

ANGELA M. LA PORTE

University of Arkansas, United States

Older adult responses to art curriculum and self-directed learning

ABSTRACT

The objective of this participant observation was to better understand how older adults respond to diverse art education curricula and self-directed learning. The study involved teaching a weekly two-hour art class of eight to ten adults at a low-income residential facility over a four-month period. Findings suggested that curricula should encompass the broad range of student backgrounds, levels of art expertise, and life experiences. Older adult participants were largely self-directed to varying degrees, depending on their art knowledge, media expertise, and confidence in the subject area. The instructor best served the older adult learner as a facilitator or resource for learning. It was important to build on what students wanted to learn and to introduce artists and styles that broadened their perspectives and inspired art-making. Not all students responded to planned curriculum, but themes with an enduring idea such as healing or ritual evoked stories and inspired meaningful art.

This study explores methods to engage ageing adults' life experiences, abilities, and interests in creative activities in the visual arts. Creative activity can improve older adults' quality of life, providing physical, psychological and social benefits. Cohen (2006) cites the results of a controlled study showing that

creative arts programmes taught by professionals significantly improve the mental and physical health of participants. Schmidt (2006) reports that creative activity improves cognitive abilities and reduces the frequency of illness in later life. Cohen (2001) states that the brain continues to make new connections during creative activity regardless of age. Art-making also provides therapeutic benefits to people with dementia and neurological disorders (Miller 2008). This interest is timely due to the imminent growth in the ageing population.

'Population ageing' refers to ongoing growth in the proportion of older persons found mostly in developed countries, a common trend regardless of socio-economic, cultural or environmental issues (McDaniel and Zimmer 2013). In the United States, the cohort of persons 65 years and older increased 15.1 per cent between 2000 and 2010, while those aged 45 to 64 years grew 31.5 per cent (Howden and Meyer 2011). This trend is occurring in developed countries as birth rates decline and longevity increases alongside technological and medical developments (Christensen et al. 2009). Quality art programmes that improve the lives of ageing adults not only present a challenge, but also an opportunity to improve the quality of life for older adults.

Despite the wide spectrum of adult art education situations and the diversity of the learners, praxis and curriculum development remain limited. The most recent United States publication in art education addressing curriculum issues for older adults (Lawton and La Porte 2013) recommends that art instructors of older adults should be more knowledgeable about the cognitive and physical needs of the ageing population and emphasizes that they should develop art curriculum and praxis that engages their students' creative potential. Historically, Greenberg (1987) and Hoffman (1992) have confirmed that older adults can be creative and that they do participate in art education programmes. Hoffman introduced various types of existing programmes and locations, explained how to develop them, and offered recommendations for content and application through a variety of art forms, including visual arts, performing arts, and interdisciplinary programmes. He also identified physical, mental, and emotional impairments found in 5 per cent of the ageing population. Hoffman et al. (1980) published a book for artists and art educators teaching art to older adults, including practices and research on the benefits of participation in the visual arts. Lewis (1987) edited a special edition of *Art Education*, devoted to articles on teaching art to older adults. Greenberg's introduction to the issue stated,

A good curriculum must do just this, change and grow to suit the wide range of needs of older adults interested in the visual arts. Given the right circumstances, we might even find some who move beyond experiencing art as a hobby, making art as a creative endeavor that fills their lives.

(1987: 7)

Lewis (1987) introduced visual art's role as an enrichment experience, describing programmes such as museum integration, and advocating the importance of assessing and accommodating for older adults' cognitive, psychological, and emotional needs, and for quality programmes to be taught by qualified art teachers. The journal included descriptive examples of existing art programmes for the elderly, resources for them, and essential ingredients

for their success. Many proposed a Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE) approach that should expose students to 2D and 3D art-making experiences, art history, aesthetics and criticism.

Barret (1993: 137) identified the growing number of art programmes for older adults, noting that those programmes 'which reflect emphasis on creativity and mental stimulation are few and far between'. She also stated,

Art educators must brainstorm with experts in other fields related to aging in order to find out what works and how they can incorporate successful methods into their individual areas. They must be willing to conduct research and to take the time to write and to publish the results.

(1993: 139)

Stokrocki (1998: 108) published a qualitative study in the field of art education. Her participant observation involved ageing and physically challenged students who responded well to 'realistic still life and scenic reproductions', and 'everyday events and people', focusing on abstract realism. She also found that students' inspiration for art-making came from sharing artists' work that resembled students' personal artwork. The literature in art education and adult education indicates that advancing age is often accompanied by unique mental abilities, and that many older adults have personal interests that are conducive to creative activity (Cohen 2006; Greenberg 1987; Hoffman 1992). Studies of intergenerational art programmes continue (Hausman 1998; La Porte 2004, 2011), but there remains an immediate need for art educators to conduct research that applies theories from both contemporary art education and adult education.

I studied the application of contemporary curriculum theory from art education and self-directed learning (SDL) from adult education to better understand how these education concepts applied to teaching art to low-income older adults at a residential facility. Art education's move towards thematic curriculum with enduring ideas (Stewart and Walker 2005) linked art to other subject areas and ultimately gave individual students the opportunity to personally connect with the theme, and to reflect and express themselves through a visual art form. Two curriculum themes used in this study were healing and ritual. The pedagogy borrowed SDL from Knowles (1975), whose central idea, androgogy (theory of adult education), was that adult learners are self-directed, that they are independent and responsible for their own learning. The educator became a facilitator, unlike teacher-directed pedagogy for the instruction of children. Caffarella (1993: 30) noted a caveat acknowledged by Knowles, that 'in some situations adults may need to be at least "temporarily dependent" in the learning situation'. She goes on to list four influences on their autonomous learning: 'the level of their technical skills, their familiarity with subject matter, their sense of personal competence as learners, and the context of the learning event'. More recently, Merriam et al. (2007: ix) proposed that 'it is especially important to know who the adult learner is, how the social context shapes the learning that adults are engaged in, why adults are involved in learning activities, how adults learn, and how aging affects learning ability'. This ethnographic case study integrated art education curriculum theory and SDL from adult education pedagogy.

STUDY OVERVIEW

Methodology

This study was a participant observation of a community art class for low-income adults and older adults at a residential facility in Fayetteville, Arkansas. I described, analysed, and interpreted how seniors responded to the instructional strategies that I implemented with two volunteer pre-service teachers. Pohland (1972) defined participant observation as a multi-method, multi-person, multi-situation, multi-variable investigation of everyday reality including three stages: data collection, content analysis and comparative analysis. Data collected included time samplings of the instruction, interviews (formal and informal) with students and the two pre-service teachers, classroom observations, documentation of dialogue and interactions before, during and after class time, and photographs of students and their work.

Data analysis involved both content and comparative analysis. Content analysis was 'the process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns in the data. ... analyzing the content of interviews and observations' (Patton 1990: 381) and substance of other data, noting the emergence of conceptual themes. Comparative analysis included the interpretation and 'the interrelation of these conceptual themes' (Stokrocki 1986: 83). Through the comparative analysis of data, I identified and interpreted how seniors responded to the curriculum and instructional strategies and how these concepts related to adult education theory. Findings emerged as themes by using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) method of data coding and Miles and Huberman's (1994) suggestions for charting categories and axial coding. The triangulation of data led to a better understanding of how adult education and art education theory might be applicable in a similar older adult population.

THE RESIDENTIAL FACILITY

The art class took place at a 40-year-old twelve-storey residential facility with 120 efficiency apartments for low-income adults. The facility provided housing for adults, mostly aged 60 years and older with economic, physical and/or mental disabilities. Within the building, there were small activity rooms, including a kitchen/dining area, a small resale shop, and an art/activities room, approximately 12'×30' with windows that opened overlooking a parking lot and neighbourhood. Three working tables and a variety of chairs offered a comfortable space for the art class. A swivel style chalkboard stood in the corner in front of piles of clothing and other donated items from the community for the facility's resale shop. There was a small sink and a storage area. A bulletin board served as an area to display artists' and students' art. The class met on Fridays from 9: 30 a.m. until 11: 30 a.m. for approximately four months. I co-taught the class with two pre-service teachers. A University of Arkansas Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice grant provided funding for art materials and digital recording devices.

OLDER ADULT PARTICIPANTS

Six regular older adult participants in the art class were the primary data sources for this study. Their art experience ranged from very limited to one student with an art degree. Participants were over 55 years of age. Their rich and broad



Figure 1: Mr. P's art cart.

cultural and educational backgrounds and personalities enhanced the art class environment. Some already had experience in art and wanted to expand their knowledge and skills. Others were curious. Most of them enjoyed socializing, a common incentive of art programmes (Riley and Stanley 2006).

The first time that I met Mr P, he rolled a shopping cart into the classroom with his art: marker drawings of landscapes, airplanes and seascapes on canvas and paper (Figure 1). His father, once a university professor, was also a subject of his work. Childhood memories of a Saturday morning art class at the San Francisco museum instilled his lifetime interest in art. Mr P's greeting, 'I love art, man!' was his trademark.

Ms J, a self-taught artist from Oklahoma was interested in landscape painting and had always been involved with crafts. Before class one day, we discussed her interest in making potato jewellery as she sat with cut, sliced, and dried potatoes in front of her, and carefully painted them (Figure 2).

Ms B, an Oklahoma native, came to the class with no prior experience in art but had an interest in learning and a desire for social interaction. Initially intimidated by making art, her fear slowly became a love for art, especially for drawing portraits (Figure 3).

The student with the most professional art training was Mr L from Kansas. He had a degree in art and was very regimented about arriving early to class, even showing up one day when class had been cancelled. A focus on details and realism was his constant concern (Figure 4).

Ms R, a retired nurse from Pennsylvania, added energy and humour to the group even while undergoing chemotherapy (Figure 5). She was most excited about ceramics, and often talked about the time that she had taken a university wheel throwing class at the age of 60. She also remembered making drawings for holiday cards in grade school.



Figure 2: Ms. J painting her potato jewellery.

One woman, Ms E, was born in England and had lived onboard a World War I rescue ship while her father was serving in the Navy (Figure 6). Her family left England during World War II. Eventually, she joined the Air Force and had lived in nineteen countries.



Figure 3: Ms. B drawing a self-portrait.



Figure 4: Mr. L drawing a self-portrait.



Figure 5: Ms. R working on drawing techniques.



Figure 6: Ms. E shares stories about her ritual sketch.

The art class was voluntary, and attendance was irregular for some due to doctor appointments, etc. But despite little promotion, attendance was a weekly ritual for the six regular students.

ART CLASS INSTRUCTION AND EXPERIENCES

Instruction in this art class was influenced by Knowles (1975) and Knowles and associates' (1984) idea of *andragogy*, specifically SDL. Instructors adapted curriculum and activities to students' wide range of abilities, backgrounds and experiences. All participants had their own reasons for attendance. Some had an interest in art and wanted to expand their knowledge and skills. Mr L already held an art degree. Others wanted new friends or a diversion from day-to-day problems, or just a novel experience. Ms B said that many of her friends had died, and she had hoped to make new ones.

In the beginning, some were self-motivated, self-directed, and had experience in art. Others expected more teacher direction. In response to the students' needs, my pre-service teachers and I offered a range of instruction from teacher-directed to self-directed to cater to the students' range of skills and knowledge. Instruction and curriculum choices reflected individual student interests and their desire to learn as well as open-ended curriculum themes that would connect to participants' lives.

Students anticipated the class with enthusiasm. Ms R said, 'At my age, you get stagnant. It's really easy to do. It's easy to get depressed that way. I think coming down, knowing that you're going to be down here keeps your mind and body physically active'. She came to class tired during her chemotherapy treatments, yet excited about participating and always ready to tell a joke. She observed more experienced students' work, commenting, 'Talented people

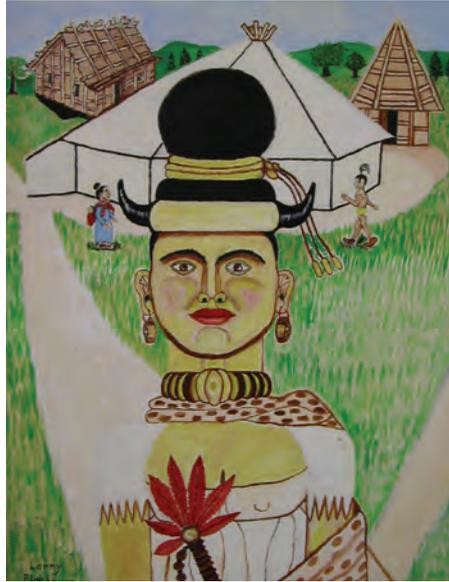


Figure 7: Mr. L's oil painting of a Native American woman.

make me ill. I feel so inferior'. Ms R also acknowledged that she came to learn something new. Knowles (1984) noted, adults attend class for 'social or fellowship reasons'. These students enjoyed socializing, catching up on news, giving health updates, and talking about past experiences and family.

The curriculum included: visits to two local art exhibitions, discussions about artists' work, students' art-making and conversations about their own art. Art studio content incorporated a variety of materials, from simpler, less demanding lessons on weaving and mixed media abstract painting to more challenging studio work with mosaics, printmaking, landscape painting, clay, drawing techniques and portraits.

Students came to the art class with a particular appreciation for realism and landscapes. These were recurrent interests, even those with extensive art experiences. The first few weeks of class, Mr L worked on an oil painting that included a United States Midwestern landscape with a Native American woman in the foreground, whom he referred to as his wife (Figure 7). Mr P brought his collection of coloured pencil drawings of seascapes, and landscapes with barns and other buildings from the places he had lived. Even Ms J mentioned her love for realism and beautiful landscapes. She said that her artworks created outside of class were paintings, scenic views, sailing ships, and a Madonna and Child. Overall, students wanted to expand their techniques in drawing and painting. Some students did not have much confidence in their art-making. Ms B, Ms R, and Ms E jokingly reminded the class of their drawing limitations. Students also had very limited exposure to abstract and contemporary artworks.

ADAPTED CURRICULUM

My pre-service teachers and I decided to begin the class with curriculum that appealed to students' interests in art skill development while satisfying their social interests. We also felt it was important to show diverse artists' approaches

to traditional art media, as well as conceptual art, and to pursue a curriculum theme that met students somewhere between teacher-directed and student-directed andragogy, allowing students to meet us at their own level and interest.

One of our earliest lessons included an introduction to non-representational abstract artists. The step-by-step lesson on abstract painting fostered a less intimidating class atmosphere, especially for students with limited art experience. According to Ellsworth (1992) self-confidence is necessary before SDL can occur. Slusarski stated, 'The instructor may need to take more control at first. Then, as learners expand their repertoire of learning strategies and develop confidence in their learning abilities, facilitators may relinquish control' (1994: 73). She noted, most adults have experience with more teacher-directed learning that might generate resistance to SDL, in addition to their lack of knowledge and skills and fear of taking risks.

Exposure to and discussion of abstract artists such as Elizabeth Murray's work challenged students' preconceptions about art. Students learned that art could be without a particular subject matter, and might include only lines, shapes, colours and textures. The introduction to abstract art began with a discussion of Murray's work followed by a directed studio painting activity that encouraged a safe opportunity for risk-taking and success. My pre-service teachers taught various drawing and painting techniques and advised the elders to use these in responding to directives: Paint a line anywhere on your paper; make a shape that intersects that line, etc. This type of step-by-step instruction encouraged individual decision-making without focusing on expectations of realism. Students welcomed instructions and some also appreciated the opportunity to experience success and gain confidence in making art. Ms B commented about the hard work she did on her abstract painting and was very satisfied with it, especially after noticing its relationship to Murray's loose organic forms (Figure 8). Ms J compared her classmates'



Figure 8: Mr. B's abstract painting.



Figure 9: Ms. J's landscape painting on sandpaper.



Figure 10: Landscape painting on sandpaper.

work with the artist – their use of lines, colours, shapes and asymmetrical balance. Students remarked that they enjoyed the unique experience, but preferred more realistic art like a few students did outside of class. In response we transferred their mark-making skills and interest in realism to the next lesson, an acrylic landscape painting on sandpaper. Many students loved this lesson. Some bought their own sandpaper and painted on it outside of class time (Figures 9 and 10).

Respecting students' interest in realism, we taught some drawing strategies including line variation, shading and textures as an introduction to portrait drawing. We offered examples of different artists' portrait styles from very realistic to abstract pencil drawings. Mr P drew portrait after portrait of his father, the professor, while telling stories about faculty party pranks he instigated at their house years ago. Ms B was particularly frustrated and disappointed in her drawings until we introduced her to Elizabeth Layton's self-portraits, which reflected her own unique drawing style. My pre-service teachers and I noticed how Ms B immediately became interested in drawing, similar to what Stokrocki (1998) identified when sharing professional artists' work that resembled students' own art style (Figure 3). Others in the class agreed that Ms B's drawings were characteristic of those created by Layton. Ms J said, 'Look at Ms B. She said that she couldn't do anything. Now, look what she's doing. She's done some great work'. Following that experience, Ms B regularly drew in her sketchbook and studied a variety of art books and magazines in addition to what she learned in class. Weeks later, she mentioned taking some of the art magazines from class to read in her free time. She said, 'I learned things from those magazines in the last few weeks'. Ms R responded jokingly, 'That's why we can't find any of the magazines'.

Visits to contemporary art exhibitions at a prominent local arts centre and at the local university expanded students' view about art beyond realism and beauty. Ms R referenced a visit to a local 5"×5" exhibition by saying, 'Two different people can do the same thing in two different ways, have two different ideas'. Mr L commented on his visit to the exhibition of 'In Response to Healing' in the university gallery, 'I realized there is more than one way to create art'. Ms J said, 'I learned that even if it's a style that you wouldn't go for,

you can enjoy it anyway'. This realization never supplanted their desire to learn to draw and paint realistically. The students felt privileged to visit the gallery exhibitions, which was an opportunity for them to see more contemporary art and broaden their understanding of art. Ms J said, 'I learned different ways to promote the ideas of what you're feeling – pain or anything else. You could even get joy from a lot of that'. Many made personal connections to particular objects in the artworks at the exhibitions: trees and nature, canning jars, and shoes. This diverse exposure expanded their conception of art and broadened their appreciation.

A curriculum unit with an enduring idea emerged from the gallery exhibition, 'In Response to Healing', of artists' work inspired by healing. Discussing the exhibition in class the following week, Ms J mentioned my artwork, 'Mother, Mary' and said, 'I thought it was really unique how you put it together (Figure 11). It was a compiling of the different things from when your mother was ill'. Would she have ever thought about some of the artworks as 'art' prior to coming to this class? She said, 'No, I wouldn't have at all. I learned that even if it's a style that you wouldn't go for, you can enjoy it anyway'. Ms B loved a couple of the artworks that dealt with nature and ecological healing. Mr L found an interest in an artist's use of actual shoes in a conceptual artwork (Figure 12). We encouraged the students to talk about the theme of healing and how they might address it in their artwork. We asked them to choose their own personal representation of healing and media. Most seemed to gravitate towards places of healing from personal experiences: flowing water, fishing, sailing on a boat, a shade tree, and the Rocky Mountains. Most sketched out nature scenes as I played a recording of Gregorian chant music. Mr P drew three ideas about sailing. Ms R combined symbols into a drawing based on her career as a nurse helping people, a tree of life, a medical symbol and text. Ms J planned to paint a forest with a brook. Mr L also said that he would paint a mountain scene from a magazine. Betty came late to class this day, but sat



Figure 11: Ms. J commenting on 'Mother, Mary'.



Figure 12: Mr. L contemplating Dominique Mazeaud's mixed media installation, 'Yitzhak & Leila's Shoes'.

down and said, 'I want to get good at drawing faces', and continued drawing faces instead of starting anything new.

Students' reaction to the exhibition, 'In Response to Healing' led me to incorporate student interests into a curriculum theme, 'Personal Objects of Meaningful Ritual'. It encouraged them to examine the meaning of ritual, artists' application of ritual to their work, and their own personal use of meaningful objects of recent or past rituals. Regardless of whether students were conscious of personal rituals, the study of artefacts used in ritual brought into question how they could be valued and how they contributed to students' understanding of their cultural identity and history.

Following a discussion about the meaning of ritual, I presented my sculptural altarpiece, 'Mother, Mary', from the exhibition they had viewed firsthand, and questioned students about the juxtaposition of healthy versus harmful objects of ritual (Figure 11). This posed a canning jar used for preserving fresh fruit and vegetables against a canning jar containing shredded Diet Coke cans. I informed students that the artificial sweetener, aspartame, is metabolized by the body and changes into formaldehyde, a preservative and toxin. Students contemplated the consumption of aspartame in conjunction with my mother's illness, and learned about her history and Italian traditions through additional ritual objects on the altar.

I asked students to identify their own rituals and the objects involved in those rituals. Although many students concluded that some rituals are done without much serious thought, studying the objects of personal ritual helped students better understand and interpret their value. Using information from their study of a personal ritual, students chose familiar two-dimensional drawing and/or painting to create a realistic artwork about a personal ritual, emphasizing the objects of ritual, and then shared stories of cultural and historical values they engendered.

Ms J chose prayer as her ritual, identifying a cross as an object to represent her strong Christian belief in life after death. While working on her acrylic painting, she revealed the story of her granddaughter who died from a car accident. Meanwhile, she placed the symbol of her ritual (a wooden cross) into a bright morning landscape.

Mr L decided to draw a special lamp that he purchased with his late wife, and reflected on that experience (Figure 13). His ritual every night before going to sleep was to think of his wife before reaching over to turn off the lamp. He chose to create a still life coloured pencil drawing of the lamp and another of a cooking pot that he regularly used.

Mr C, a new member of the class, talked about a past ritual when he played guitar in a travelling band, hoping to become a rock star. We discussed the history of the guitar and how the electric guitar changed the sound of rock-and-roll music. He also thought that it reduced the musician's skill level compared to what was necessary for playing acoustic guitar. This experience inspired a self-portrait oil painting on a small canvas (Figure 14). Unfortunately, a neurological disorder prevented him from playing his guitar, but he did find some solace reflecting on it.

It is unreasonable to expect everyone to follow a particular unit theme. Some might come to class with a specific goal in mind and want you to be their mentor. This is reminiscent of Knowles research on SDL (1975) and andragogy (1984). One student refused to make art inspired by the gallery exhibition. She was willing to talk about the art, but was more interested in drawing faces, which she did.



Figure 13: Mr. L's ritual lamp.

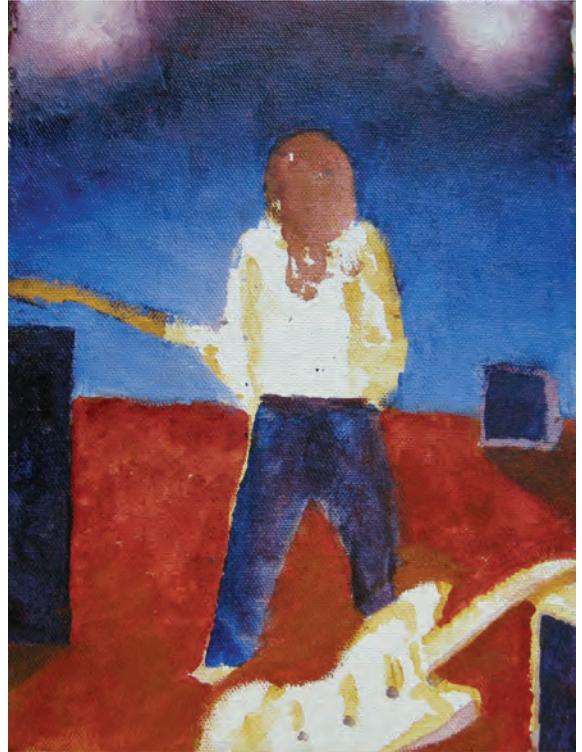


Figure 14: Mr. C's in-process ritual painting.

Ms E exclaimed, 'I don't participate in any rituals'. She believed that people were more important than objects. Everyone in the class stopped what they were doing. I asked if there was anything that she enjoyed doing regularly with people that related to an object, maybe something that was a family ritual. She finally revealed an interest in her family's British ritual of making Christmas pudding in a special mould, a long involved process that she explained. There were special ingredients, intermittent stirring, and the addition of small tokens (top hat, money bag, wish bone) into the batter. She had to be careful eating the pudding, but she loved finding the tokens. Other students took an interest in the recipe. Ms J asked if she used eggs. Meanwhile, Ms E drew the pudding mold, Christmas ornaments and a snowman with a pencil while describing the tokens (Figure 6). I asked if she had other stories about the objects she had drawn, including a snowman. Ms E went on to say that the first time she ever saw snow in England was at the age of 7. A tin can of snow she had collected turned into brown water. Although she had never built a snowman, she had watched her daughter make one in Michigan.

Regardless of the abilities and backgrounds of these students, each person made their own connections to art. Curriculum experiences that motivated students most were visiting contemporary art exhibitions, seeing a variety of artists' works, the abstract painting with open-ended directions, and art that connected to themes of healing and ritual. Yet, particular interests prevailed: realistic drawings and paintings of landscapes, personal objects and portraits.

CONCLUSION

SDL from adult education theory is central to this study's findings. It was important to allow adult and older adult students' interests and abilities to drive curriculum. These students were often self-directed, where the instructor best served them as a facilitator or resource for learning, and built on what students wanted to learn. Even if students initially preferred a more teacher-directed approach, as in the case of Ms B, once she developed confidence through the support of students and teachers in the class and the self-recognition of her art as comparable to Elizabeth Layton, she became more motivated and self-directed.

This particular group of students had a broad range of backgrounds, levels of art expertise and life experiences. When they wanted to create potato jewelry, paint realistic landscapes, or draw portraits, teachers broadened their exposure and understanding of those subject areas. We introduced multiple styles and interpretations of portraits. We exposed students to a variety of art and media, encouraging them to expand their notion of art and appreciation of it. For students attracted to, but intimidated by realism, using open-ended directions to create abstract art through elements and principles of design eased their apprehensions and prepared them to approach future art-making experiences with more confidence. Students still maintained their own interests in art media and subject matter. Not all students responded to pre-planned curriculum, but themes with enduring ideas such as healing and ritual evoked stories and offered pathways to interesting cultural discussions and meaningful art-making, allowing for students to become more self-directed.

Socializing added an important dimension to the art class. Contrary to Taylor's (1987: 10) suggestion, 'Perhaps the emphasis of art education for the older learner should not be art as a group activity, but, art as enjoyment of relaxed solitude', the adults and older adults in this study looked forward to socialization. It was an opportunity for students to gain self-confidence through the support and comradery of peers. As Stokrocki (1998) suggested, peers can be sources of encouragement and the presentation of artists that resemble student work can be inspiring. Also, when students gained confidence in their skills and knowledge, they became more self-directed and enthusiastic about pursuing art in class and during their free time.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Angela La Porte is an Associate Professor of Art Education at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Arkansas. Her research interests are on inter-generational, social and multicultural issues in art education. She recently co-authored an article for *Studies in Art Education*, 'Beyond traditional art education: Transformative lifelong learning in community-based settings with older adults' and has edited a book published by the National Art Education Association (NAEA), *Community Connections: Intergenerational Links in Art Education*.

Contact: University of Arkansas, Department of Art, 116 Fine Arts Center, Fayetteville, Arkansas 72701, USA.

E-mail: alaporte@uark.edu

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