

Enabling Approach in Museum Projects for persons with dementia*

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In this article Museum Visit Projects, directed to persons with dementia, family members and operators, are presented.

These Projects are framed in a specific modality of interpersonal relationship developed in Italy in the early 2000s: the *Enabling Approach*^{1,2}. They are considered as an opportunity to gain the following objectives:

- to facilitate museum visits also for persons with dementia and their family members,
- to facilitate the expression of *Basic Abilities* by persons with dementia,
- to facilitate a *Happy-enough Coexistence* between persons with dementia, family members and operators.

Here below, the Project “With Many Voices” realized by the Palazzo Strozzi Foundation in Florence, Italy, is presented as an example. This Project was initially based on the *TimeSlips*³ method of Ann Basting, and after was enhanced with the *Enabling Approach*.

1.The Museum

The Museum is presented here as a place in which *Freedom, Creativity, and Happiness* inhabit.

1.1.The Museum as a place of freedom

From the point of view of the *Enabling Approach*, the museum can become a place in which two freedoms meet: that of the artist, free in the production of the artwork, and that of the observer, free in the fruition of the artwork.

1.1.1.The freedom of the artist

The artist is free to create his piece (painting, sculpture, installation...) as he wants, following his inspiration and expressing his own world, with the methods of his choice. The world that he expresses is his own and the methods chosen are only those that are most suitable *from his point of view*. The artist creates what he wants, as he wants, following his own inspiration.

The artistic language can be considered as a form of communication, but it has a peculiar characteristic: the artist expresses something, communicates his own message, but does not expect the observer to perceive the same message as he has conceived it.

The artist produces for the joy of producing, not necessarily with the objective of communicating or being understood. I like to think that the piece of art is a message released by the artist and that the observer has the freedom to extract from this piece what he is able to and what he wants to extract.

In this sense, the artwork is a stimulus that induces emotions and interpretations in the observer. There is no correct or incorrect interpretation. Therefore, in my opinion, artwork has more value if it is able to elicit many different emotions and interpretations.

If we want to consider art as a form of communication, the artistic communication is not perfectly bi-directional, it does not search for a strict correspondence between the message released by the artist and the message received by the observer. The art aims to elicit multiple diverse responses from the observer.

1.1.2. The freedom of the observer

Every observer of a piece of art reacts in his way. He has a personal reaction that is only his own: the reaction of the observer is not right or wrong, it's only *his own*. The observer is free to react as he wants.

This freedom is the motivation for which even persons with dementia can feel free in front of **an** artwork.

1.1.3. The suffering of persons with dementia

One of the major problems of persons with dementia is derived from the feeling of inadequacy in facing activities of daily life. Problems with memory, language, orientation, recognition, and executive functions create the feeling of insecurity in persons with dementia. When a person with dementia speaks, moves or acts, he often makes errors and, therefore, his caregiver feels obliged to correct him.

Feeling in error, inadequate, and insecure is the source of continued suffering for persons with dementia. It becomes a constant state of being which creates depression and inhibits any free expression: a person in advanced stage dementia tends to stop speaking, doing, and moving; he tends to close inside himself, become isolated and stop communicating.

1.1.4. The opportunity of museum visits

The museum visit offers persons with dementia a great opportunity: during a guided visit they can feel free to observe the piece of art, to comment and interpret it, and to feel and share emotions. They can choose what they want to observe, how and if they want to comment, and whether to speak or remain silent. Finally, what they say is not right or wrong, it's simply *their own free reaction* in front of a piece of art. The reaction of the observer, even those with dementia, are rooted in their history, culture and personality, and in their memories. In other words, in front of a piece of art persons with dementia feel free to inhabit their own *Possible world*, a world in which they want to inhabit and in which they enjoy inhabiting.

1.2. The Museum as a place of Creativity and Happiness

As we talked about freedom previously, the Museum is also a place in which creativity and happiness inhabit. The creativity of the artist producing the piece of art can meet with the creativity of the words spoken by the observer with dementia: as the artist lives in his own *Possible world* and creates a piece of art, so does the observer with dementia allow himself to inhabit his own *Possible world*, a world in which he can create images, emotions and words without fear of being in error or being judged.

As the painter with his paintbrush creates figures that can be variously interpreted, so does the observer create stories with his words which can be more or less comprehensible, but which are *significant for him*.

As the artistic production answers to the artist's need to create and express himself, so does the production of words and creation of stories answer the needs of the observer.

The satisfaction of the need to create, to express himself and to share emotions elicits pleasure in the artist as well as in the observer, a pleasure which is additional to the pure aesthetic enjoyment.

1.3. The operator as a facilitator

The geriatric or museum operator should be conscious that the Museum is a place in which *Freedom, Creativity, and Happiness* can inhabit. To realize this, his role consists of facilitating the free expression of visitors, with specific regard to their *Basic Abilities* (Speaking, Communicating, Emotional, Negotiating, and Deciding Ability). A method suitable for this purpose is the *Enabling Approach*.

2. The Enabling Approach

All forms of dementia are chronic and progressive. Today it is well-known that Alzheimer's disease begins several years before clinical evidence. In fact, problems of memory (amnesia), attention, language (afasia), executive functions and motor functions, as well as difficulties in performing finalized actions (apraxia), and in recognizing people and things (agnosia), appear after a long period of silent disease. Persons with dementia progressively lose their abilities, starting from the more complex, followed by the more simple abilities such as those necessary for activities of daily life (washing and dressing oneself, eating...), however they conserve their ability to observe and enjoy artwork for a long time.

2.1. Definition

The *Enabling Approach* is a modality of interpersonal relationship based on the recognition of the interlocutor's *Basic Abilities*. The goal is a *Happy-enough Coexistence* between the speakers.

In geriatrics the *Enabling Approach* is a professional intervention that seeks to create an enabling environment in the location where frail elderly people live, with or without dementia.

In this environment they can exercise their *Basic Abilities*, especially the *Speech Ability*, as they are able to do - as they actually do - without feeling in error, and with the only aim of being happy in doing what they are doing.

The goal is to create the conditions for a *Happy-enough Coexistence* between elderly people, operators and family members.

2.2. Origin and intersections

The *Enabling Approach* was introduced in the early 2000s by the author and has spread through multi-disciplinary seminars and training courses organized by Anchise Group⁴ in Milan and across Italy. From the methodological point of view, the *Enabling Approach* is derived from direct experience in assisting people and from the study of verbal exchanges between elderly people and operators, which were recorded and carefully transcribed. The *Enabling Approach* has its roots in the concept of Therapeutic Alliance and is derived from Giampaolo Lai's method called "Conversazionalismo"⁵. It intersects with contributions of other authors: Naomi Feil with "Validation"; Carl Rogers, Tom Kitwood and The Bradford Dementia Group with "Person centered care"; Moyra Jones with "Gentlecare"; John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth with "Attachment Theory"; Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen with "Capability Approach"; Paul Watzlawick, Janet H. Beavin and Don D. Jackson with "Pragmatic of Human Communication"; and now intersects with Anne Basting's *TimeSlips* method for storytelling.

2.3. Basic Abilities

Within the *Enabling Approach*, there are five *Basic Abilities*:

- *Speech Ability*, which refers to producing and exchanging words, regardless of their meaning;
- *Communicating Ability*, by means of verbal, non-verbal and para-verbal language.
- *Emotional Ability*, which refers to having, expressing and sharing emotions, and recognizing those of the interlocutor.
- *Negotiating Ability*, which means working towards agreements or compromises through speaking (an expression of this ability is observed in the negotiation of the narrative theme during verbal exchanges).
- *Deciding Ability*, referring to daily choices even when cognitive deficits are present and in contexts where freedom of decision-making is much reduced (extreme expressions of this ability are represented by oppositional behaviors, relational closure and isolation from the world).

2.4. Fields of application

The Gruppo Anchise proposes the *Enabling Approach* in the care of older people, both in the presence or absence of cognitive deficits (including all types of dementia, particularly Alzheimer's disease). When an enabling environment is created, elderly people feel allowed to perform activities which they are capable of doing, in their own way, without feeling in error. The only purpose is to be as happy as possible, in doing what they are doing, in *their own way*, in the particular context in which they are.

2.5.Key concepts

The key concepts forming the foundation of the *Enabling Approach* are the *Recognition of Basic Abilities*, the *Recognition of Multiple Identities* (frail old people and people with dementia are not only people in need of assistance; in every person there are several stratified identities), the *Recognition of Possible Worlds* (the *World of Before* and the *World of After*, the *World of Here* and the *World of There*) and the *Recognition* of the point of view and value system of persons with dementia.

2.5.1.Recognition of Basic Abilities

The *Recognition of Basic Abilities* is a complex activity which consists of:

- *Focusing attention* on each *Basic Ability* in the moment in which it appears, as it appears.
- *Identifying*, which means understanding and naming the *Basic Ability* that appears.
- *Accepting* that frail elderly people say what they say, express what they express, without interrupting or correcting them.
- *Facilitating* the emergence of *Basic Abilities* without judging them (*Basic Abilities* should not be judged as right or wrong).
- *Giving Effectiveness*, which means seriously considering what the speaker is expressing and, if appropriate, passing from words to action.

2.6.Tools

The *Enabling Approach* focuses attention on verbal exchanges between the speakers; the tools are listening and words. An operator employing the *Enabling Approach* would capture the *Basic Abilities* of the interlocutor as they occur and how they occur, and with their own verbal intervention they would give *Recognition* of these abilities. Verbal interventions of the operator (such as *Don't ask questions*, *Don't interrupt*, *Don't correct*, *Don't complete sentences*, *Listening*, *Respecting the silence and the slowness*, *Accompanying with the words*, *Giving back the narrative theme*, *Echoing response*, *Supplying fragments of autobiography*, *Recognizing the emotions*, *Looking for a Happy Meeting Point (HMP)*, etc.) are inspired by *Conversational Techniques* of "Conversazionalismo" so they are developed within the Gruppo Anchise.

2.7.Settings

To create an enabling environment, it is possible to use the *Enabling Approach* in both specific and non-specific settings.

Specific settings include:

- *Welcome Conversations*, when elderly people enter assisted living locations.
- *Individual Recognition Therapy*, based on the *Enabling Approach*.
- *Recognition Groups*, which are conversation groups for people with dementia.
- *ABC Groups*, which are groups for relatives of people with dementia directed by a therapist.
- training courses for operators.

Non-specific settings include:

- All professional activities (such as nursing, medical, recreational and rehabilitation activities),.
- Informal meetings of everyday life.

Therefore, this approach can be adopted by all caregivers (both operators and family members), with all frail elderly people, in every context, 24 hours a day.

In this way *Enabling Approach* can become like the air which people breathe.

3.The Project *With many voices*

In 2009, the first contact between operators from the Nursing Home Vincenzo Chiarugi (Empoli, Florence, Italy) and Ann Basting (Center on Age&Community, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee), creator of the *TimeSlips* method, was initiated. Carla Bagnoli and Luca Carli Ballola acted as a bridge and imported into Italy a new attitude to be adopted for persons with dementia. Starting from the observation that the disease robs the memory, but the persons with dementia continue to be a person, Ann Basting launched an idea: *Forget memory, try imagination*. This method consisted of facilitating storytelling by persons with dementia. The operators of the Nursing Home Chiarugi were joined with those of Associazione Anna and began to utilize the method with persons of dementia residing in the Nursing Home.

Following this, they involved the team from the Education Department of the Palazzo Strozzi Foundation in Florence (Cristina Bucci, Irene Balzani) to apply the *TimeSlips* method within an original project of museum visits called *With many voices*⁶.

The project is linked with other partly similar projects which are being implemented by MoMA in New York (*Meet Me*⁷), the Royal Academy of Arts in London (*InMind*⁸), the Prado Museum in Madrid (*El Prado para Todos*⁹ - *Prado for everyone*), the Gallery of Modern Art in Rome, (*La memoria del bello: percorsi museali per malati di Alzheimer*¹⁰ - *The memory of the beautiful: museum visits for people with Alzheimers*).

In the case of Florence, it involves museum visits for persons with dementia and their family members, during normal public visiting hours, conducted in conjunction by museal and geriatric operators.

While it was being implemented, the Project incorporated the *Enabling Approach*, which inserted it into a frame that placed the focus on the person and the words he is able to produce, as he is able to. The person with dementia, in fact, is then considered in his identity of speaker (a subject who can produce words), without caring that what is being said is right or wrong, but attributing value to the words simply because they are spoken by a person who wished to speak them, independently of the communicative value of the words themselves.

3.1.A cycle of meetings at Palazzo Strozzi

Every cycle is constituted of four meetings of one hour, guided by operators of the Education Department together with specialized geriatric operators.

In the first three meetings a different piece of art is chosen for observation: everyone observes and the operators valorize the words that emerge, as they emerge, to create a collective story, as the group is able to create it. The story is transcribed by an operator during the visit, in order to valorize and retribute it the narrators.

The last meeting is instead dedicated to a creative workshop in which pieces of paper, pencils and other materials are utilized: the words are accompanied with objects, there is a crossing from watching and speaking to doing, from being an observer and a narrator to being a creator of objects and creative pieces.

3.2.An example of storytelling

The group stops in front of a painting of John Singer Sargent *At Torre Galli: Ladies in a Garden*¹¹ (lent by Royal Academy of Arts, London, UK) and they observe with attention. An operator distributes perfumed tissues. The fragrance creates a link between the situation represented in the painting and the situation that is present here and now. Words and emotions commence to flow. The operator listens without interruption and correction, channeling the reactions of participants with open and evocative questions such as *where are we? what are we smelling in the air?* In this way, free and collective storytelling begins. Another operator transcribes the story:

"I have little memory but this does not shock me. All is good.

*There are two structures of different constructive times.
The young women, the well-maintained carpet, the flat road in the middle is the recent part,
the background is more old, there are rocks, old marble and peeling walls.
The wall is the confine that closes this garden, behind there are trees, a hill,
a convent and a palace with a lodge facing us, at the end of the arch a little woman,
she is a Mother Mary who prays on a basin, then there is another basin, where there is water that
falls down.
I hear something frying... shhhhh... it's the water.
There are flowers, hollows of lemons flowering”.*

3.3.The role of operators

In the Project *With many voices* the operators highlight the words of visitors with dementia, when they emerge, as they emerge, and valorize them using the *Enabling Approach*.

3.3.1.Persons with dementia, family members and operators

Until now, I discussed persons with dementia and operators, and I proposed the *Enabling Approach* as a method which creates space for freedom, creativity and happiness.

I left out the relationship between operators and family members, only for lack of time. This relationship, indeed, requires a particular attention because it is of great importance for the achievement of results.

It is not easy, for example, to join freedom of speaking of persons with dementia with that of family members: the relative usually is more quick in beginning to speak and in this way he can inhibit the verbal expression of elderly people. A preliminary meeting with family members is necessary to explain the sense of the project and to avoid this occurrence.

The Project can give the best results if operators are able to join the freedom, creativity and happiness of persons with dementia with that of family members and their own.

This is the enabling art of conducting a group.

3.4.Expected and additional positive results

The expected results include:

- an effective participation of people with dementia and their family members during the guided visit,
- an effective expression of *Basic Abilities* by the person with dementia,
- the experience of a *Happy-enough Coexistence*, here and now, during the visit.

However, during a visit additional positive results are obtained. These results are not searched for but we obtain them anyhow:

- an expansion of social relationships,
- overcoming stigmas associated with the disease,
- the joy of the fruition of the art,
- the revival of memories.

3.5.How to achieve success

The success of the Project depends on a specific visit preparation and training of operators.

3.5.1.Guided Museum visit preparation

The Museum visit should be carefully prepared:

- *Preliminary meeting on organizational training for caregivers*: the caregivers are invited to participate in order to become better experts in the use of listening and words. They can achieve this by learning the techniques employed by operators to facilitate the emergence of words from persons with dementia.

- *Composition of the group*: 5-8 persons with dementia, sufficiently homogenous on the degree of dementia, each accompanied by their caregiver.
- *Criteria of inclusion*: Persons with any degree of dementia: mild-moderate (Mini Mental State Examination with score 10-24), moderate-severe (MMSE 6-9), severe (MMSE < 6).
- *Criteria of exclusion*: severe behavioral symptoms associated with dementia (wandering, psychomotor agitation, aggressive behavior).

3.5.2. Operator training

The attention of participants is focused on the piece of art, while the attention of operators is focused on people with dementia and on the functioning of the group.

Therefore, the operators should be experts in knowing and valorizing the piece of art, and above all, in connecting with and valorizing people with dementia.

It is important to note that

- The words of people with dementia are unchangeable and should be accepted as they are said.
- The words of operators should indeed be chosen to obtain specific results.
 - the emergence of words and *Basic Abilities*,
 - a *Happy-enough Coexistence* between people with dementia, their family members and operators.

In groups of people with mild stage dementia, the artistic-cultural commentary by the operators is important and is able to enrich and give recognition to the participant's artistic-cultural competency. In groups of people with severe stage dementia, the artistic-cultural commentary by the operators can have positive or negative effects. In some cases, it can elicit happiness and facilitate the emergence of other commentary. In other cases, it can actually elicit frustration, confusion and isolation; it can inhibit the free expression of people with dementia.

4. Summary and perspectives

The Project of guided museum visits demonstrate that it is possible to make the Museum and art accessible to people with dementia.

The guided visits can become a therapeutical instrument, which can facilitate

- the expression and conservation of Basic Abilities (Speaking, Communicating, Emotional, Negotiating and Deciding Ability);
- a *Happy-enough Coexistence* between elderly people, operators and family members.

To develop and diffuse the Project, it is important to

- create a network among the Museums,
- further develop the training of operators.

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