ‘Where’s the cakes?’ She’d say ‘Get your grubby, chalky hands off. You can look but you can’t touch’. (Biddy Davies)

Some writing illuminated the varied and active lives that had been led, for example by Jenny:

I was a postmistress for three years, until my husband took over. We had to call the police once but it was OK because the policeman was lovely... The first thing I cooked was mince pies. I used to sell them as well in my shop. I loved cooking and won a lot of prizes. (Jenny Tickner)

One participant, Mary, wrote with great skill about numerous memories, memories made vivid through portraying experience through the five senses. This is a key technique for experienced writers, but one which Mary (who had worked as a typist and shorthand secretary for much of her life, but had never done any creative writing) used naturally:

Remembering a Christmas morning and my young grandson enjoying the echo of his voice in the empty church – and his exclamation at the sound of the bells as we walked home for lunch cooking in the oven.

Re(discovering) the self

It was through the process of unlocking memories that residents appeared to revive their sense of identity. At the outset, many within the group expressed a strong feeling of having ‘nothing to say’ and ‘being ordinary’.

Today I feel very humbled, in such a very well educated group of people. I’m afraid.
(Doris Reynolds.)

Just a short little name

Ordinary – lacking in fame

Always helpful

Never one to complain (Joan – acrostic)

Anne Smith also described herself as ‘ordinary’ in the first session, but in the second session, wrote:

I like to go out and see gardens. Ordinary houses with ordinary gardens. *Sometimes ordinary things are important.* (Facilitator’s emphasis).

On the other hand, there was bravery and boldness in the responses, and the sense of an opportunity to be grasped.

If I was a place, I would be the majesty of Rome, recording all the historic battles of the gladiators, seeing all the ruins that remain. (Joan)

One workshop began with a plate of natural objects from gardens to stimulate imagination.

Working with natural objects in this way, Biddy Davies chose a twig and described it in ways that may have reflected her self-image:

feels supportive

supporting a branch of a tree

that’s got too heavy laden with apples...

It’s so strong very strong

it wouldn’t bend.

On another occasion, Bidy also described herself as a raven, popping over to Buckingham Palace. The raven is a powerful symbol of wisdom, age and intelligence. It was a striking metaphor for her to choose, and one that immediately took language to another level. Coupled with the humor of ‘popping over to Buckingham Palace’ it highlighted a latent sense of self-worth, one that had possibly been lost, misplaced or forgotten. This was also reflected in other exercises; for example using the theme of gardens, participants were asked to complete the sentence ‘If I were a garden’. One woman wrote about a garden using nurturing images, revaluing a life where she had nurtured others.

Writing also gave people the opportunity to demonstrate their sense of humor as they recounted details of their lives:

The first thing I baked was at school- rock buns. Any mix left over thrown up onto the ceiling where it stayed for years. (Joan)

I used to love the farm sales. This particular day, I was badly wanting some mole traps because I had moles in the garden, so I went to the farm sale knowing there were mole traps for sale. I put my hand up, then a farmer put a hand on my shoulder and said, ‘What are you doing?’ I said I wanted to buy some mole traps and he said: ‘You’ve bought a bull!’ I’d put my hand up too early. (Doris Reynolds)

Change and Adaptation

As the workshops progressed, the writer moved the focus to living in the care home, beginning with memories of the arrival at the home. One member of the group was contemplating a permanent move to the home and wrote poignantly about her first impressions:

The first time I came to Henleigh Hall
I wondered if I would like it here
I knew I might have to stay and then
I remembered the home left behind and
I felt a sense of sadness (Joan)

Many of the responses to this exercise also highlighted how the women had recognized the need to adapt and to learn new skills in order to become part of the community of residents.

The first time I came to Henleigh Hall I wondered how I was going to fit in after being a housewife in a small bungalow. After being here for 3 ½ years I'm still adjusting... it's very difficult. Some of the staff and clientele are most helpful and I found myself quick to make friends. I knew it was the end of my independence. But I've learned to mix with people, to fit in. (Doris Reynolds)

Almost every participant named 'patience' as something they had learned from living at the home.

It took me some time to get used to the routines. When I first got here I felt like I could shoot myself. Everything had gone wrong. My husband was here, he died. I had to sell the house. You wouldn't mind if you hadn't worked so damned hard. Then you meet a lot of people in the same circumstances. You sort of blend in, you get on. It's just an

expensive way of doing it. In my day I wouldn't have seen my mother out on her own.

It's different now. (Amy)

The flexibility, interdependence and co-operation necessitated by moving to and living in the home became apparent when writing about relationships:

In the deep heart's core, I hear ... a friend. Doris Sweetman, when I came here and we met, we clicked, just like that. She's dead now. We developed a great friendship.

(Biddy Davies)

Many residents spoke about the importance of maintaining relationships with family members external to the home and valued their visits:

The best thing about this week is my husband coming to see me, he comes when he can, I love seeing him (Jenny Tickner)

Giving and Receiving Care

As the medium of creative writing became more familiar, increasing levels of abstraction were used as the workshops progressed. In the final workshop participants were invited to use metaphors from the natural world to describe the experience of receiving care, and the qualities of good care:

The best kind of care is like sunshine

You are being caressed

A warm feeling on your skin

through the thin blouse you're wearing. (Biddy Davies)

There were precise and articulate responses on the topic.

The best kind of care is like loving care, (it) means more than just giving tablets or medicine. You can be very ill but a few words of genuine love can make you feel better. Loving care can come from just holding your hand, or an arm round you. (Doris Reynolds)

The best kind of care is just to be there. (Mary Hall)

The best kind of care is the care which a mother gives to her newborn baby. The gentle holding given at first as she carefully feels her way around the delicate velvet skin, until she finds a less gentle touch. (Joan)

Giving and receiving care was also something that residents engage in with each other:

My friend Amy has helped me the most and another friend David who was always a willing helper. Amy's always there at the right time to move my chair from one room to another. If I'm worried she's always there for me to talk to. (Doris Reynolds)

As Amy was a fellow member of the group, it was a powerful moment when this writing was read out and acknowledged. In response to the question 'Who or what helps you the most at Henleigh Hall?' Amy acknowledged the importance of the writing group as well as the relationships with other residents:

Coming down here – being with other people and you realize you're not the only one who feels the same way. There are days when you feel a bit overcrowded with all the things you're thinking, so it's nice to have someone to talk to. You very often find that you're better off than a lot of them.

Each older person engaged with the opportunity to engage in creative writing feeling supported within the group, making the insights shared very powerful:

All the way through I was struck by the willingness and courage to seize the opportunity offered, and though there were many practical obstacles to and frustrations with participating, the residents gave themselves, each other, as well as the scribes and facilitators a unique and moving insight into their lives.

River Wolton - writer/ workshop facilitator

Discussion

Transforming findings from projects such as this into clear messages for current and future staff is necessary if we are to positively influence experience of older people within long term care settings. Indeed, Brown Wilson and Davies (2009) suggests that the sharing of personal information between residents and staff, often in the form of storytelling during personal routines may lead to staff adopting a resident centred approach to care. Using a narrative approach, gave the women the opportunity to creatively express their stories, revealing further insights into the meaning the stories held for each person, showing connections to the person they had always been (Bolton, 1999). This is important as gaining insights into the personal feelings of care home residents has been found, in the UK and US, to have a positive

impact on individuals, which can in turn lead to the development of more resident centered approaches to care (Brown Wilson & Davies, 2009; Schuster, 1998).

In order to move towards positively influencing care, a digital book was produced. This was a multi media book using text, recordings of the women reading their work and pictures. Using this as a medium to share their personal writings and accounts of their lives and experiences, may in turn enhance the insights and abilities of care home staff to provide more person centered care. The ways in which this may come about are considered in this discussion of the key findings.

Describing life experience

The older people appeared very used to dealing in concrete terms in their day-to-day lives in residential care, so each of the sessions, used a specific trigger to evoke the use of imagination such as the metaphor of the garden, and the experience of cooking/baking; each theme triggering a wealth of images and stories demonstrating how these older people also welcomed the opportunity to engage in metaphors. This was evident in how the participants in the project reported here moved from considering themselves as ordinary to engaging in metaphorical description of their life experience. Metaphor has been described as opening windows in the mind lending layers of meaning to the writing. It is the uncovering and understanding of these layers that offers insights for both the reader and writer (Bolton, 1999; Flint, 2004). This was evident in the sensory images evoked, within the writings presented in this paper. Similarities have been drawn between art therapy and poetry as a conjurer of images, with prose being considered as inhibiting people to move away from memory (Flint, 2004). However, in the experience of this group, prose was also used within the writing to capture anecdotes and humor which emerged from rich life experiences being recounted. Capturing the stories of the

lives lived by older people provide an opportunity for health and social care students to understand how biographical experience shapes the person, enabling them to see beyond the frailty that brings older people into long term care.

Capturing the lived experience of care

This project illustrates how an activity such as creative writing might be used to gain insight into the experience of frail older people when moving into care homes as well as their experience of giving and receiving care. Making the transition into a care home can be a turbulent time for many older people as reflected in the accounts of the women in this project. While the difficulties for older people are well documented in the literature (see for example Froggatt, Davies, & Meyer, 2009), the poignancy of emotion captured through creative writing enable staff and students to see the implications of the move from the perspective of the older person. Seeing the situation from the perspective of the older person has been suggested as a prerequisite for resident centered care.

In moving to a care home, older people often feel marginalized from the decision-making processes that affect their lives and living conditions (Reed, Weiner, & Cook, 2004; Cook & Stanley, 2009) contributing to a feeling that they have nothing to say. In contrast this project gave the older women who participated an enjoyable opportunity to creatively share their experiences of care, revealing important contributions being made to the lives of other residents. Similarly, older women in US based studies developed important networks in care homes (Powers, 1996). Staff recognizing the importance of these relationships often enable frail older people to maintain important social networks within the home, improving their experience of care (Brown Wilson, Cook, & Forte, 2009).

Developing social relationships

Although not an explicit intention of the group, many of the older women identified the opportunity of being able to meet together and speak about things that were of interest. Participants spoke in terms of developing friendship and experiencing it as a loving group. The creation of positive social dynamics has been recognized as a key factor in supporting older people to socially engage and in turn feel a sense of successful ageing (Greaves & Farbus, 2006; Rossen, Knafl, & Flood, 2008). Litwin and Shiovitz- Ezra (2006) also suggest that wellbeing is related to the social relationships created by the activity rather than the activity itself. Indeed, relationships have been considered central to supporting a feeling of community in care homes (Brown Wilson, Davies & Nolan, 2009). Therefore, the facilitation of group based activities such as creative writing workshops has the potential to influence the wellbeing of older people by enabling them to develop and maintain personal relationships within the community of the care home.

Promoting meaningful activity

Whilst there were individual and group benefits, it is important to recognize that many older people within this project might have been precluded from undertaking creative writing due to their inability to write. This project therefore illustrates some clear implications for activity work with older people. Everyone involved in the workshop therefore required an understanding of the frailty of older people and how this might impact on their engagement with the activities. When working with older people in care homes, ensuring the ongoing involvement of people with sight, hearing and speech impairment throughout each workshop required the resources and skills of the facilitator and volunteers, which increased the overall project costs. However, the use of one-to-one scribes enabled older people to reconnect with previous

interests. Tailoring activities to individual abilities by a mentor, and building confidence in the person's ability to engage in the activity is fundamental to the engagement experienced by the older person (Greaves & Farbus, 2006). Each scribe supported participants in identifying a starting point for their writing, but then needed to maintain a balance between capturing the exact words alongside the fullness of each account. The decision as to what to capture was led by the participant with an element of co-construction as the stories unfolded. All scribes re-read the writing back to participants to ensure the meanings and words were reflective of the participant's meaning. This rehearsing prior to sharing with the group gave the participants more confidence in their writing abilities.

Using creative writing to access the women's voices and views can also make an important contribution to shaping education and practice. In discussing the building and development of a knowledge base in health and social care, which includes service user involvement, it has been argued that:

'our traditional quest for quantitative, 'objective', systematic knowledge will need to be replaced with a more questioning approach which constantly asks which stakeholders may be able to contribute to the debate, whose voices usually get heard in such debates and who decides what constitutes valid knowledge' (Glasby & Beresford 2006 p 282).

Older people in nursing homes have the same right to contribute to development of a knowledge base that will inform and support the development of health and social care services (Reed, Cook, & Cook, 2004). The analysis of the creative writings presented in this paper, and the description of how the workshops were managed, therefore provide significant insights into how the challenges of hearing older people's voices and experiences can be creatively accessed

and practically supported, whilst also producing rich insights that illustrate how the older women saw themselves and their lives in the context of living in a care home.

Conclusion

At the start of this paper it was noted that there is limited evidence of work or activity on the use of creative writing in long term care environments. Whilst accounts such as the ones related in this article are not intended to be generalizable, they can sensitize those who work with older people to the importance of the stories older people share. Furthermore, the use of creative writing in care homes can, as an activity, provide enjoyment and facilitate the sharing of experiences promoting the development of social relationships between residents. However there were resource issues that would need to be addressed for activity workers to effectively use creative writing in long term care settings. Drawing on the experiences of our project we were able to successfully facilitate this work through an internal university grant. This paid for a professional writer to lead the workshops. We also had access to a skilled volunteers as one member of the project team was an engaged in education programs for occupational therapy students. Through this we were able to recruit student volunteers from a module that explored the use of therapeutic creative writing. These students were also experienced in working with older people and group facilitation. The activity worker at the care home was also integral to the functioning of the group as she encouraged people to participate and liaised with care staff to ensure that all those who wished to be involved, were supported to attend. On completion of the project, the professional writer and university staff continued to work with the women in developing a digital book based on their written accounts. Alongside the written words, the digital book includes photographs and the audio recordings of the women themselves providing a lasting legacy for the participants, their families and the care home of the work they undertook.

Furthermore, the digital book is being supported and developed by the university for use as part of an inter- professional curriculum on ageing. It has also been suggested that the accounts produced from the activity has the potential to promote resident centered care, when disseminated to staff and students working with older people, although further research in this area is required.

Table 1

Week	Themes & Starting Points	Number of Participants	Number of Volunteers
1	<p>Introduction- getting to know each other</p> <p>Today I am..</p> <p>Today I feel..</p> <p>If I were a place I would be..</p>	8	1
2	<p>The garden</p> <p>Name acrostics</p> <p>Looked at outdoor objects- what does it look like, what does it feel like, what does it smell like, what might it taste like, what might it say.</p> <p>If you were a garden what type of garden would you be?</p> <p>The facilitator read some of her poems to the group</p>	6	5
3	<p>Cooking</p> <p>Looked at kitchen objects, cooking implements and ingredients</p> <p>The first thing I cooked/ baked</p> <p>In my kitchen..</p> <p>In my mothers kitchen..</p> <p>In my grandmothers kitchen..</p> <p>What I loved about coking</p> <p>What I hated about cooking</p>	6	5

	Poem: 'Sea Fever' by John Masefield Writing poems beginning with 'I must go ...'		
4	The key Remembering the first time I came to the care home 'Isle of Innisfree' by WB Yeats In my deep hearts core...	8	6
5	Today I am The best thing about today (or this week) is The hardest thing about today (or this week) 'Everyone Sang' by Siegfried Sassoon Poems beginning with 'Suddenly everyone '	8	5
6	The Senses Today I smelt, yesterday I saw, last week I touched, when I was little I tasted, tomorrow I will sense The best kind of care Poem: 'The Subaltern's Love Song' by John Betjeman	7	4
7	Dear carer (unsent letters) The story of the group The group as a colour/sound/texture etc What are we taking away from the group Facilitator read her own poem 'The Writing Room' about the group	8	5

Note. Numbers of volunteers and participants do not always equal as the activity coordinator and professional writer also acted as volunteers when needed.

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