

# Understanding people with dementia's experiences through involvement with photography and storytelling

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## Project setting

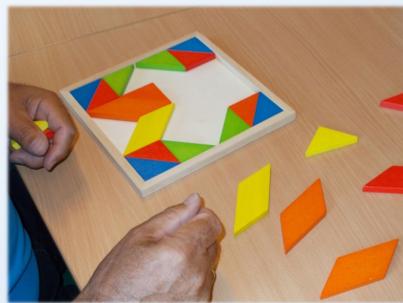
The project was set at Voksenskolen for Undervisning Og Kommunikation (VUK), a school for adult education and communication in Aalborg, Denmark.



VUK offers lifelong learning and a focus on *'what is possible instead of limitations'*, working with students to help them grow and develop<sup>1</sup>.

Classes are delivered for people with early stage dementia who attend the school as students. Attending classes in:

- ❖ Cognitive training
- ❖ Music therapy
- ❖ Art therapy
- ❖ Woodwork
- ❖ Computing
- ❖ History



## Project aim

To explore the student's experiences of being a student at VUK

## Method

Students were provided with a camera for 1 week, with instructions to take photographs of:

*Objects, places or things which have meaning to you as a student at VUK.*

10 students took part (5 Male, 5 Female), aged 67-83. Four weekly sessions were run with two groups of 5 students. Images and storytelling methods were used to explore what it meant to be a student at VUK. Students were supported by staff and researchers to take photographs and talk about the images. Each session was run on a different theme or activity:

- ❖ Week 1: Group poem<sup>2</sup>
- ❖ Week 2: Storyboard of a 'typical' day at VUK
- ❖ Week 3: Home and family life
- ❖ Week 4: Celebration and review



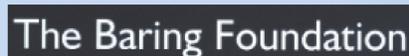
*"It is about being together and new experiences. The unique thing is that you are fed with things that you have forgotten."* (student)

## Thank you

The team would like to thank the staff and students at VUK for their support and participation with this project.

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- The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust and The Baring Foundation
- The University of Northampton
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## What does it mean to be a student at VUK?

- ❖ Student's look forward to what the day will bring
- ❖ Student's talked of the value of meeting new **'challenges'** and of **'positive learning'** and learning new skills
- ❖ Being a student supported their sense of identity and helped them feel they were contributing
- ❖ Student's had developed good friendships, and felt they were in a place where they were supported and with **'like minded people'**
- ❖ There was a lot of humour with other students and staff

**"We understand each other,  
We are each other's friends,  
There is also a friendship with the ladies!  
We love to talk to each other,  
It is easy to make friends,  
Friendship is behaving well to each other,  
We talk to each other and are equals, we  
are patient,  
Also the teachers can be a friend,  
Not everyone has a friend. It depends on  
your personality how you make friends; we  
don't all hug each other."**

An extract on friendship from Group B Storyboard

## What is the value of using photography and storytelling?

- ❖ Student's recalled pictures they had taken and identified that the images did not show the full experience of school life, some students therefore requested to take additional images
- ❖ Student's recognised themselves and peers in the pictures
- ❖ Photographs helped support memory of events
- ❖ Photographs aided in prompting the telling of stories
- ❖ Photographs enhanced group discussions

**"You can put a lot without using many words"** (student)

## Value of involvement

People with dementia are increasingly having a voice in research, not only as participants but also as active members of a research team. Photography and storytelling can support this involvement, providing benefits through:

- ❖ Increased self-confidence and knowledge<sup>3</sup>
- ❖ Improved quality of life<sup>4</sup>
- ❖ Wanting to help others<sup>5</sup>
- ❖ Services gain an understanding of the person's experiences
- ❖ Services can tailor activities and services to better support people's needs

## References:

- <sup>1</sup>Voksenskolen for Undervisning og Kommunikation (2015) <http://vuk-aalborg.skoleporten.dk/> [Accessed: 8<sup>th</sup> October 2015].
- <sup>2</sup>Collective Encounters (2015) *A Pocket Guide to Arts Activities for People with Dementia*. Liverpool: Collective Encounters.
- <sup>3</sup>Tanner, D. (2012) Co-research with older people with dementia: Experience and reflections. *Journal of Mental Health*, 21(3), 296-306.
- <sup>4</sup>Littlechild, R., Tanner, D. and Hall, K. (2014) Co-research with older people: Perspectives on impact. *Qualitative Social Work*, 0(00), 1-18.
- <sup>5</sup>Hellström, I., Nolan, M., Nordenfelt, L. and Lundh, U. (2007) Ethical and methodological issues in interviewing persons with dementia. *Nursing Ethics*, 14(5), 608-619.