

Creative Connections

An investigation to create positive moments of engagement for people living with dementia and their carers.

Jane Souyave, Senior Lecturer and MA Graphic Design course leader at the University of Central Lancashire and Judith Bower, Dementia Adviser from Alzheimer's Society Central & West Lancashire,

combined their expertise to identify creative ways of providing beneficial activities for people with dementia and their carers to enjoy.

INTERACTIVE WALL PANEL

Background

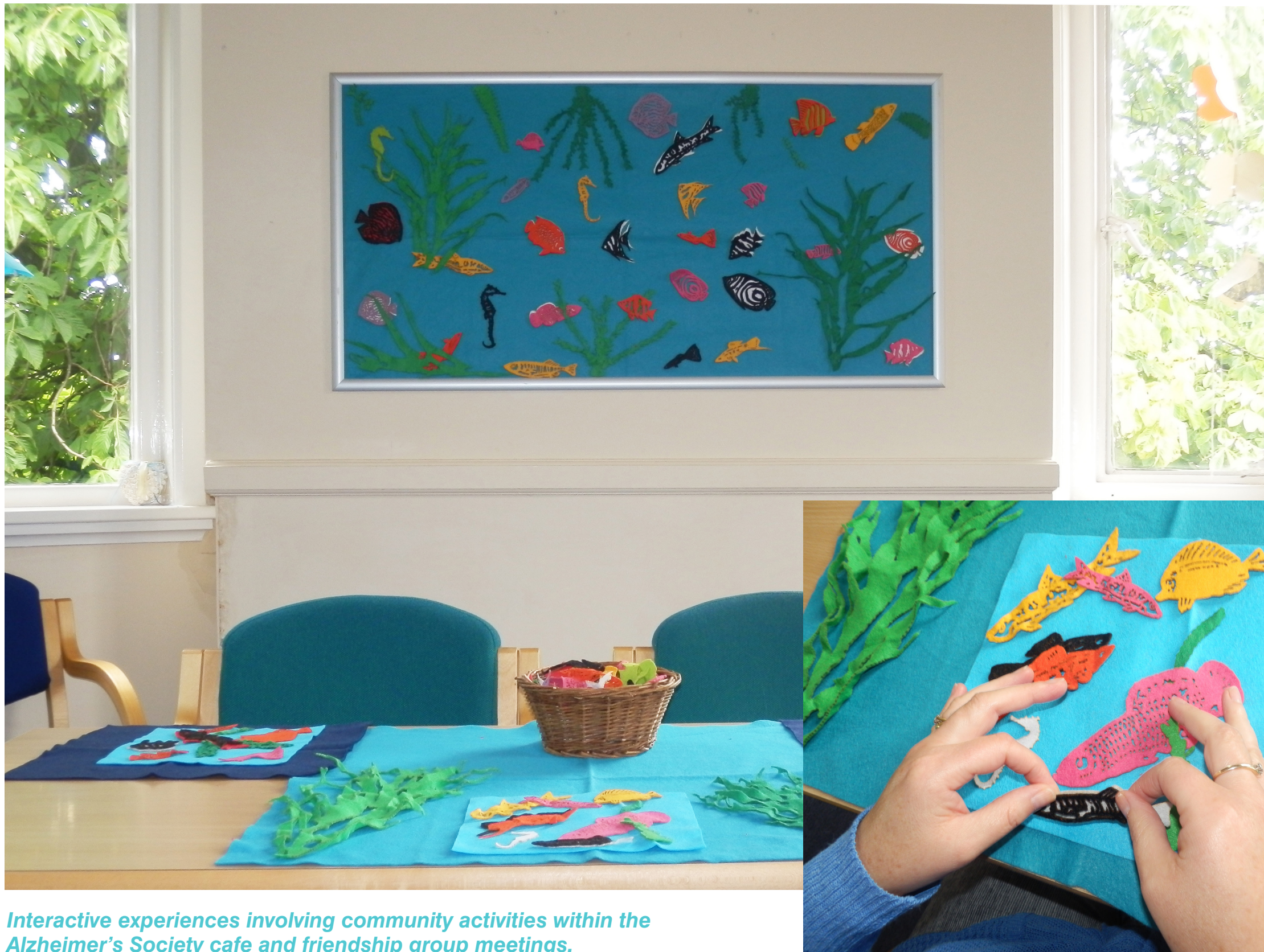
The group of symptoms that are associated with dementia include memory loss, mood changes and communication problems with a decline in the ability to talk, read and write. Its debilitating effects appear to leave individuals with a poorer quality of life than before and less positive moments throughout their day.¹ So how could more positive moments be created?

Judith Bower, a dementia care advisor at Alzheimer's Society Central & West Lancashire, approached myself to design an activity for their Forget Me Not Living & Learning Centre. We received a small grant to design and produce this activity.

What Activity?

We wanted to create a new activity that provided the visitors with a positive experience. At the time of this study, (2009) there was a lack of suitable activities specific to the adult market for people with dementia and their carers. Many activities and games etc.. were heavily referenced from children's sources, so this study provided the opportunity for an alternative activity to be designed that would be more adult focussed, whilst retaining the interactive benefits that children enjoy.

People with dementia can be at various debilitating stages of the condition but it does not mean that all their senses are diminished, individuals could still possess some sense of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch.² My area of expertise is graphic design and although this is the field of visual language, it could offer the opportunity for sensory investigations using graphic elements of touch, smell, sound and taste. An initial project was to be developed using visual language which appealed to the sense of touch and it was decided to base it on a 'fuzzy felt' activity.



Interactive experiences involving community activities within the Alzheimer's Society cafe and friendship group meetings.

Why this Activity?

It was proposed that a large 'fuzzy felt' would provide an interactive activity that could also appeal to the sense of touch and was a simple means of playful expression for the user. It was genderless in its appeal and the felt images could be positioned randomly, as there was neither a right nor wrong visual solution. It was a traditional, recognisable activity that was tactile, interactive, errorless and was able to be displayed as a large wall panel to brighten up the environment. Illustrations on the theme of an aquarium could be easily adapted in a stencil style that was required for laser cutting the felt shapes. Further potential would be to explore other playful themes such as landscapes, gardening, food, etc..

Methodology

Initial research was gathered through participating and observing a small group at the Forget Me Not Living & Learning Centre at the Alzheimer's Society. This was an appropriate setting and environment for an initial study as it provided a safe and friendly area for people with dementia to spend some quality time with their carers.

What were the results?

After conducting a small scale study, this activity was shown to be an interactive experience for users to creatively explore making pictures. The visitors offered positive comments supporting the project and expressed that they found the experience enjoyable, sociable and creative, whilst encouraging discussion and playful activity. They enjoyed using their hands and the sense of touch with the felt shapes. The activity appeared to provide positive moments of interaction. It was observed that this activity generated a calming, interactive experience along with a creative outcome for users of the centre to view, as it visually brightened up their environment.

This study was conducted in 2009 and initiated further work on activities for people living with dementia and their carers.

Further work focussing on the qualities of touch and interaction in books was generated as a result of the above project.

Below are just 2 of the books that were produced with MA Graphic Design students and presented to the Lady Elsie Finney resource and activity library for public use within Alzheimer's Society in Preston.

A TOUCH OF SUMMER

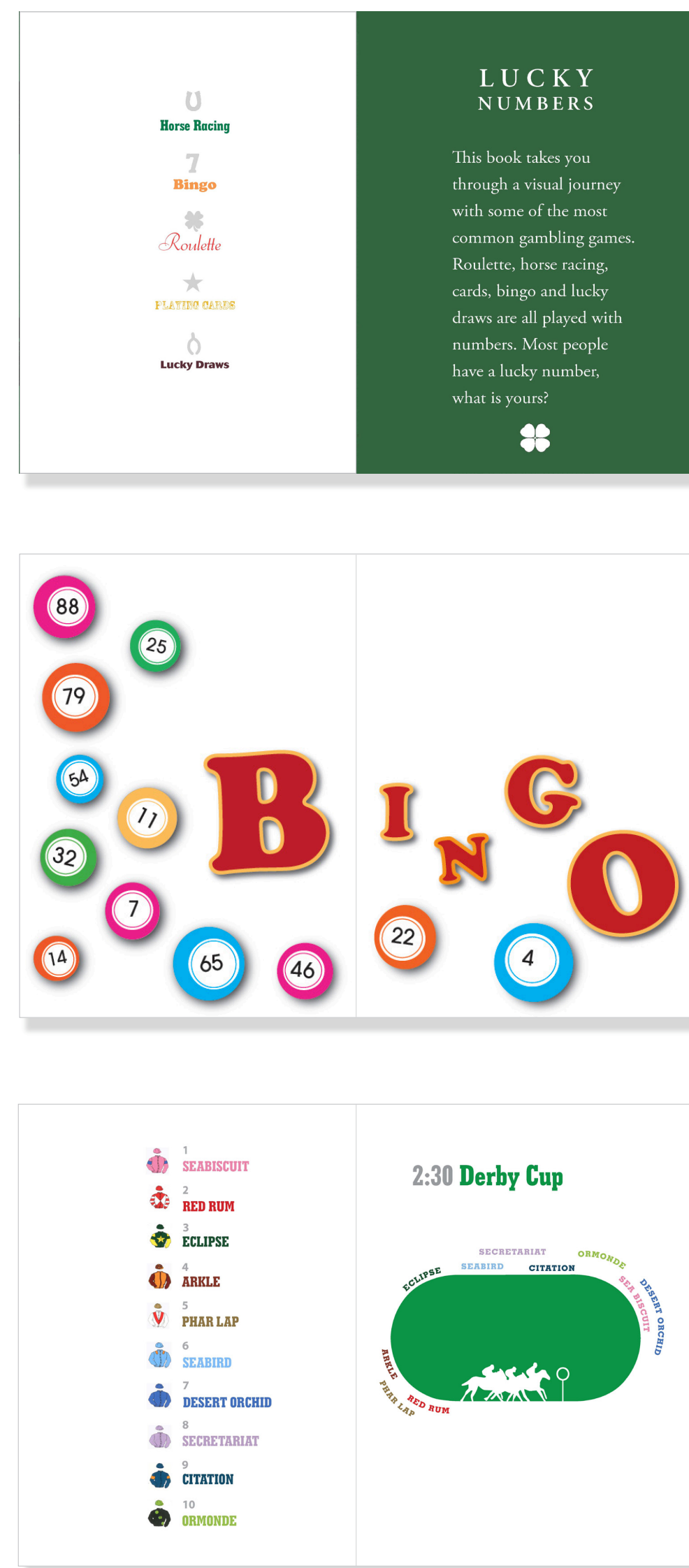
This book was designed to stimulate the sense of touch through visually communicating in a simple manner. The large images and small amount of text enabled easy reading and understanding, whilst providing an opportunity for some quality time through engagement with the pages. The theme of summertime was chosen to uplift the users mood as it is reminiscent of happiness, carefree days and the pleasures that go with summer. Each page had a relevant printing process or technique that invited a reaction through the appeal of touch. The result was to stimulate senses leaving individuals with a lingering sense of summer and positive feelings.



The graphics depicted simple images related to summer using appropriate printing techniques and processes. Soft towelling fabric was used for the summer stripes of beach towels and cut out techniques enabled folding of flower petals and birds wings.

LUCKY NUMBERS

This book was aimed at a more masculine target audience. Each double page spread communicated one area of gambling through imagery with a relevant graphic design technique that encouraged touch and interaction. The variety of techniques and processes provided different experiences and the opportunity to exercise various actions in exploring the folds, pop - ups, cut outs, pull outs, turning, enveloping etc.. The mixture of interactive qualities generated, served as a relaxing activity to evoke positive feelings.



References

1 Alzheimer's Society, (2009). Fact Sheet.

2 Baker R., Holloway J., Holtkamp C.C.M., Larsson A., Hartman L.C., Pearce R., Scherman B., Johansson S., Thomas P.W., Wareing L.A. & Owens M. (2003). Journal Of Advanced Nursing 43(5), 465-477. Effects Of Multi-Sensory Stimulation For People With Dementia

ONGOING & FUTURE STUDIES

The University of Central Lancashire & Alzheimer's Society have funded further projects resulting from this earlier work, these included:-

A 'Sensory Store' - collection of various materials and objects that were explored for their appeal to the senses.

The Fidget Widget Toolkit - a range of interactive tools for fidgeting.