Community engagement with heritage-based resources through online platforms

This article is a companion piece to the work reported by Smith et al in the previous issue of the Journal of Dementia Care. While the earlier work focused on the use of a new life story platform on a hospital ward, this article considers engagement with the life story platform and a related heritage-based resource in a broader community setting. [wording to be adapted based on when both articles are actually published]

Background

Heritage can play an important role in maintaining and improving wellbeing, with historic places and assets – and related interventions such as object handling – having *"a wide range of beneficial impacts on the physical, mental, and social wellbeing of individuals and communities"* (Pennington et al, 2019: p73). However, the focus so far has tended to be on the benefits of physically visiting a heritage site (Fujiwara et al, 2014). This can be a barrier to many individuals, including those with dementia, for a variety of reasons such as travel, cost, accessibility, and more recently restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is particularly challenging when the physical environment at a heritage site is not dementia friendly and, by its very nature, is difficult to adapt to become so.

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of maintaining social connections, not just at a personal level, but also in terms of accessing culture and arts activities remotely. While the pandemic has encouraged museums and other heritage and cultural organisations to explore different options around online and virtual access, many were already working in this area pre-pandemic[1]. Having options available to enable people to connect with heritage in a way that doesn't require them to physically visit a venue or historic site can therefore be beneficial.

Engaging with heritage can also help to prompt reminiscence by triggering people's memories. People generally enjoy talking about their memories and can often see the importance of recording their memories (Gridley et al, 2016). Reminiscence and life story work are often recommended for people with dementia (Age UK Sheffield, n.d.; Dementia UK, 2022; SCIE, 2020) as a way of encouraging communication and helping to find out more about individuals to improve care. It enables people with dementia to share their stories and what is important to and valued by them, while allowing others to potentially see them in a new way through stories that may otherwise not arise in day-to-day interactions.

Sharing life stories goes beyond helping people to understand and appreciate others. They are also socially and culturally important, helping to provide a collective view of wider society. They offer the ability to see different views of everyday life and share informal experiences that would otherwise be lost or overlooked by official records.

With this in mind, the Worcester Life Stories project aimed to combine digital technology and heritage to promote inclusion and connect community networks through reminiscence and enable the easy production of online life story books. Consequently, two online platforms enabling users to engage with heritage-based resources were developed focusing on different aspects of life story and reminiscence.

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[1] https://econsultancy.com/how-museums-are-using-immersive-digital-experiences/

However, given the extra connection with the local community and environment that Worcester Life Stories embodies, there may also be wider benefits for those using it than simply aiding memory. Through engaging with shared history, the project has the potential to help people connect to others and become involved in sharing their own local knowledge and experiences. Worcester Life Stories users can contribute their memories and artefacts to the platforms, adding further to 'civic memory' and their own sense of community participation, integration and self-worth, with the wellbeing benefits that is known to bring.

The two online platforms

Know Your Place Worcester (KYPW)[2] is a freely accessible online resource based on the Know Your Place Bristol website[3], but specifically for Worcester. Hosted by Worcester City Council, it joins eight other locations across the country that have adapted the website for their own area. The platform allows people to overlay and compare different maps of Worcester and see how areas have evolved over the years. Users are also able to click on the maps to explore various images, memories and records uploaded by others, as well as link to a host of digitised photographs and Historic Environment Records. This allows people to learn more about areas of Worcester that they may have a connection with. Users can also upload their own photographs and memories of Worcester and share them with other users via a 'community layer'.

Life Stories Herefordshire and Worcestershire (LSHW)[4] is an online platform hosted by Herefordshire & Worcestershire Care and Health NHS Trust. It is free to all residents of Worcestershire and Herefordshire and allows people to create their own digital life story book. Each book is split into different chapters, which are fully customisable. You can upload your photos, text, audio and video, even recording your own audio clips within the book to accompany images that you're adding. You can also add media from the internet and KYPW by copying a web link. You can add as much or as little to your book as you like and can add to it over time rather than having to do it all in one go. Users can choose to share their book, or selected chapters from it, with other people or export it as a pdf or video.

The LSHW website also hosts free Life Packs containing photographs, other images and videos around a common theme. These can be used separately from the Life Story books, or the content can be linked to a book.

The evaluation

A previous evaluation by Smith et al (2023) focused on the introduction and use of the LSHW platform on a hospital inpatient ward for people living with dementia. The exploratory study found that the platform was positively viewed by staff who had been trained how to use it, while patient observations also showed increased engagement with digital life story sessions.

The Association for Dementia Studies, University of Worcester, was commissioned to evaluate the impact of the two platforms and gain an understanding of how they are being used in community rather than medical settings. It also had a broader remit beyond focusing on people living with

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[2] https://kypworcester.org.uk/
[3] http://www.kypwest.org.uk/explore-the-map/
[4] https://life-stories.hacw.nhs.uk/

dementia. The evaluation comprised two key activities: online surveys to see how people were using the platforms; interviews and focus groups with people involved in adding to the platforms and using them with others either in a group or one-to-one capacity.

Interview and focus group participants were provided with project information and required to give informed consent. All interviews and focus groups were recorded with permission of the participants. As the survey was anonymous, participants were provided with project information at the start of the survey and required to confirm that they had read the information, were over the age of 18, and were happy to participate in the survey.

Two focus groups and four interviews were conducted with a total of 10 individuals including staff and volunteers at a museum, staff working on the Herefordshire Coffee and Memory Bus, and an oral historian with experience of facilitating group sessions. There was a roughly even split of participants with experience of the KYPW and LSHW platforms, with a few individuals having experience and knowledge of both. Thirty-three survey responses were received. While the overall evaluation considered the wider user of the platforms, this article focuses on the findings relating to their impact on people affected by dementia.

Findings relating to KYPW

While KYPW is essentially a resource for people to use in terms of looking at maps, the evaluation identified that it was also useful as part of an ongoing process that engages people and communities at different levels. KYPW can support oral history and reminiscence activities, but it was recognised that not everyone can do reminiscence work or deliver sessions. You need the right skills, and you also need to know how to adapt those skills to work successfully with different groups.

It is also a good resource to use in an ad-hoc way to explore topics 'in the moment' in response to comments that arise from wider discussions and conversations. For example, a user can actively search for content that ties in with what people are talking about. A key factor of this, especially when working with people living with dementia, is the ability to find relevant maps, photos or information quickly.

Having all the KYPW content available online in one place is convenient but working online does not necessarily suit everyone. For example, when working with older people, people living with dementia, or in group situations, people may be less keen or able to view things on a screen unless it is projected onto a big screen. One solution was to print out photographs in advance so that people had physical, tangible copies to hold, view and pass around. Facilitators found that physical copies of the photos were *"very, very popular with everybody"* and *"they did stimulate a lot of conversations"*.

Although the ability to add and find different types of media (e.g. audio clips, video clips) in the community layer was not well known, it was felt that this could enable more people to engage with the platform, especially when people may have visual or perceptual difficulties. Encouraging people to share information to the community layer not only adds to the richness of the platform for others to benefit from, but also gives power to the individual when their experiences are captured in their own words, especially in the form of audio recordings.

Overall, the KYPW maps and photos were found to trigger a lot of memories, and not just for people affected by dementia. There was a recognition though that while the historic images are good, those

relating to living memory tended to be more popular and generate more interest. For example, people found it easier to engage and connect with images from within their lifetime than a historical image of the same location.

Findings relating to LSHW

As with KYPW, the evaluation found that LSHW was more than just a place for people upload their life stories. The life story element of the platform acts as a bookend as it provides a prompt or stimulus to initiate life story conversations, then a repository to record those stories. The Life Packs can be used to support conversations by helping to trigger memories or respond to topics that may arise.

Perceptions of life stories can influence a person's willingness to engage with such activities, and sometimes when working with people living with dementia there was found to be a need to change how life story work was approached. Some people with dementia, especially if they are relatively newly-diagnosed, may not see the need to capture their life story and wait until they are either at imminent risk of losing their memories or have already started to do so. For others, there can be a feeling that starting to write down your life story is an admission that you are on a downward path, which can have negative connotations.

Different approaches were tried when engaging people with the LSHW platform. While still focusing on the care angle, one option was to encourage people to consider what might happen if they were cared for by someone who did not know them, and how knowing a person's life story could improve this experience. Other options considered the broader 'social relevance' angle by tapping into the heritage and cultural aspect of the platform and how it captures different perspectives on everyday life, getting people thinking about having interesting stories rather than focusing on their dementia. These approaches can help to change the narrative around life stories as it can be easy to emphasise the importance of capturing information before it is forgotten, rather than the wider range of benefits that LSHW offers. Having someone take the time and interest in your life story also shows people that they matter and are valued by others, and it may be the first time that they have ever been asked about different aspects of their lives.

A person's motivation for starting a life story can also be important. Where it was felt to be a carer or family member 'making' a person capture their life story, it did not work as well. When working with individuals, each conversation must be judged carefully as some people are just not interested in talking about their life story. Essentially, when introducing the LSHW platform, and indeed life stories more generally, it is important to consider how you frame it and adapt it on an individual basis.

It was noted that introducing LSHW to individuals who are already in a care or support setting can be easier. This suggests that if someone is in a position where they have already lost some level of independence, they may be more willing to share their story, or can see the benefits of doing so, than someone who is still living independently at home.

There was an overall feeling that using the LSHW platform would work well in care settings, particularly if staff are able to sit and talk to people rather than having a fixed schedule of activities. Staff would also already have established relationships with residents, while an unknown facilitator

may have to spend time establishing a rapport and building trust before being able to elicit any stories. However, regardless of existing relationships, it can be tricky to start life story conversations when faced with a blank page. The Life Packs can help with prompts, but the facilitator would need to have the skills to tailor these on an individual basis. The Life Packs were also felt to be useful more generally as they can be printed to provide hard copies of images that can be passed around.

Being able to print the life story book was appreciated, especially as people tend to have an expectation that there will be a physical copy of their completed book to hold and look through. This is particularly useful for people who may be less comfortable using technology, as they can be supported to create their life story book but still have a tangible output. The ability to use different media was also a beneficial way of engaging with the LSHW platform. People can capture their own stories in their own words through audio recordings, which can be powerful. Personal photos and video clips can also be added to a life story book, making it an accessible way of engaging the different senses.

Conclusion and discussion

This evaluation complements previous work (Smith et al, 2023), identifying that KYPW and LSHW are both flexible and versatile platforms that can be used in a variety of ways by and with different audiences, including people with dementia, in community settings. The two platforms help to instigate and develop conversations and activities, promoting reminiscence and triggering memories. Having resources available within the platforms helps to provide a common topic of discussion that enables everyone to be involved, including family members and staff in care settings who can learn more about the person with dementia. Consequently, people are given the opportunity to share their stories, and everyone is valued as an individual with their own experiences. Additionally, people can share their own knowledge for the benefit of others, contributing to their own sense of wellbeing.

From a dementia perspective, the heritage aspect can be used to help promote the platforms in terms of their wider social and cultural relevance. This can make engagement a more positive experience as people can feel part of a bigger initiative beyond themselves, instead of focusing on reminiscence and how it may relate to a person's dementia. The platforms are also conducive with ad-hoc conversations which can support people with dementia 'in the moment' and put them at the heart of a conversation. Combining technology and heritage to create these two new platforms could therefore be of significance to help support people affected by dementia, their families, and carers.

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Key points

- Two new online platforms have been developed to enable users to engage with heritage-based resources
- Both platforms encourage ongoing engagement and interaction at different levels
- They can be used to prompt or initiate conversation in both ad-hoc and pre-planned sessions, either in a one-to-one or group setting
- Although online, both platforms embrace multimedia and include resources that can be printed to aid engagement
- The heritage and cultural aspects of the platforms can change the narrative around reminiscence and life story work to focus on social relevance and community participation

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