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The Storytable Research

Een studie naar de effecten van de Verhalentafel op bewoners van zeven verzorgingshuizen/woonzorgcentra

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SUMMARY

The StoryTable research was started following the positive response of its first users, the residents of Het Twiskehuis in Amsterdam. It examines the effect the StoryTable has on elderly people living in assisted living facilities. The research was carried out in seven different Dutch facilities, from January to December, 2004.

The StoryTable design

The StoryTable is a specially designed piece of furniture equipped with three built-in computer screens, which can seat a maximum of six persons. Simply pressing a button accesses all kinds of audiovisual material from the past; songs, news reports from the forties and fifties and filmed fragments from daily life.

To stimulate contact between its users and to prevent users from surfing individually, the StoryTable screens all play the same fragment at the same time. Furthermore, the screens are positioned in such a manner that users are able to watch the screen and communicate with each other at the same time. The StoryTable includes a recording function allowing users to add their own stories.

The preliminary stages of development

The StoryTable was developed by Waag Society in close cooperation with the residents of an assisted living facility in Amsterdam, Het Twiskehuis. Originally, residents were to be presented with a piece of art, but they preferred something they could actually use.

The introduction of the StoryTable in Het Twiskehuis quickly resulted in a group of regular users who were able to operate the table on their own and who introduced their families and visitors to the experience. Sitting around the StoryTable clearly was an enjoyable pastime to them. Often those present joined together, singing along with the audiovisual material and contact was easily made between different users.

Inspired by the positive feedback, Waag Society decided it was time for a large-scale research examining the effects of the StoryTable on the mental well-being of its elderly users. In addition, Waag Society intended to use the research project to fine-tune the StoryTable design. New tables were built, and soon seven homes, from all over the country, were found willing to participate.

The research

The research itself was carried out by the Centre for Research on Aging (CVO) of the Free University of Amsterdam and the Free University of Amsterdam Medical Centre. The research used three different methods to collect information: an effect study, questionnaires and interviews.

In order to conduct the effect study, the residents who had agreed to take part were divided into two groups. During a period of sixteen weeks (intervention period) one group was to participate in StoryTable sessions on a weekly basis (experimental group) and the other would not (control group). The researchers assessed the social and emotional well-being and cognitive functioning of both groups before and after the intervention period. The results of these tests were compared and analyzed.

Of the 181 persons who agreed to take part, 123 completed the entire program. The study was conducted several times, in different institutions, and took a total of thirteen months to complete (from January 2004 to February 2005).

The most important results of the effect study are listed below.

- StoryTable sessions seemed to lessen feelings of loneliness amongst the elderly. The more frequent the session, the more marked the effect.
- Frequent participation in StoryTable sessions (attendance rate of 70 % or more) appears to have had a positive effect on feelings of depression amongst those participants who suffered from depression at the outset.
- Frequent participation also increased the sense of control over life for those who felt they had little control when they started the program.
- Participants' confidence increased, provided they had little confidence to start with and they attended the sessions frequently.
- StoryTable sessions had no –demonstrable- influence on either cognitive ability or the number and frequency of social contacts.

Those partaking in the effect study were asked to fill out a questionnaire on their experiences twice during the sixteen weeks. Based on these questionnaires, the following can be concluded:

- Participants consider the StoryTable an effective way of making contact with other people and getting to know them better.
- The StoryTable is used mainly in groups. Individual sessions are significantly less common.
- StoryTable users' satisfaction is rated high.
- Users found the StoryTable sessions pleasant and a good ambience prevailed. However, some users clearly reached a 'saturation point' somewhere during the intervention period.

The more qualitative part of the research consisted of interviewing both users (8) and activity facilitators (12), thus collecting information on method of use, on the social function of the StoryTable and on user satisfaction.

Analyzing the interviews yields the following insights:

The StoryTable sessions led to improved contact among residents and between residents and staff. It should be noted, however, that this contact often remained limited to (chance) meetings in the public spaces of the institutions, like the common room or hall.

The StoryTable is an effective aid to conjuring up memories. Generally users enjoy the reminiscing that is involved in a StoryTable session.

Facilitators regard the StoryTable as a welcome addition to the activities on offer. The StoryTable is user-friendly, pleasant to work with and easily turned into an organized activity. Facilitators recognized three different functions of the StoryTable: entertainment, social contact and reminiscing.

According to the facilitators, the StoryTable could be used for other target audiences as well, such as (grand)children together with their (grand)parents and residents of psycho-geriatric wards.

Facilitators and staff both emphasized the importance of offering the StoryTable as a supervised activity. Thus, they could further explain how to use the StoryTable, add structure to the sessions and encourage participants to contribute to the sessions by sharing their own stories.

Using the StoryTable was sometimes hindered by technical failures, wrong choice of location for the StoryTable and insufficient variety in the fragments on offer.

The next step

Based on the outcome of the research, recommendations were made for optimal use and future development of the StoryTable.

Suggestions for using the table to its maximum potential mainly deal with its functioning and the organization of activities. Of course, technical functioning should be warranted. Although some senior citizens are quite capable of operating the StoryTable on their own, it is recommended that supervised StoryTable sessions are also provided. Adding the StoryTable to the regular activities on offer could ensure this. During the study, facilitators gave and were given advice on how to organize and supervise StoryTable sessions. Collecting this kind of information in a comprehensive handbook could prove an important contribution to optimal use of the StoryTable in future.

Future research could focus on further examining the effects the StoryTable was found to have on its users, the optimal length of intervention, and the social function of the StoryTable. Also extending the research to other groups, such as senior citizens suffering from dementia and groups of elderly persons with (their) children, is a logical next step.

