

LEE LI MING
PROGRAMME IN
AGEING URBANISM

Literary Pursuits

Arts and Culture for the Elderly¹

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Creative writing is a tool that may be applied to promote mental health and wellbeing. Many studies have shown that the process of thinking retrospectively about one's life and communicating about one's life through the mechanism of writing and with younger generations can promote older adults' mental health and wellbeing.

The freewheeling nature of poetry has also been shown to return the gift of words to people with dementia. Words, which may be made up or written in free verse without the need for formal syntax to paint a picture, in turn provides a glimpse into the somewhat isolated world of the cognitively impaired.

¹ This is an evolving database. We will be adding more examples and cases over time.

Living Legends – New York City, NY, USA

The Living Legends programme was part of a New York University study to improve the psychosocial wellbeing of community-dwelling seniors and promote ageing in place. The programme was delivered in four NYC NORC (Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities) or senior centre sites and involved thirty-nine older adults who participated in a life review writing workshop.

Each week for eight weeks, a specific writing prompt was given to participants that related to a particular decade in their lives. During the workshop, which was led by study author Tracy Chippendale, participants learned about the life review writing and sharing processes. After the workshops, a subset of the participants also spent 90 minutes with a younger cohort of college students. During that time, they shared and discussed the content of their writing from the earlier workshop with the students.

Researchers found that the interactive exchange with young participants contributed to a significant increase in sense of purpose and meaning in life among older adults. The benefit was not observed in participants who solely attended the life review workshop.

Living Words – London, United Kingdom

Founded in 2007, the Living Words organization uses arts and literature to support people with dementia and their caregivers. The organisation works with 1) dementia patients to co-create poetry; 2) professional and family carers to support reflection and creative communication; and 3) the media to improve understanding and awareness about dementia among the wider public.

Living Words uses free speech and expression as tools to work with dementia patients. During conversations with people with dementia, Living Words facilitators use active listening techniques to record and shape patients' words into poems. Every word or sound is validated, including words that would normally not be used in everyday conversations. The poems are included in patients' medical notes, and assist caregivers to better understand and connect with their charges.

The Living Words Residency Programme is conducted in art centres, care and nursing homes, day centres, hospitals and community settings. The programme has produced publications and hosted performances and literature events, which have been well-received by audiences.

For nursing professionals, Livings Words provides training in a series of three workshops. The workshops aim to embed qualities such as mindfulness and shared experience in daily practice. Each residency runs as a five-stage programme, as seen in Box 1.

Box 1: Living Words Residency Programme

1. **Working one-to-one with individuals** with dementia to create Living Words Word Books. This is the main part of the programme.
2. **Working one-to-one with staff** to facilitate their understanding of the experiences of dementia patients participating in the programme.
3. **Every participant receives their own Living Words Word Book**, which is used to help build a communication bridge between staff, residents and relatives.
4. **Staff commit to a 'project'** and in doing so, the books and communication techniques from the workshop are embedded in practice.
5. **A sharing event is held** where staff, residents and relatives come together to share words and poems. Certificates are also distributed.

Source: Arts in Health,
[http://www.livingwords.org.uk/dementia-](http://www.livingwords.org.uk/dementia-treatment/)

treatment/, Accessed 20 October 2016.

Muthirrai முத்திரை (Impression) – Singapore

Muthirrai முத்திரை is an intergenerational Tamil writing programme and community arts project. It was piloted in 2015 as part of the Silver Arts initiative organized by the National Arts Council. It was facilitated by the artistic director of Avant Theatre, G. Selva, and guest speakers representing different Tamil literary forms.

The programme involved a group of six people – three youths and three older adults – who met from July to August 2015 to explore several literary genres: short stories, poetry, essays and plays. Over eight sessions, they discussed and analysed selected readings before creating their own works of literary expression in a guided writing process. This culminated in a reading and sharing presentation in September 2015. Some of the written works have been published on the Muthirrai microsite.

10 x 10 – Singapore

10 x 10 is an intergenerational writing programme organized by local literary journal, Ceriph, in collaboration with the National Arts Council. It involved ten young writers

(aged 16 to 25) who were paired with ten seniors (aged 52 to 79). Over six writing sessions, the paired writers explored their memories and lives. The aim of the project was to form a “literary bridge” between the younger and older writers and encourage artists to work with the community.

Over two months, participants were introduced to literary concepts through creative prompts and literary devices, which lent the impetus to their writing. The programme culminated in 100 pieces of poetry and prose that were bound into a booklet and distributed at the National Library Building.

Older participants responded positively to the programme. One participant explained that the programme had “awoken a dormant creative streak” in them. In addition, one participant is experimenting with keeping a diary in haiku form, while another is applying techniques learned through the programme to write an autobiography.

Known by Heart – St. Paul, MN, USA

Located within the Creative Enterprise Zone in St. Paul, *Known by Heart* focuses on working with older adults living in the area to deliver “Better Living Through Poetry”. They partner with theatres, writing programmes

and libraries to offer poetry performance events, workshops and classes. In a free writing workshop for older adults, participants discussed poems and writing in order to generate inspiration for their own pieces. They also learned about the basics of poetry.

Founder and teaching artist Naomi Cohn observed that for many participants, getting to class is a challenge in itself as many are frail or wheelchair-bound and thus dependent on dedicated transportation. Nonetheless, Naomi notes that their shared love of writing and poetry has helped to forge bonds between participants outside the classroom, thereby creating a self-organising community where relatively frail students push their wheelchair-bound peers to class, and students with memory issues receive reminder calls from less forgetful classmates.

Sources:

Writing Program with Student Interaction Creates Sense of Purpose for Seniors, <http://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2015/june/writing-program-with-student-interaction-creates-sense-of-purpose-for-seniors.html>, Accessed 21 October 2016; Living Legends: Inspiration and Education for the Next Generation of Health Professionals, http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/ot/projects/Living_Legends, Accessed 21 October 2016; Living Words, <http://www.livingwords.org.uk/>, Accessed 19 October 2016; *Poems offer glimpse into dementia patients' inner*

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