

Ann Basting is the founder and director of TimeSlips™, an improvisational method of storytelling that invites seniors and people with memory loss to create original stories inspired by works of art. Ann has been working with the MIA and SPARK! Alliance cultural institutions for 3 years and has trained staff as well as docents/volunteers in using the TimeSlips method.

INTEGRATING CREATIVE STORY TELLING IN TOURS

By Anne Basting, PhD, founder and director of TimeSlips™

TimeSlips is an improvisational storytelling method that replaces the pressure to remember existing stories with the freedom to imagine new stories. The method originally emerged out of the desire to support growth and learning with people with dementia and their caregivers. It was first used in a Milwaukee nursing home in 1996, and replicated in four adult day centers in 1998 (two in Milwaukee and two in New York City). It has grown exponentially since then, with an interactive website, online trainings, and individual and organizational certifications in the process. As museums and cultural institutions began to create educational programming for families with dementia, the TimeSlips method and trainings have been adapted for “talk and turns” in museum settings.

The TimeSlips method itself is built on ritual and improvisation techniques. Facilitators invite people to participate in a special event and welcome them individually. They provide a prompt to initiate the story, most commonly an image. In museum settings of course, this can be almost any work of art or historical object. Facilitators practice active, full-body listening – watching for and echoing-back contributions to the story in words, sounds, gestures, and facial expressions. Like improvisation’s motto of “yes – and,” TimeSlips facilitators invite and accept all responses to the prompt – and emphasize this fact repeatedly throughout the storytelling session – to encourage people to step into the world of imagination. “There are no wrong answers – we’re making up a story together,” is a common, reassuring phrase among facilitators. “You can say anything you want, we’re just making it up!” is another.

As a way to prove to the storytellers that they mean what they say, facilitators write down every word on an oversized piece of paper. This is usually done on a flipchart to enable all the participants to see their words being captured on paper. Facilitators also refer to the flipchart when they retell the story. Throughout the storytelling session, which can range from thirty minutes to an hour in duration, facilitators repeat the story several times to bring storytellers to the moment of creation. When a facilitator feels the group starting to lose the thread of a story, she simply tells what they’ve built thus far and the group is ready to offer more responses.

The writing down of the story can provide challenges in museum settings where markers and pens make guards (and curators) very nervous. In the museums that have implemented TimeSlips in their tours, coordinators get special permission to use water-based markers (or pencils) in the galleries. It's important that participants SEE you writing down the story in order to confirm that you are indeed capturing everything they are saying, which is why we recommend a larger sketch-pad and fat-tipped, water-based markers for museum settings where flip charts can be a challenge.

A crucial element of the story facilitation process is to let go of preconceived notions of story structure and follow the lead of the storytellers. Asking open ended questions that put the power of creativity into the hands of the storytellers can take practice. "What do you want to call this person?" or "Where do you want to say they are?" are examples of open questions. "Do you think his name is Bob?" and "Which of the Great Lakes do you think that is?" are both example of closed questions that give the power of creativity to the facilitator, not the storyteller. In this way, TimeSlips is more akin to improvisation than some story-generating programs that rely on traditional story structure. If 4 storytellers provide 4 different names for a character, then the story has a character with 4 names. If two storytellers disagree on a course of action, the facilitator will retell the story with two possible courses of action. TimeSlips stories are full of possibilities. In addition, storytellers often respond with sounds or gestures and even words that facilitators don't understand. When this happens, facilitators echo the response (with full body echoing) and write it down as best they can. TimeSlips training suggests they draw or spell it in a way that enables them to read it back to the satisfaction of the storyteller who said it.

In effect, facilitators are creating a safe space in which people with cognitive challenges can practice communication without fear of reprisal or shame. Facilitators provide people with dementia access to meaning making, a sense of belonging, and feelings of pride and purpose. Facilitators learn how to open the storytelling process, freeing themselves from rigid structures, even spelling rules. It is an open, supportive space for experimentation for both storytellers and facilitators.

This creative, improvisational approach can be useful for groups that are further along in symptoms of dementia, and for whom conversation can be challenging. Several museums in the SPARK! Alliance integrate TimeSlips into their tours, offering some traditional discussions at one work of art, and a TimeSlips session at another. Others separate the approaches, offering TimeSlips tours and traditional tours.

If cultural institutions can provide images of the objects they are using for storytelling, TimeSlips can upload them to www.timeslips.org for use in their interactive storytelling software. The software enables families across the world to read the stories that emerge in the sessions and to feel the pride of the creative efforts of loved ones with dementia.

Since 1998, TimeSlips has been researched in multiple settings. In nursing home settings, TimeSlips has shown the potential for improving communication and mood among people with dementia and for improving relationships between staff and residents.

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We've found in our tours that familiar poetry and verses that were memorized in childhood pop up and out at unexpected times. Many individuals in their 70s, 80s and 90s were taught to memorize and recite a wide variety of verses, and this skill comes back even when everyday verbal abilities diminish. On one tour, we were in front of a painting with an image of Abraham Lincoln and one of our individuals with memory loss began reciting the entire Gettysburg Address from start to finish. This was an individual who could rarely put a short sentence together, and yet she was able to recite the entire speech. When she was done, the group gave her a spontaneous round of applause and she was pleasantly surprised by the response.

Yes, you may be a dance group, but movement flows through poetry. Find a poem and create an interpretive work inspired by that poem. Think outside your box!

"When I think of what makes me happy I don't think of things —I think of what's happening to me right now, this group and what we're doing. We're talking about poetry and it stretches the mind, feeds the imagination."

—Peter, APP-MN

participant with late-stage memory loss

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Building a Poetry Program

Poetry Session Tips

- Have everyone in a circle.
- Greet people, shake their hands and tell them you will be performing and creating poems with them.
- While you may be seated during the session, you may also move closer to people and kneel so you are not always standing over them when talking.
- You may also choose to stand and recite a poem to give it emphasis.
- Ask permission before asking a question. "May I ask you a question, please?"
- Thank people for their creativity and performance.

Overview:

The APP engages the participants in the recitation of classic poems and creation of new poems. The session leader uses a call and response technique: reciting a line from a well-known poem and coaching the group to echo the line.

Coupling this performance technique with an open-ended question enables a group poem to be composed based on the participants' responses.

The hour-long sessions divide into 30 minutes of performing poems and 30 minutes of creating a new poem. Each session ends with the performance of the new work.

Call and Response:

Recite a line of high-energy poetry. Have the group echo you. This is an aerobic activity that helps to build and hold attention.

Discussion Starter:

Use poems as a flashpoint for discussions. Build questions based on the subject matter of the poem. Reinforce the answers by reciting the poem using the call and response technique.

Create a Group Poem:

Use the simple prompt of asking an open-ended question. Choose a classic poem (or another poem you love that has great rhythm and lots of sensory information) as a model and then base the prompt on the subject matter of the poem. For example, "Daffodils," by Wordsworth might lead you to ask what spring smells like, tastes like, sounds like, looks like and feels like. The group's answers become the lines of the poem.

Props—Use items people can smell, feel, hold:

Tree poems: Bring in leaves and branches

Garden poems: Bring in herbs, vegetables and flowers

Sports poems: Bring in a Nerf ball to play catch with

Poetry Tips

Alternate between different styles of performance and types of poems. Try a high-energy, rhythmic poem followed by a funny poem, and then a love poem.

Elements of performing poetry: projection, articulation, pacing of the recitation, dynamics and bringing out the emotional content of the poem.

INTEGRATING POETRY IN TOURS

Poetry and Art

Gary Glazner is the Founder and Executive Director of the Alzheimer's Poetry Project (APP). The APP uses artwork to inspire the performance and creation of poetry by seniors and people living with dementia and their families. The following piece was written by Gary after working with a group at the John Michael Kohler Art Center, a member of the SPARK! Alliance.

by Gary Glazner

I was doubled over with laughter in front of a life-sized sculpture of a whale leading 30 people living with dementia and their care partners in a group performance of our newly created poem inspired by Tristin Lowe's "Mocha Dick." One of the participants had just improvised the line, "Drinking pale, whale ale from a pail."

Margaret Groff, Education Program Manager at the John Michael Kolher Art Center, knew of my work with the Alzheimer's Poetry Project (APP) and had invited me to lead one of their SPARK! programs.

This awe inducing fifty-two-feet-long sculpture was made of felt. Lowe based his artwork on a real-life albino sperm whale that terrorized early 19th-century whaling vessels near Mocha Island in the South Pacific. Newspaper accounts of "Mocha Dick" described its appearance as "white as wool." The stories talked of how whale engaged in battle with numerous whaling expeditions and inspired Herman Melville to write the classic *Moby-Dick* in 1851.

Performing Poems

We started the SPARK! session with a poem that celebrates museums, Alberto Rios's "Museum Heart." We used a "call and response" technique where the session leader said a line of poetry and had the group respond in unison to perform these opening lines of the poem:

We, each of us, keep what we remember in our hearts.
We, all of us, keep what we remember in museums.
In this way, museums beat inside us.

We find elements of the "call and response" technique in many religious ceremonies and in music, notably in gospel, blues and jazz. Tapping into this form of "echoic memory¹,"

¹ Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Echoic_memory

is a powerful way to engage people with memory loss. The 2004 study “Oscillations of Heart Rate and Respiration Synchronize during Poetry Recitation,²” by Dirk Cysarz, et al, demonstrates that the “call and response” performance technique also has an aerobic benefit.

Here are a few questions to ask and paths to explore in preparing to pair poetry with art:

- Has the artist written poetry?
- Are there poems written in tribute to the artists?
- Are there poems that were written in the same time period as the art was created?
- Is there a thematic tie to the art?
- Has the artist written about poetry?

In preparing for the session, I identified a number of poems with ocean and whale images. We started the session by performing: “Catch a Little Rhyme,” by Eve Merriam; “Whopper!” by Jack Prelutsky; “The Whale,” by Hilaire Belloc; and used quotes from “Moby Dick,” by Herman Melville. Here is a section from “The World below the Brine” by Walt Whitman that we performed using the “call and response technique.”

The world below the brine,
Forests at the bottom of the sea, the branches and leaves,
Sea-lettuce, vast lichens, strange flowers and seeds,
the thick tangle openings, and pink turf,
Different colors, pale gray and green, purple, white,
and gold, the play of light through the water,
The whale at the surface blowing air and spray, or disporting with his flukes,
The leaden-eyed shark, the walrus, the turtle, the hairy sea-leopard,
and the sting-ray,
Passions there, wars, pursuits, tribes, sight in those ocean-depths, breathing that
thick-breathing air, as so many do,
The change thence to the sight here, and to the subtle air breathed by beings like
us who walk this sphere,
The change onward from ours to that of beings who walk other spheres.

Example of Thematic Ties

- Pair an abstract painting with a predominate red color scheme and “Red Wheelbarrow,” by William Carlos Williams
- Pair a classic landscape such as Frederic Edwin Church’s, “Tropical Scenery,” which features a path leading the eye of the viewer into the painting with “The Road Not Taken,” by Robert Frost.

² American Journal of Physiology, <http://ajpheart.physiology.org/content/287/2/H579.abstract>

- Georgia O’Keeffe, “Brooklyn Bridge,” with “Bridge” by Hart Crane and “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry: by Walt Whitman. With both of these, we recited short sections of the poems.

Creating a Poem Inspired by Art

To create the poem we asked open ended questions around what the ocean would smell, taste, look, sound, and feel like. We imagined encounters with whales and improvised during the poem.

OCEAN POEM

(Created with “The Gathering Place,” which located in Sheboygan Falls, at the St. Paul Lutheran Church and is directed by Cindy Musial. This unique adult day care center uses a model of a one-to-one ratio of people living with dementia to community care partners.)

The lake is fresh.
The ocean is salt.
It’s so cold when you’re ice fishing,
that the fish don’t smell
and that’s why we ice fish!

Ice fish.
Ice fish.
Nice fish.
Nice fish.

The ocean has quite a sound-
splashing waves and wind.

It can roar.

ROAR!

(Make crashing wave and water sounds.)

And that’s when the birds come.

The ocean feels like foam- all the bubbles.

If a whale came along, I’d be scarred.
If I could swim fast enough, I’d get myself out of the water.

A whale is a something- BIG!

I wouldn’t talk to a whale, unless I was formally introduced.

I would say, "Whale, do you have a problem?"

You know what I would say?

What would you say?

Schultz is my name!

What do you have to say to that you big old whale?

I'm not afraid of you.

With your blubber and your tail and your eating...of kale.

And drinking of ale.

Whale Ale!

Pale Whale Ale!

From a PAIL!

You may see a performance of the poem at the APP YouTube channel at:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/alzpoetry?feature=mhec>

On-line Resources for Finding Poems:

(Poetry Foundation: Poetry Tool) <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/>

(Academy of American Poets: Find a Poet, Find a Poem) <http://www.poets.org/>