

8 | The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and a look into the future

Covid-19 challenged all of us, both the project partners in organizing this project and our cultural mediators in reaching people with dementia. In this chapter, we will highlight the challenges we and our cultural partners encountered in ensuring continuation. First, we will discuss Covid's impact on this project. Second, one of our cultural partners (Isabel Vermote, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium) will bring in the perspective of our cultural partners/mediators. Both examples will identify the challenges (financial, organisational, productional, ...) that Covid-19 posed, explain how these challenges were addressed, and elaborate on negative as well as positive implications for both organizers and participants. Third, we highlight some of the initiatives taken by cultural institutions worldwide to address the constraints Covid-19 posed to arts and culture for people with dementia. This aims to inspire cultural organisations in times of pandemics/restrictions or in reaching an audience that is not mobile anyway and therefore often excluded from social contacts and cultural participation.

8.1 | Strong and agile readiness for change of the project partners

As project managers and project participants in 'Dementia in Cultural Mediation', there have been new levels of challenges related to the coronavirus that spread in Europe and the rest of the world shortly after the DCUM project started. Luckily, the project group just managed to meet in Denmark for an important start-up seminar in November 2019.

Start-up meeting of the DCUM project consortium
@ Odense (Denmark) in November 2019



The perspective of the project partners

To meet the corona related challenges, it required special qualities, transformations and readiness to transform physical activities into digital environments. That challenge was taken up by the members of the project group and the cultural mediators who presented methods for use in cultural mediation with people living with dementia and showed their strong competencies in the use of audio-visual online presentations as well as dialogues and discussions between the presentations.

The following summarizes some pros and cons in relation to online activities, such as presentations, discussions, breaks, finances, ...

Pros:

1. Opportunity to invite more participants: presenters, cultural mediators, reference group members and others with interest in the area.
2. Opportunity for online enhancements from LTT-1 to LTT-2.
3. Informal social activities, like dancing. An extended opportunity for participation 'behind a screen'.
4. Re-prioritization of the economy between budget lines, without extensive administration.

Cons:

1. Lack of opportunity for informal networking, conversation and workshops between the presentations.
2. Occasionally technical issues regarding internet connections and limitations of the streaming software.
3. Limited opportunities for intercultural exchange between the partners due to cancellation of physical meeting in the different countries.

Tryouts have been limited due to restrictions regarding the coronavirus pandemic, but in Denmark the project partners from Odense managed to make a few cultural mediated walks, inspired by some of the presentations from the project partners in the webinars. The end-users have responded very well to these activities, being grateful for having the opportunity to experience a sort of normal life in a situation where they have been isolated, seeing only a very limited number of people.

The perspective from the cultural mediators and end-users

During the pandemic many found their way to digital art exhibitions all over the world, as a partial alternative for the non-digital offer that was temporarily less available. For Isabel Vermote and her colleagues - **art mediators from the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (Brussels)**, the main challenge during the Covid crisis was: **How to maintain**



Art and care in dialogue. © Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium

contact with their target groups, like people with dementia and their caregivers?

Direct contact, whether on-site (e.g., in nursing homes) or at the museum, is key to their approach. However, during Covid, the museum was closed for a long time, and the staff was asked to work from home. At first, the department of art education decided to shift focus towards digital communication, in organising for instance virtual tours, or producing videos. Soon, they discovered that these initiatives did not reach people with a vulnerable condition, for instance dementia. At the same time, the team felt that these people were especially affected by the corona crisis.

Therefore, from the beginning of the Covid crisis, the team of art mediators kept in touch with Brussels residential care centres and their regular partners in particular through amongst others regular phone calls or letters. A very successful initiative was the **'Four leaf clover' project**. The museum team presented four works on the same theme from their museum collection. They suggested that care centres could display these on an iPad or print them out, hang them up in the corridor or show them for example during meals. Next, the residents (but also volunteers and/or care staff) were asked to choose their favourite work. The participating centres received an enlarged poster of the most successful artwork.

Besides urging them to develop such creative initiatives, Isabel and her colleagues also see some positive repercussions about the Covid crisis. They finally had the time to evaluate their program for people with a health condition and write it down. This will lead to a publication in which the different care partners that the museum works with, describe how they experience the museum program: the positive aspects, but also the pitfalls and points of attention. Also, different expert organisations in art mediation, such as Culture and Democracy, Demos and Open Museum were asked to contribute to the publication. However, the team was extremely happy to be able to resume the guided tours as soon as it was possible again (first on site, extra muros, and later in the museum), for which there was a great demand. There was a clear need for people to get back together and talk about something different than corona. The team is unanimous: **nothing beats a live encounter, especially when working with art.**

8.2 | Good practices worldwide and (non-)digital innovation

Research shows that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on people with dementia. Not only are these people at relatively high risk of becoming seriously infected, they are also susceptible to social isolation (Numbers & Brodaty, 2021). Various initiatives arose to make art and culture more accessible and thus counteract the adverse effects of physical and social isolation on this group. Some have relied on professional and informal care networks to ensure the smooth functioning of their activities. Initiatives were taken that focused on technological or digital solutions. However, people with dementia are less likely to access or participate in online activities than the general population (Dowson et al., 2021). It was therefore promising that during COVID-19 the cultural sector also launched non-digital initiatives to combat digital exclusion. In some cases, initiatives were accompanied by research in order to better understand how arts and culture could alleviate isolation during the pandemic. However, continuing research in this area is important so that policy and practice can make informed decisions.

SOME INSPIRING EXAMPLES:



- Several museums across the globe have embraced **online exhibition initiatives**. FARO (2021) lists six types: virtual 360° tours, live tours, online expo or digital exhibition websites, digital storytelling and museum podcasts and online exhibitions in 3D. For example, in Bristol, Brunel's SS Great Britain, a museum ship, provided online sessions including a virtual tour of the ship using video footage to stay engaged with people with dementia (Alzheimer's Society, 2020). Another example is the Frye Art Museum (n.d.) in Washington offering a YouTube channel to engage with art. They developed short videos for adults living with dementia, such as



guided art discussions. A third example is the American Folk Art Museum (n.d.) in New York offering virtual folk art discussion sessions.

- In England, **several music making activities for people with dementia and their supporters have been transformed into an online format**, such as group singing which is the most widespread and accessible type of live music activity (Dowson et al., 2021). Activities range from live sessions (from fully interactive to semi or no interaction) to pre-recorded sessions and carer-facilitated sessions, using online resources. Dowson and colleagues (2021) examined the associated challenges and also formulated recommendations in terms of accessibility (technology), the well-being and safety of participants, the musical experience (quality control) and the practitioners, specifically the importance of self-preservation in order to carry out digital music activities in a sustainable way.
- A company in England received a grant to develop a six-week pilot programme for older people that helps them participate in **live, interactive artistic sessions online**. The sessions are based on cognitive stimulation therapy. Each participant can choose from nine disciplines (from photography and creative writing to history and music), based on their preference. The online sessions are designed to respond to everyday experiences or evoke memories. One of their biggest challenges was finding the right balance between human interaction and the technology itself (UK Research and Innovation, 2021).

8.3 | Social prescribing

Social activities, such as art and cultural activities, have a beneficial effect on health and wellbeing and are therefore subscribed by the general practitioner. This is called social prescription . Some countries, such as the United Kingdom, Canada and Denmark, are already applying it. In Montreal the Museum for Fine Arts (MMFA) collaborates with the local doctor's association. Some patients with physical or psychological challenges get a prescription for the museum. In Denmark '**Culture on prescription**'  is being offered to people suffering from mild to moderate stress, anxiety or depression through some of the local municipalities. The aim is to create a cultural community and cultural activities to the participants a supplement to the health system and medication. Prescribing culture like you prescribe a pill.

Social prescribing helps patients to access non-clinical sources of support, predominantly in the community sector (South et al., 2008) and is a means to address the well documented social and economic factors that accompany long-term illness beyond the healthcare setting (Mossabir et al., 2015). In the last couple of years it is more and more implemented all over the world. In this report we narrow it down to arts and culture on prescription.

Many benefits of museum-based community referred activities (broader than only people with dementia) have been described in literature and pilot projects. Key outcomes of social prescribing include increased self-esteem, confidence and sense of control, improved psychological wellbeing and positive mood, reduced negative mood, anxiety and/or depression, provision of holistic options to complement medical care and the potential to reduce inappropriate prescribing of antidepressants (Veall et al., 2017). A project in London and Kent showed that museums on prescription may lead to a sense of belonging and improved quality of life, renewed interest in learning and acquisition of new skills, something to look forward to, increased social and creative activity, continued visits to museums and healthier lifestyle changes (Veall, 2017).

8.4 | Where do we go from here?

As it is very important for the DCUM strategic partnership that as many cultural mediators and end-users as possible will benefit from the website and training material that we have developed, it is crucial that these tools become well-known and that we reach out proactively. That's why the third and final work package of the project, of which this publication is an important part, focused on **the sustainability and use of project results** beyond the project period. This way we want to embed our project results in local and regional initiatives, but we also want to provide answers to **future challenges and opportunities in the field of culture, arts and dementia policy** at an international level.



This publication covered a wide range of topics, research and inspiring initiatives, but they all share a common goal: inclusion of vulnerable people, looking through their perspective and building bridges between the world and their daily reality. That's exactly the heart and soul of 'Dementia in Cultural Mediation': **exploring the value of arts and culture to improve the quality of life for people with dementia and their loved ones**. The coronavirus pandemic had a massive impact on society in general and also on the 'Dementia in Cultural Mediation' initiative, but despite the additional challenges it also made clear that the need to connect is more urgent than ever. We are therefore convinced that the value of this project reaches far broader than the participating countries and sincerely hope that this publication is not the finish but a first step towards more international collaboration on the value of arts and culture for vulnerable people.

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