



Nicola Abraham and Ma.  
Victoria Ruddock

SUPPORTING  
PATIENTS LIVING  
WITH DEMENTIA  
DURING A  
PANDEMIC

Digital theatre and educational spaces

Education Studies

Collection Editor  
**JANISE HURTIG**

LIVED PLACES  
PUBLISHING



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## **Abstract**

This book tells the story of how digital applied theatre was adapted to support patients living with dementia across hospitals in a pandemic. The challenges, successes and opportunities that this unusual project, Innovating Knowledge Exchange, created are shared in this book that acts as a guide to person-centred online practice. The narratives of the book share insights into horizontal team structures as ways of supporting students learning this evolving practice that adapted to COVID-19 restrictions and in doing so opened up a whole new world of possibilities for creative practice to support the wellbeing of older adult patients in acute hospital contexts. We hope you find the journey of the evolution of this new type of practice as useful and exciting to read as we have to live, dream and advance.

## **Keywords**

Dementia; healthcare; higher education; applied theatre; practical experience; stories; students; virtual learning; pedagogy; education studies.

# Notes on contributors

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Science degree in Nursing from the Philippines and has extensive experience working with older adults living with dementia and experiencing delirium in both hospitals and care home contexts. Victoria has additionally undertaken team leadership support in a nursing home and work as a private nurse for people living with dementia. Victoria has also taken part in a TEDx talk about her work facilitating applied theatre projects in acute dialysis wards and Medicine for the Elderly wards with students.

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# Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Jo James for her inspirational “say yes” approach to collaboration and the Office for Students and Research England for funding our work.

# Learning objectives

This book addresses the following five learning objectives. The aim is to enable readers to step into the shoes of the practitioners who have worked with us, across disciplines, in order to learn about dementia and applied theatre in care contexts.

## Objective one

- To engage readers in a journey of discovery through vignettes of project experiences to help support understanding about the ways in which facilitators can work responsively online in acute hospital settings with patients living with dementia.

## Objective two

- To offer insights into best practice working digitally within arts and health hospital contexts.

## Objective three

- To provide suggested assignments to support students' learning and development as community arts and health practitioners creating practice to improve wellbeing.

## **Objective four**

- To develop readers' understanding of the importance of reciprocity in digital applied theatre projects to avoid extractive ways of working that aren't as dementia-friendly as they could be.

## **Objective five**

- To think about how we navigate social identities in digital spaces to build connections through creativity.

# Introduction

We begin our tale in the middle of a global pandemic. We locate our story in acute hospitals within Medicine for the Elderly wards in London, UK, working with people living with dementia through digital applied theatre projects. We have two main characters in this tale: Vic, a dementia specialist healthcare support worker, and Nicky, a senior lecturer in applied theatre Practices. This may sound like an odd pairing to you, but for us the projects we discuss and the journey we share in this book are the culmination of five years of collaborative projects between applied theatre practitioners and a dementia care team who work within one of the biggest hospital trusts in the United Kingdom, Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust. With funding from Research England and the Office for Students, we were able to more than quadruple the number of projects we offered to creatively engage with patients living with dementia in hospital wards.

The pandemic and lockdown hit in March 2020, which could have thrown our plans to upscale our in-person work into disarray. However, as a partnership, we are dedicated to innovation; our one rule for working together is to “say yes” to ideas and discover ways to make our ideas a reality. We decided to continue with our plans despite the pandemic for this reason, and for the added reason that the urgent need to support patients living with dementia only increased in the pandemic. This is because of the change in rules in hospitals and care homes that meant visitors were no longer allowed to see their relatives in person.

The impact of COVID-19 and long hospital stays has been detrimental for the wellbeing of patients and care home residents across the board, but particularly for people living with dementia. The projects we will discuss in this book are the result of collaborations between clinical specialist nurses; Jo James, consultant nurse in dementia and delirium and head of the dementia care team; and applied theatre practitioners working and studying in a drama school. Each project locates the patients who take part as artists at the heart of the work. There are six main projects that we make reference to as case study examples of practice in action. The projects are summarised below for context.

### **Auchi Street**

This is a collaborative film-making project that is facilitated with patients living with dementia and/or undergoing dialysis. The project creates a collective fictional narrative, which patients then help to script, cast, direct or perform. The project team of applied theatre practitioners then film and edit the piece to premiere on the ward for patients, staff, family and friends.

### **Wonder VR**

This is a project that usually happens one-to-one through a workshop that engages patients in creative tasks that explore places they like or would like to see. The stories are transformed into VR360 video experiences that students film and edit to present back to patients, in order to bring to life their stories as an immersive experience. This can help to transport a patient to a place they miss, would like to see or have invented.

### **Life in Lyrics**

This is a song-writing project that works one-to-one with patients living with dementia to engage in experiences of music. The

project is about sharing our love of music, singing along to our favourite songs, thinking about how we feel about music and forming ideas for an original song that is then co-written with patients, recorded and transferred to CD.

### **Hear Me Out**

This is a podcasting project that connects family, friends and patients in hospital. It is a storytelling project that shares recollections, current thinking and future dreams and often involves recordings from siblings and children. Recordings are then edited into one podcast that all parties can listen to, to hear one another's voices as a form of celebration of life stories and as a comfort when families are unable to be together because of the pandemic.

### **Intergen**

This is an intergenerational project that connects school children with patients living with dementia. The project has many models depending on the collaborative partners at the time and has involved collaborative storytelling, solving mysteries together and sharing stories of inspiration between patients and children/young people.

### **Your Story Your Way**

This project asks participants to think about stories that communicate an aspiration or cherished experience, explored through a creative workshop. The participants can then ask for their story to be represented in any way they wish. For example, we have had requests for audiobooks, animations, puppets, paintings, radio shows, music videos, poems and performances, to name but a few.



## Digital applied theatre

The term “digital applied theatre practice” underpins our values, ethics and the creative approach to all of our projects. So what exactly do we mean by this phrase? Applied theatre is an umbrella term that has been used to describe a set of practices that have similar traits. For example, often practices under this umbrella are focused around making theatre with, by and for communities (Prentki and Preston, 2009). Applied theatre practices are also concerned with participation, socio-political contexts, responsive cultural practice, development, challenging oppression and advocating for social changes; applied theatre means to use theatre as a tool to address these themes. The practices under the umbrella of applied theatre take place in a range of contexts including schools, prisons, hospitals, care homes, refugee centres, detention centres, community centres and on the streets. Practices working with communities are sensitive to cultural differences and seek to understand the interests, circumstances and context of the communities that they engage with to avoid neo-colonial models of practice that assume superiority of Western values and middle-class sentiments. Being open and responsive are core qualities inherent in applied theatre practices, and questioning the ethics of different approaches is the subject of much debate and ongoing critical thinking to help advance the field to continue being politically aware and engaged and to model best practice (Kerr, 2009). Applied theatre practice is responsive to the needs of the community and not only requires practitioners in this field to be artists leading participants as co-artists, but also seeks to be supportive of participants as a