

Conversations between the audience and artworks: A constructivist approach



In shaping successful conversations between people with dementia, their accompanying care partners and artworks, the key for cultural mediators is to provide learning opportunities to construct meaning from different points of view, where there is no such thing as one right answer. In this respect, it is important to remember that individuals with dementia are as heterogeneous as the general public. One educational paradigm that has the potential to meet this heterogeneity and guide a wide range of needs, interests and desires, is called constructivism.

A constructivist approach is based on the idea that learners construct their own knowledge out of a need to understand and interact meaningfully with the world around them. It recognises learning as an active process in which the learner constructs personal meanings and gives sense to their own learning experiences. So, when an interactive conversation is also constructive, information about the artwork is not presented as the so-called truth, but mediators help people with dementia to assign meaning to what they observe and experience.

A constructivist conversation thus values alternative perspectives that also increases people's motivation to explore and learn more. In line with this thinking, a variety of interpretations are valid regardless of whether they conform to an external or imposed standard of truth. When interpretations seem unrelated to the conversation or the work of art, the cultural mediator may ask for an explanation in order to become aware of the connection the participant is making.

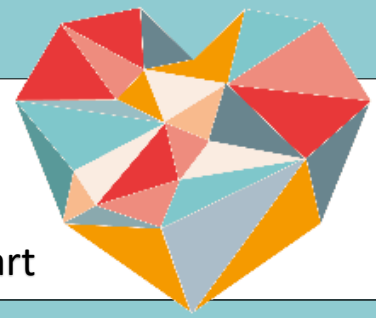
Using a constructivist approach offers people with dementia an opportunity for personal development and engagement with art.

The following tips can help cultural mediators to apply this approach while paying attention to the specific needs of people with dementia.



6 Constructivist tips

for shaping conversations between people with dementia and works of art



Stories

The stories of the people with dementia, their caregivers and the artwork are central to the conversation, not the story of the exhibition and the cultural mediator. There are as many stories as there are people involved in the conversation. The mediator does not need to focus on reminiscence techniques to construct stories, but can focus on a shared world created by imagination and associations.



An experience

The cultural mediator does not merely focus on showing works of art but puts a meaningful learning experience for people with dementia first. Involving elements of play can create optimal learning conditions and move beyond the roles of caregivers and patients. When playing, it is important to set rules (e.g. on positive behaviour such as giving each other space to contribute) and, in the case of people with dementia, to avoid competition or a specific end goal.



Conversation facilitator

The cultural mediator takes the lead in facilitating the conversation that supports looking at the artwork and builds on existing ideas shared by people with dementia. Central to this is creating a suitable learning environment for the conversation to take place in which the disease is not an issue. Important here is to always address people by name and make eye contact.



Self-reflection

Whether the cultural mediator achieves the desired results and thus provides lasting experiences for people with dementia and their caregivers can be assessed through conversations with them, but also through self-reflection. This is a necessary condition for a cultural mediator to adjust the often intuitive way of acting and to grow in applying a constructivist approach.



Two-way traffic

The mediator as a co-participant must respect three conditions to stimulate two-way communication: (1) consider all participants as equal contributors (e.g. use non-verbal cues if a person has communication difficulties); (2) show a genuine curiosity and interest in the participants' responses (e.g. listen, do not interrupt or supplement sentences to speed things up); and (3) create a safe atmosphere in which the conversation can take place (e.g. ask accessible questions and use an inviting tone).



Mediation Tools

Cultural mediators can use tools that are tailored to the group, the work, the exhibition and the vision of the artist and curator. For example, asking concrete questions prompts interaction with the works and among the participants. Another example is to pay attention to the sensory experience by using touch, for instance, to support their imagination and spontaneous reaction. Or comments from participants are repeated, for example, to help people with short-term memory loss to reorient.

