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Recommended Citation

Hunt, Irma (2013). "Retirement and Visual Arts: Older Adult Learners," *Adult Education Research Conference*.
<http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2013/papers/23>

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Retirement and Visual Arts: Older Adult Learners

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Abstract: This paper examines the role of visual arts and its impact on successful aging and older adult learners in retirement. The findings have implications for visual art in adult development, adult education, and retirement.

Introduction

Retirement is one of the most important economic, psychological, and social transitions in most people's lives. Longevity has increased in the last sixty years such that in 2012, the average person can expect to spend anywhere from 15 to 30 plus years in retirement (U.S. Census, 2006). There are 78 million baby boomers, ranging in age currently from 48 - 65, who have recently started retiring and will continue leaving the workforce over the next decade (Greenblatt, 2011). They will likely live more of their lives in retirement than the previous generation. How will newly retired people fill their leisure time, and what factors will enhance the quality of life for this group of adult learners? Answers to these questions have personal, societal, and policy implications. Many older learners look for activities in retirement, and one activity is engaging in visual arts. Retirees in this study are creating pieces of visual art - be it sculpture, sewing, knitting, paintings, photographs - they are creating tangible products. A gap in the literature with regard to older learners and art exists. With regard to retirees, when Knowles (1984) wrote *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*, an addendum could be included today titled: *Older Adult Learners: Still Neglected*.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of visual arts and its impact on successful aging and older adult learners in retirement. Exploring artistic and creativity opens up possibilities for older, retired adults in knowing how they come to learn, feel and experience retirement. In the current struggling economy, the new face of retirement for many may likely be part-time labor and full-time engagement in other activities. So what does retirement mean to older adult learners? Retirement is generally understood as a multidimensional construct that is shaped by biological, educational, social and cultural factors; and, thus, can be defined in many ways. The study was guided by the following research questions: What do older, retired adults perceive as the purpose of engaging in the visual arts? How does evidence of the role of art in successful aging inform educators in supporting life-long learning for retirees? And what is the relationship between engagement in the visual arts, generativity and successful aging? Retirement, successful aging, generativity, art as a way of knowing, visual arts, retirement and visual arts within the context of adult education were areas of literature that were reviewed.

Theoretical Framework

Three theoretical frameworks were utilized: successful aging, generativity and art as a way of knowing. Together, these concepts provided a robust and holistic lens from which to view the experiences of these older adult learners.

Successful Aging

The first conceptual framework is successful aging, which is defined by Rowe and Kahn (1998), as the “ability to maintain three key behaviors or characteristics: low risk of disease and disease-related disability; high mental and physical function; and active engagement with life” (p. 38) This framework was used because it is broad and lends itself to use with other concepts and theories. It also includes many components for older learners to function independently in the activities of daily living. Successful aging includes the “individual acting on resources available to her or him to optimize the aging experience” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 12). This type of aging makes the process of growing old a worthwhile experience. The concept of successful aging has an emphasis on resilience and health coupled with the decline or absence of disease (Bengtson, Silverstein, Gans & Putney, 2009). With life expectancy increasing, older learners have no set guidelines or criteria of how to age successfully (Flood & Scharer, 2006).

Generativity

The second theory, generativity, is framed by human development and is seen as a positive aspect of healthy psychosocial development and aging (Erickson, 1963; McAdams, 1998). Generativity is about giving back to future generations. Generativity aided in informing the understanding of why older adult learners are engaging in art. Adults develop at different rates and follow different pathways. Generativity in retirement focuses on people giving back to society in various ways. The successful aging component in generativity can mean engaging in visual arts and staying actively involved in this manner. Some researchers indicate that generativity impacts one’s ability to age successfully with fulfillment (Rothrauff & Cooney, 2008; Schoklitsch & Baumann, 2011; Vaillant, 2002). Benefits of generativity include achieving a sense of immortality, passing on one’s genes, enhancing one’s purpose in life and giving back to the next generation (Erikson, 1963; Rothrauff & Cooney, 2008). Generativity can be a key to successful aging; it includes commitment, energy, tolerance and humor (Vaillant, 2002).

Art as a Way of Knowing

Third, this study draws on the concept of art as a way of knowing (Allen, 1995) which focuses on the ways in which adults learn through viewing and creating art. Creating artwork is a way of nonintellectual knowing, through emotion and body. Visual art as a way of knowing is a nonintellectual way of knowing (Allen, 1995), and is a way of knowing that is complex and subtle (Eisner, 2002; Gardner, 2011). It is as a way of knowing that allows individuals to transform their consciousness by making sense of what they see (Damasio, 1999; Eisner 2002). It is knowing something through visual art. One way of explaining this is through books that exist without words; solely pictures. These picture books can tell us a story in elaborate detail with no text or dialogue. How do we know what is going on in the book? A story is being told visually through pictures. We are finding out the narrative story through the art work and through the pictures someone has created. We know what we know through visual art. Epistemology is defined as “*how we know what we know*” (Crotty, 1998, p.8, italics in the original). Sometimes knowledge can be better expressed by or through visual art more easily than it can be expressed by words. “The [visual] arts provide opportunities to learn in different modalities and to understand one’s own unique characteristics” (Sherman, 2006, p. 43). What happens to some of us when we experience visual art is that our imagination fills in what we cannot actually see, smell, taste, touch or

hear (Eisner, 2002). Visual art as a way of knowing is a way of seeing the world around us, and can be for some, a search for meaning within this venue. It is a way of knowing that “is what we actually believe...it is our imagination...the most important faculty we possess” (Allen, 1995, p. 4). Looking at older, retired adult learners with this particular framework: successful aging/generativity/art as a way of knowing brings a unique perspective to the literature.

Research Design and Methodology

This study utilized narrative inquiry (Rossiter & Clark, 2011) an interpretive methodology which was appropriate for this study because it involved the collection of people’s stories to explore their thoughts, feelings and experiences in relation to the research questions. In-depth face to face semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposeful sample of 10 older adult learners in the spring of 2012. A guided approach was utilized and all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The artwork was also viewed and described as part of the narrative. Simultaneous collection and analysis of data; constant identification of emerging interpretations and for simultaneous modifications to questions; and thematic analysis was used to keep the data intact. Furthermore, to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, member checks and follow-up interviews were also part of the data analysis.

Findings and Conclusions

There were six significant findings that show that active participation in the arts promotes mental and physical health and improves the quality of life for older adults. The first theme was that these individuals had an early influence in their lives with regard to art; several of the participants indicated that family positively influenced them at a young age by providing encouragement and buying them art supplies. In addition, interactions with all levels of relatives including grandparents, parents and children have had an effect on several participants’ interest in art.

The second theme was that most participants did not see themselves as artists; the data suggests that because people of this older adult generation, as one participant put it, saw artists as, “live[ing] a bohemian lifestyle,” they did not associate themselves with being an artist. The data suggests that because people of this older adult generation, as one participant put it, saw artists as, “live[ing] a bohemian lifestyle,” they did not associate themselves with being an artist. There was also a relationship as to how the art was produced and the perception of being an artist. Some participants felt that if they merely copied a pattern and no creativity was involved, that they could not be considered artists. However, some participants felt they were more creative than others in their art classes.

Third, art helped the participants both physically and emotionally. Engaging in art was relaxing for almost all participants. The dexterity in the hands for those who painted with brushes or crocheted and knitted with needles was very apparent. Their ability to grip and manipulate a paint brush, fabric, knitting needles, and / or wood may have led them to have more dexterity and improve the function of their hands. This type of activity improved rheumatoid arthritis for some participants; others indicated that art was detrimental to their health. If they stayed in one position for too long, they would stiffen or cramp up. Another detriment was that detailed artwork can be difficult on the eyes. One participant noted “I’ve done counted cross-stitch, but I can’t do it anymore. It’s very hard on the eyes.” Findings from some of the participants indicate that art allowed them to take their mind off of ailments, some of which are age-related.

Most of these older learners find joy, camaraderie and meaning and purpose as they moved toward and through retirement. Art impacted several participants' emotional health in positive ways. Art helped to improve their mood and increase their self-esteem and made them feel better about themselves. In short, it aided in their emotional well-being. As one participant noted: "Art opens up your mind. To more an extent of feelings; I'm sure there are other things that do that. If you're doing what you love the best [for me, it's art]...I mean as far as doing the rest of your life. That's the most enjoyment you get out of life because you're doing what you want to do. It's tough when you're in a job and you want to do something else, but it's not always easy. It [a job one doesn't enjoy] makes people deteriorate faster."

Another finding included the participants feeling that art was both a solitary and social activity. A dichotomy was found between being alone and being with others when involved in art. As one art teacher volunteer put it, "you have to spend hours and hours developing your craft" to be good at it. Several of the participants discussed relishing their alone time. Many lost track of time and enjoyed being one with their art. Several spent hours being solitary with their art. They need 'alone time' to create; but they also feel a need to share. Engaging in art can be time consuming and provides an 'escape' for some participants. However, at the same time they enjoyed art classes, where camaraderie, critique and friendships arose with few complaints. The only downside mentioned by four of the participants was the ongoing cost of the courses.

Art as story emerged as a new finding; and data suggest that it is a narrative on its own. What was found was that each participant had favorite pieces of art that told a story; very elaborate stories emerged behind each. Every piece of art had a story. The artwork was extremely personal to each individual. These stories are from my field notes and they represent the communication of artist's inner space of creation. What the artist saw was their inner world being put on canvas. And what I was seeing was the painting in the physical world described by the artists. An example of art as story is from Henry. He created an impressionistic painting of a locomotive train moving through thick, heavy fog. The light from the train was in the center, shining a way for it to come through. Henry said that this represented his retirement. He was on a journey and it was unclear where he was going, just as the train had an unclear destination. He had several other paintings that represented modes of transportation: boats, cars, trucks and trains (Henry, field notes, May 16, 2012). But this particular train painting was one of his favorites because what it represented to him. "My art is me," he said.

Other findings include the participants were uncertain of their identities as artists based on how they produced their art; that art created a space for new learning and that there are degrees of generativity. Several common themes emerged from the 10 participants engaged in art, and several findings warrant further discussion.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

The findings have implications for visual art in adult development, adult education, and retirement. In using three frameworks to analyze data, each component provided a valuable lens from which to view my participants, but the three frameworks taken together give a sharper picture as to what actually occurred with the participants in this study. Successful aging, art as a way of knowing and generativity are the three components that are represented in the Venn diagram below. They are intertwined and interconnected where each factor is important in itself and to some extent independent of the others. The diagram below assists in the analysis and offers a holistic perspective of the participants experience with art. Some components were experienced individually, and sometimes in different

combinations. The combined framework provided a useful way to frame the data analysis. While this was the primary lens that was utilized to look at the data, it revealed some areas that fell outside the framework.

The pinnacle of being in the center of the Venn diagram is to be participating in and experiencing all three components: successful aging, generativity, and art as a way of knowing simultaneously. If an individual reaches this, they would be experiencing flow and a deep concentration that lets them forget what time it is or where they are.

Art as a way of knowing is demonstrated through the participants who are still learning more about themselves through art. It is a connection of self-knowing, learning and growing and understanding themselves. The interconnectedness of the section of number (1) where generativity and art as a way of knowing converge represent some of the participants were generative, and had a concern for the next generation, or they cared about a cause and donated their artwork for research for a cure. The area where (1) is overlapped does not have a component of successful aging. There were no participants in this study who fit this category. This area would represent individuals who for whatever reason, were not necessarily successfully aging. This area would include individuals who knew themselves, and had a sense of understanding of self through their art, and they were generative to some extent, but not successfully aging necessarily. In order to move to the flow represented by the star in the center, an individual would have to improve their health and get back to successful aging.

Looking at category number (2) in the Venn diagram, only a few of the participants fell into this category, where they were successfully aging and experiencing art as a way of knowing, but they were not necessarily generative or concerned for future generations. These were the participants who kept their artwork, and were much less inclined to volunteer or give any of their time or talent.

Some of my participants fell into the overlap of number (3) where they were successfully aging and generative, but only engaged in art as something to do. They perhaps did not rise to the level of knowing through art. This is not to say that they did not have fun or enjoy their art. They did. Reba falls into this category. She was healthy for the most part, and gave her art away for future generations, but she did not seem to have the deep level of understanding through art the way that some other participants did. She could reach the star in the center of the Venn diagram by more fully engaging in art, and reaching a knowing through her art.

Engaging in art helped many of the participants to transcend loss, either loss of a spouse, or loss of their work. The findings show that these participants, through spending so much time with their art, that they were engaged in art to mask pain, or using art as a coping mechanism. An important finding from this study is that art can be used as a means of survival for some of the participants. They engaged in art to aid in their new approach to life after a significant loss. It appears that several of the participants used art as therapy in certain situations. For example, Connie, Jennifer, Reba, Bella, Henry and Brad all stated that they were experiencing feelings of depression and anxiety at times. They all began to engage in art for hours at a stretch, spending a great deal of time with their artwork.

Art helped to keep these retirees actively engaged with life, and at a time when many of them felt they no longer had any type of control, example, “my children have taken over my finances and are telling me to sell my home,” art allowed them to feel as if they had control in their lives. Art also allowed them to pushing limits with their imagination, to paint or sculpt...to create something outrageous if they wanted to. Several participants said that they felt as if they “found themselves through art.” Some of the participants, through creating art were pushing the limits of their imagination; the data suggests they did

so to have more control in their lives. Most of the participants in this study were well-educated and displayed high mental and physical function. Several participants had new ideas and formed new images and sensations which they did not perceive through sight; yet the images were visual in their minds. Creating art “involves taking risks, breaking boundaries, pushing limits and inventing new ideas” (Machiodi, 1998, p.69). Several of the participants pushed limits and had new ideas. Tom for example, when he led a group of teens in designing a cow for the cow parade, he came up with a theme and displayed spontaneity, originality, inventiveness, divergent thinking. He led and taught a group of teens to his way of thinking. Tom allowed the teens to see things in a new light.

Because of the numerous benefits through engaging in art, adult educators need to aid in building up the art curriculum in senior centers, universities, churches, etc. Because art was found to be relaxing, art therapy courses can perhaps be offered in the workplace to adult learners who have stress in their lives or included in anger management courses.

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