

The Journal of DementiaCare

For all who work with people with dementia

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**Frames of mind:
telling personal stories
through animated films**



- Improving the mealtime experience
- People with dementia online • End-of-life care

Making animated films with people with dementia

Film makers Zoë Flynn and Bo Chapman introduce Frames of Mind®: their innovative method of using animation to work with people with dementia

Stop frame animation is a technique where physically manipulated objects appear to move on their own... like magic. The object is moved in small increments and in between a photograph or 'frame' is taken. The computer then links the frames, and plays them back, to create a movie. The magic is captivating for all ages.

In education, the process of making an animation is considered a truly 'cross-curricular' activity because it embraces a range of subjects from IT and maths to art, literacy and psychology. When creating an animation with people with dementia, it is no different. The levels of engagement are as multifaceted and profound. It is not only a physical activity where new skills are acquired and developed, but also an intrinsically valuable form of creative expression, an affirmation of one's sense of self.

Introducing Frames of Mind

'Frames of Mind®' is our name for using stop frame animation as a communication tool. It's a tool that is relevant to all, but its benefits are particularly pertinent to people with dementia. It's not necessary to know how to use a computer: the animation software is extremely simple to use. It's not necessary to be able to draw: anything can be animated, from peas to people. With animation there is no linear narrative, no right or wrong. Animation is a fun and liberating experience: all you need is your imagination.

The essential components of Frames of Mind® are:

- animated film (using personal objects/belongings as catalysts where possible)
- recorded voice-over to narrate the story
- music of the person's choice.

These elements are then edited together to make a short film. Every participant receives a DVD of their work that they can watch again and again. Throughout a Frames of Mind® project, staff are offered training to help them understand and participate in the process.

In a Frames of Mind® project, we see the potential story in everything. We ask care workers to recount some of the stories that permeate their shifts. We ask care home residents for a tour of their room, their dressing tables and cabinets, evidence of hobbies and holidays, putting names and dates to photographs to spark conversation. The set can be anything or anywhere: a table can be a desert, a cabinet can be a

dance hall. The action is driven by questions and suggestions and directed by their response – which could be anything. The whole process is a two-way improvisation that begins and ends with the person.

Our early dementia work

In 2008 Sutton Council asked us to do an experimental film project in Oakleigh care home. We shot the film, 'How You Look At It', over six months. We entered the world of Oakleigh with little experience of working with people with dementia and no expectations of what might be possible. Instead, we drew on our experience as film makers to explore new ways of communicating. For example, we plugged a video camera into a large screen TV: this enabled residents to see themselves on the screen and interact spontaneously. We also encouraged residents to interview each other using the cameras and generally involve staff and residents in the making of the film.

Half way through the project we decided to try animation (after all that's what we do!) and the results were extraordinary. Our first attempt was with Mary, an Irish woman whose accent was soft and her virtues strong. She chose some significant objects from her room: a framed photo of her mother as a young woman, a china shire horse and a crucifix. With a little instruction she was able to move the objects, direct the action and operate the animation software on the laptop. Our delight in seeing Mary 'doing' the animation herself and enjoying it is evident in the documentary footage – we are grinning from ear to ear!

After the success of working with Mary we tried using animation with a group of residents sitting in the lounge. We draped two outfits, one for a man and one for a



Two outfits were draped over chairs to trigger a romantic narrative



Zoë Flynn (left) and Bo Chapman founded Salmagundi Films in 2004. Salmagundi Films specialise in stop frame animation and work with all ages and abilities to produce films that raise awareness and challenge stereotypical thinking.

Bo and Zoe run a range of training sessions on the use of animation with people with dementia, including one- and two-day courses, and a train-the-trainer course to facilitate Frames of Mind® projects. The courses cover topics such as story collecting methods, introduction to equipment and animation software, and opportunities to make a short animation. For more information, see www.salmagundifilms.co.uk

woman, over two chairs, side-by-side, to trigger a romantic narrative. One resident, Gladys, operated the computer and everyone else improvised the story, calling out suggestions such as: “They have known each other long enough to hold hands” and “It would be nice if he gave her a flower, wouldn’t it?” Bo followed their instructions, moving the clothes while Zoë filmed the process.

The group activity showed that with animation you can make anything happen. The action can be as much in the present as the past. It provides an interactive platform for play that places the participant in the moment and alleviates the anxiety to ‘remember’.

In the words of Rick Mayne, centre manager for Oakleigh care home, “The film project helped set a new vision and purpose for all of us, staff and residence alike. It really helped staff to believe that anything is possible. It challenged mindsets.”

Where next?

Since the Oakleigh project, we have worked with several care providers developing Frames of Mind®, the use of animation as a creative means of communication and life story tool. This has included:

- in 2009, working with Housing 21 Dementia Voice to produce a collection of life stories for the launch of the Westminster Memory Service in London.

- in 2010/11, running a pilot project at Central & Cecil’s newly acquired Church Walk House care home in north London. As well as life story work, the project involved training staff and working with families, with the aim of highlighting the value of arts interventions. The films were ‘premiered’ at a Church Walk garden party with dignitaries, a marquee and Pimm’s.

- in 2011, running a project with Housing 21 at The Watermill care home in Walsall. This project has involved a comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness and impact of Frames of Mind®, including investigating outcomes for residents, staff and family carers in terms of communication, empowerment, well-being, cognitive abilities and relationships. The study has revealed positive outcomes for all involved and the films made by staff and residents are its legacy.

Animation helps focus

Animation has the benefit of being able to be watched instantly, which alleviates problems with short-term memory loss and enhances a sense of control and empowerment.

During our work in Westminster, at the Tresham Day Care Centre, care staff told us



Sara drew the characters from her story of escape across the desert in the sand

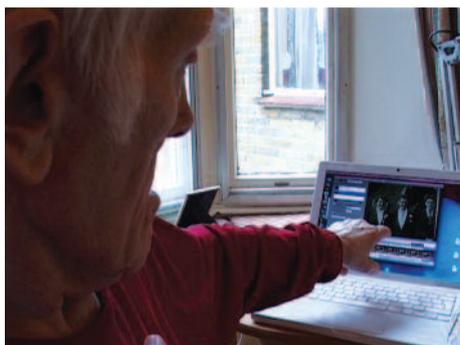
about one service user Sara’s amazing story – a ready made film script. Forced to flee her home, Sara drove across the desert in a blue Vauxhall with her two daughters, a tortoise, a cat and a bottle of fishes. She had lost a son a few years before and was travelling through the Angolan desert to adopt a baby boy from “the Zulus”.

When we first started talking to Sara she was quite muddled in her recollection of events. However, later, when we had constructed the film set (out of a bag of sand!) she began to draw the characters from her story in the sand, and she became more relaxed and her delivery was lucid. The physical activity helped Sara to focus and tell her story. Also, up to this point staff had had no idea of her artistic abilities.

Learning new skills

None of the people with dementia we have worked with have been intimidated by the equipment or reticent to try something new, which has surprised some care staff and family carers. The repetitive action of moving objects in increments and pressing the capture (or ‘record’) button on the laptop becomes rhythmic and can even be soothing for people living with dementia.

Edward, a gentleman at Church Walk House with later stage dementia, had limited vocal communication and often got agitated. However, he showed immediate interest in the computer and during the animation helped us press the buttons and was fixated by images of his mother and his



Edward was captivated by images of his mother and brother



Jesse demonstrated how her dog Brett would be jealous of her husband

brother when they appeared on the screen. After the session staff remarked, “Don’t know what you’ve been doing to Edward... rarely seen him smiling that much.”

Engaging with play

Animation invites you to play, to suspend disbelief and to find ways of creating the illusion of reality. It invites problem solving and lateral thinking, and is a mentally stimulating activity that can be a constructive experience for all.

Jesse, an exuberant woman and resident at The Watermill, told us a story about her dog Brett and how he used to get jealous of her husband Norman. Brett would sometimes jump on Norman when they played board games together on the carpet, in a fit of canine jealousy. We simulated this anecdote with a chessboard and her treasured replica of Brett, which she kept in her cabinet. Jesse engaged with this virtual game play completely. She decided that she would be the white queen and Norman was definitely “on the black”. She was totally immersed in the metaphor: “He looks like a different dog now altogether doesn’t he...? He’s a real dog!”

Instant playback of the animation kept the interest going and meant that the anxiety of forgetting what she was doing or ‘losing her place’ was removed. It was very much her ‘show’, and pointing to the computer she said, “These are very good... are they expensive?”

Horace, resident at The Watermill, was a keen biker. He recounted, with much laughter and technical accuracy, the story of a girl who had fallen off the back of his motorbike. He was giving her a lift home from a dance and didn’t notice until he got home. We re-created this mishap using a roll of wallpaper and some magazines from which Horace chose his girlfriend and her outfit. He called his film ‘Slip Up’ and asked where we were planning to show it – he thought it would make a good children’s programme. Horace was happy to show us his many scars. There were other women who fell off his bike – but we never found out how many.



Horace's film reflected his love of motorbikes

A shared activity

Creating animated life stories together with care staff, family or friends promotes dialogue, co-operation and comprehension for everyone involved. At Church Walk House, resident Joan and her daughter Jo reminisced about the years they lived in Glasgow and the times they used to look after their neighbour's budgie. The 'cheeky' budgie's trick was to land on Joan's husband's glasses and roll coins off the table. Jo brought in a small replica blue and white budgie and the story was re-enacted on a bureau in the care home. Joan imitated the budgie's trill and they both fell about laughing as they collaborated on the budgie epic. It was very rewarding to see how much they enjoyed working together and how mutually empowering the experience was. After watching the film, we all pitched in with titles of possible 'Budgie' sequels: "Budgie learns Russian" "Budgie goes to Gibraltar", and so on. Then Joan contributes "Budgie falls in Love"? to which daughter Jo swiftly replies, "Oh no! That means I'll have to go back to the shop and buy the bloody green one!"

A valuable record

Preserving individual testaments is not only of historical importance, but gives vital information about the person. Ivy was a new arrival at The Watermill. Her key worker Donna knew very little about her. Ivy's family brought in a box of photographs and inside was a printed collection of her poems. Donna handed Ivy the poems and asked about her poetry. Ivy said that she "didn't know what that was". However, on opening the pages, Ivy immediately began reading out loud a poem she had written for her daughter Susan. The process of reading and sharing her poetry with her key worker



Joan recalled how a neighbour's budgie would land on her husband's glasses



Above: Ivy reading poems to her key worker Donna. Below: Ivy's daughter's birth book



helped her remember. "I forgot about them but it all comes back... it breaks my heart."

We recorded Ivy reading the poem and Donna (as part of her Frames of Mind® training) animated a 'cavalcade' of family photographs from the box to go with it. When Ivy saw the animation at The Watermills' screening, her recall was instant and she recited the poem word for word as the film played. Her daughter Susan was present. It was a very powerful moment.

Ivy's key worker, Donna, was not aware that she wrote poetry and said, "The process helped me to see Ivy as a real person, with a life and a past, not just a passive receiver of my care."

Training

We would like Frames of Mind® to be more widely available and sustainable and realise that the only way to do this is through training. At The Watermill staff training was an intrinsic part of the project. We felt it was essential that staff were allowed to produce their own animated life story, not only to understand the technical process but also to understand the relevance of the project. The empowerment from making their own film and telling their own story is key to their motivation.

At The Watermill we delivered Frames of Mind® training to five key workers and two managers. The project spanned five days and culminated in a screening of the films made by staff and residents. Staff were taken off their shifts for two days enabling them to focus solely on the training and make their

own animated life story. During the next three days we supported the staff as they practised their new skills working with the residents to make their films.

In the staff evaluation one member of staff remarked about the project:

At first I was very sceptical that this would benefit the tenants I care for, but when we began doing the animations with them, to see their faces was delightful. Doing the animations on a one-to-one basis was also very good because the tenants were talking about things that were important to them that they could remember. Also seeing the tenants using the laptops without being fazed by technology was also a plus.

The future

We are currently working in partnership with Central & Cecil to devise a Frames of Mind® project spanning several care homes, with the aim of exhibiting the work in a public exhibition. We are also hoping to collaborate with Susanna Howard, the poet and playwright, on a site-specific regional project.

Frames of Mind® films themselves have a historical and social value in their own right and deserve mainstream exposure. They are powerful testaments that can challenge preconceptions about ageing and dementia. But most of all the value of Frames of Mind® lies in the process and encouraging an attitude of living in the moment.

Kathleen's words (below) encapsulate what we have both learned from working with people with dementia. Kathleen is 93 and used to work the strip in Vegas: "I've always danced... It depends on the music. Sometimes there's music playing and I don't know what kind of dancing goes to it, and I have to make up a fresh step of some sort to go with it... but that's how I go through life. But as I say I'm 93... so I might as well enjoy what I'm doing while I'm doing it while I can."