

## Making Friends and Making Art: An Intergenerational Learning Experience

**Susan R. Whiteland**

*University of North Texas  
Denton, Texas*

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### **Abstract**

*In this article, an after school art program titled, Making Friends and Making Art is described. The art program provided an opportunity for older adults and children to work together. Over a six-week period, community members, age 50 years and older, volunteered to learn along-side local elementary age children to create a collaborative mosaic project. Through the analysis of the data, themes of value-sharing, cooperation and collaboration, motivation, and playful interaction emerged. Also evident was that the art-making experience provided mutual benefits for both generations. The art-making experiences and discussions about art were useful in generating relationships between older and younger generations. This project may serve as a practical example of intergenerational art education.*

**Keywords:** intergenerational relationships, art education, mosaic

Correspondence regarding this article may be sent to Susan Whiteland via email:  
susan.whiteland@unt.edu

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Common cultural practice in the United States separates children and older adults. This trend began near the middle of the 20th century corresponding with a continuing decline in agrarian economy (La Porte, 2004). Age segregation may have negative consequences such as a fear of the aging process and possibly create social injustice in the form of mistrust of those outside one's age group. As a way to overcome these negative effects, Roodin (2004) suggested the use of educational programs that bring generations together. Such intergenerational opportunities provide reciprocal benefits for both older and younger participants. Older adults benefit by satisfying a need to nurture or teach, having a sense of personal accomplishment in their life, sharing cultural mores, and leaving a legacy. Children benefit by learning from and about the past, having a positive role model, connecting to preceding generations, and the nurturing that they may receive in the process.

The purpose of this article is to describe an after school art program that may serve as an example

of the type of intergenerational educational situations that Roodin (2004) recommended. The program, Making Friends and Making Art, provided an opportunity for older adults and children to work together while creating a collaborative mosaic project. The underlying philosophies of *Art for Life*, or the belief that art should benefit life rather than exist separately from it (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005), were emphasized when community members age 50 years and older volunteered to learn along-side local, elementary age children for a period of six weeks.

Shared experiences, such as the after school program described herein, may provide for meaningful learning opportunities in the context of the relationships that are built as teams and partners work together on common tasks (Johnson, 2002). Situational learning theorists posit that learning is embedded within activity and that much learning takes place unintentionally as members involved in a particular situation interact with one another (Wenger, 2006). Learning environments may

include a classroom, a laboratory, computer lab, or any number of locations that provide social, cultural, physical and psychological experiences (Center for Occupational Research and Development, 2007).

### **Background**

In the US little attention has been given to lifelong learning. A large portion of US society perceives old age as a season without purpose or as a disease. In response to industrialization, life has been categorized into three boxes: (a) childhood and education, (b) adulthood and work, and (c) old age and retirement (Rugh, 1998). There is a need to develop a new image of aging, rather than the pessimistic age-as-decline model. As people move through life, they encounter numerous experiences influenced by individual personality differences and freedom of choice. Aging opens the door to meaningful new roles and activities (Moody, 2002).

Intellectual curiosity, the desire to be involved in the lives of others, and the resiliency to endure and adapt to challenges are characteristics typical of older adults who engage in lifelong learning and intergenerational relationships (Kim & Merriam, 2004; Lamb & Brady, 2005; Stanford, 2006). Several research studies (Cohen & Gene,

2006; Diamond, 1988; Larson, 2006; Saltiel, 1998) document the positive effect that lifelong learning provides for older adults. Other researchers (Hannon & Gueldner, 2007; Johnson, 2002; Kaplan, 1994; Larson, 2006; Vanderven 2004; Zelkowitz, 2004) documented the benefits for both older and younger participants when intergenerational relationships are forged.

Most intergenerational research has been in fields outside of arts education (La Porte, 2004). While the fields of gerontology and sociology have documented the positive effects of reducing age related stereotypes, including the prevention of depression and improvement of self-worth among older adults, few studies have investigated the quality of shared learning between the old and young participating in visual art programs (La Porte, 2004). This oversight continues to exist despite the fact that the National Art Education Association (NAEA) and the Arts Educational Partnership (AEP) have both called for the need for research related to lifelong learning in art education (Goals 2000 Art Education Partnership, 1997; NAEA Commission on Research in Art Education, 1994).

Over the past decade only a few research studies have explored



Figure 1. *First day of class - Learning dyads: Circle Ice Breaker.*

the positive aspects of intergenerational relationships formed in mixed-age art education programs. An oral history project used artworks as dialogue prompts and collage-making to foster a sense of empowerment for older adults and young people. In the process age related stereotypes were reduced (La Porte, 2000). At-risk teens and senior adults worked through their negative feelings of distrust when they collaborated in creating block prints, memory boxes, collage and relief sculpture (Gilden & Perlstein, 2004). Intergenerational learners worked together to create illustrated stories of personal life events.

The mutual listening and sharing between the age groups created an atmosphere of caring (Lawton, 2004). The process of creating a community mural between high school students and nursing home residents reduced generational prejudice and fostered improved relationships among peers, self-assurance and the ability to resolve conflicts (Zelkowitz, 2004). School children and older community volunteers created a climate for mentoring and learning about environmental preservation while engaging in various art forms through a wetlands community service project (Sickler-Voigt, 2010). These examples point to the practical

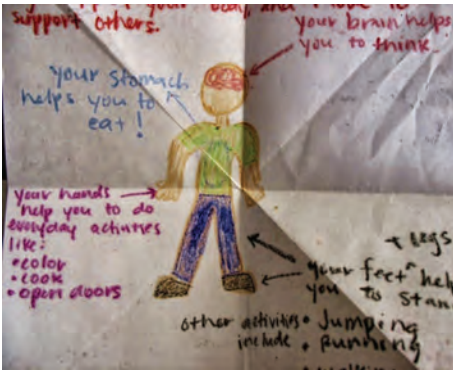


Figure 2a & 2b. *Memory book page responses.*

application of art in bringing the generations together in mutually beneficial relationships. They suggest mentoring and learning situations where trust is built and personal values can be shared. They illustrate experiences of taking risks, cooperation, collaboration and motivation that can take place among those of different ages while engaging in the common pursuit of art.

### Methodology

I used qualitative case study methods to understand the intergenerational learning that took place between six older adults, ages 53-78, and nine younger students, ages 6-10, who were enrolled in an elementary school's after hours' enrichment program. Case study methodology provided a rich context for not only investigating the pertinent facts necessary for answering research questions and allowed the researcher an op-

portunity to take part in the subtle nuances that can be discovered through narratives and testimony. I sought answers for the following questions: In what ways are values shared between intergenerational learners in an art class? In what ways do intergenerational learners motivate each other during art production or art discussions? In what ways do intergenerational learners demonstrate the characteristic of risk taking in art activities? In what ways do intergenerational learners demonstrate cooperation and collaboration in an art making project?

Field notes, photographs, and participant reflections in the Memory Books were the data sources (Eisner, 1998). Thematic analysis was used to understand the collected data. Much like the analogy of working a jig saw puzzle (Seidel, 1998), the research questions helped me to sort my data into groups in an effort to deter-



mine how the pieces fit together to form a completed picture.

I made spontaneous notations of my observations on scraps of paper, and wrote more in depth recollections at a later time in a field journal. I considered conversations that I overheard and noticed the body language and voice intonation used by the older and younger art students as they actively engaged with one another in class. I also took digital photos to remind me of the exchanges between the learning dyads (see Figure 1). After each day's session I purposely relived in my mind's eye what took place during the intergenerational art lessons and carefully record-

ed the events for later analysis.

Guided by the research questions I used a color coding system to assist me in the data analysis. I assigned a color for each theme and hand marked my data accordingly (Miles & Huberman, 1994) as I discovered instances of value sharing, cooperation and collaboration, motivation, and playful interaction occurring among intergenerational partners. My understanding of the qualitative data was corroborated through member-checking with the participants to verify my interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Pseudonyms were given to the five older adults participants: Ms. Sandy, Ms. Phoebe, Ms. Sarah, Mrs. Betty and Ms. Johanna. In



Figure 3. *Folding memory book pages.*



Figure 4. Tiling work on group mosaic

this paper I will refer to these older adults by their pseudonyms and to seven of the nine younger students by their pseudonyms as Palmer, Ruby, Elyssa, Addie, Mike, Andy and Chuck. The children were partnered with an older adult to engage in art conversations and studio activities. Six classes of about 90 minutes each took place in the school cafeteria during the case study.

Each day as part of the art curriculum, students reflected on photographs taken on a recent trip to Spain. Intergenerational partners shared their ideas about the photographs while reflecting on picture prompts and written questions pro-

vided. The partners shared personal likes and interests and verbalized the commonalities and differences in their answers to each other and to the class. The learning partners also wrote responses in their Memory Books, journals created as one of the studio activities, using both text and drawings to document their learning and interaction (see Figures 2a & 2b). The students culminated their time together through the creation of a group mosaic (see Figure 6) that depicted designs and images from their intergenerational art engagement.

### **Emerging Themes**

The findings of this study revealed four emergent themes

identified through theme analysis of the qualitative data. The four themes were value sharing, cooperation and collaboration, motivation, and playful interaction.

### ***Value Sharing***

Value sharing is the passing of value judgments and mores between two or more people. Older adults are in a unique position due to the wisdom gained through their life experiences to share what they have learned with young people (Oelschlaeger, 1995). Participants in the after school program both consciously and unconsciously shared values as documented by my data collection and suggested by the following scenarios.

On one occasion a discussion during an art activity opened an opportunity for an older adult to share moral instruction with her young counter-part. Palmer mentioned that his dad had two guns in the house and that he knew where they were. Ms. Sandy remarked, "And you know not to touch them, don't you?" Thus, Ms. Sandy related her thoughts about the danger of guns to Palmer and she subtly suggested that he stay out of harm's way.

Moral dilemmas were often discussed and new perspectives shared after art topics were introduced in the art class. In one

instance, class members considered if borrowing ideas from others was appropriate when creating art. Ms. Sandy said that she often followed patterns when making quilts. In her view this practice was similar to borrowing someone else's idea, and she felt it was acceptable. Ms. Phoebe told the class that she looked at dresses worn by others when her daughters were younger and used the ideas garnered from her observations to sew similar dresses for her children. These conversations allowed students and elders to consider their beliefs in regard to appropriation versus stealing.

The older adults in the art class emphasized the value they placed on lifelong learning and did not hesitate to learn from their younger partners. One example of this took place when Ms. Phoebe asked Elyssa to teach her how to fold her book pages during an art activity that used a lotus fold technique (see Figure 3). Ms. Phoebe said that she had missed the earlier instructions and that she needed Elyssa to teach her.

As intergenerational partners spent time with one another in the art class there were also values that were transferred unconsciously. Patience was one virtue that was modeled and made particularly apparent to one student, Ruby. I noted in my field



notes the following occurrence:

Ruby commented, "I like art. My mom doesn't like to take time to make things. It frustrates her." Ruby and her grandmother, who was one of the older adults in the art program, had exchanged whispers and knowing smiles about the times that they had shared making art together and the patience that the older adult showed her granddaughter in the process.

Ruby's relationship with her grandmother was an example of how intergenerational relationships provide simple life lessons such as exercising patience that are often missed or overlooked by many parents due to their busy work schedules (Vander Ven, 2004).

One elder's persistence through a difficult time is another example of a life lesson that was unconsciously shared. The situation involved Ms. Sandy's attendance at the art class. Ms. Sandy had suffered severe bruising due to a fall the day before class and had debated if her presence would upset the children. Ms. Sarah told Ms. Sandy, "Being hurt is part of life. Maybe it is good to have children see how one responds to it."

Values were shared through dialogue between intergenerational partners, and through the older adults serving as role models. Anec-

dotal conversation often led to the sharing of value systems. Participants recognized that lifelong learning and knowledge building were not age restrictive. They also recognized that borrowing ideas could be considered acceptable and valuable for certain purposes, including art making. Overall, contextual learning experiences set the stage for values to be transferred amid interactions of older and younger participants involved in art activities.

### ***Cooperation and Collaboration***

A second theme emerged during the analysis of the intergenerational art class. Frequent cooperation and collaboration incidences took place between intergenerational partners (see Figure 4). Cooperation is the interdependence of others that takes place for a common positive goal with assigned or assumed accountability (Johnson & Johnson, 1988). Collaboration relates to co-created ideas and "removes the mental blinders imposed by limited experience and narrow perceptions. It makes it possible to discover personal strengths and weaknesses, learn to respect others, listen with an open mind and build consensus" (Johnson, 2002, p. 89).

Intergenerational participants readily offered help and fulfilled assigned responsibilities when asked



Figure 5. *Grouting group mosaic*

to do so. They volunteered without solicitation. For example, Ms. Johanna took responsibility for calling members to the group mosaic tiling table on the first day of tiling and began demonstrating the gluing process to the groups. The younger students also exhibited cooperation. Addie, a fifth grade student demonstrated cooperation by stirring the grout and allowing other students to take turns as they prepared the mixture for the group mosaic. Mike and Andy, two young students, distributed supplies and took special care to fulfill each class member's needs even

when it required going out of their way to find a particular color that someone requested. Regularly the students set up and arranged chairs as needed. The younger students took turns waiting for one another to complete thoughts instead of interrupting, and they raised their hand for permission to talk during large group discussions.

Overall participants took ownership in carrying out assigned and unassigned class roles while fellow participants showed respect and courtesy toward them in this process. Ms. Betty summarized the cooperative attitude of the

group when she said, “We are a mosaic of people, thoughts, and feelings expressing ourselves with tiles on a board!”

There was also evidence of collaboration among class members. It was apparent when younger students shared their ideas in group discussions and worked together with others in creating the group mosaic. I am reminded of a specific example that illustrates the theme of collaboration by recalling a class discussion regarding bodies. After looking at examples of Spanish statuary, class members identified body parts that they felt they characterized. One student said that she was the legs of the class’ body because she supported the other class members like the legs supported the body of the statue. Ruby’s mom who attended the discussion added that Ruby could be the heart of the group because she had a compassionate nature. The consensus of the group was that all members of the class were important and that each member had special contributions to offer the group.

Assigned and volunteered roles for intergenerational participants engendered feelings of pride, resourcefulness and respect. Collaboration was evident as intergenerational partners shared ideas and opinions during group discussions.

### ***Motivation***

The third theme that emerged in my data analysis was motivation. The term suggests providing a motive or reason for pursuing a particular course of action (Motivate, 1980). During the six-week period there were numerous situations where one or more intergenerational students provided a motive for another member of the class to respond in a particular way. The students’ desire to consistently attend and participate in the intergenerational art class underscored that motivation was taking place. Excitement and active engagement in the art making experience also contributed to an awareness of motivation. The reason that participants may have been motivated to participate is suggested by Chuck’s interview response. He said that he liked working with older adults because they appreciated his art and they showed him how to do things. Elyssa heard Chuck’s comment and added that she would like to have elders in other school classes like math or writing so that they could help her in positive and fun ways in those classes, too.

Students were also motivated to feel concern for others during the course of the art class. This outward concern for others’ well being was keenly noticeable on

the fifth class day. All class members spent concentrated effort and time on putting together the group mosaic. They were fearful the mosaic would not get finished. Two of the elder participants offered to work on the mosaic outside of class time to insure its completion.

The comments of both the young students and older adults suggested that motivation was taking place in the art class. The younger students were prompted or motivated to interact with older adults because the older adults showed appreciation toward the children, assisted them through explanations, and were associated with having fun. The older adults' offered to meet me outside of class time to complete the mosaic emphasized their investment in the art project and their concern for others.

*The intergenerational art class provided a context for the older and younger learners to motivate others as well as experience motivating factors themselves.*

In summary, intergenerational partners motivated each other through encouraging dialogue and

in regard to making wise choices. Motivation was observable in consistent attendance, an elevated excitement level and active engagement in the art making experiences.

### ***Playful Interaction***

Playful interaction also emerged as a significant theme in this study. Through play, people can express what they know, clarify concepts, and organize knowledge (Szekely, 1991). Intergenerational learners exhibited a playful attitude as they interacted with one another throughout the after school art program.

Ms. Millie said that she joined the intergenerational class because she needed an enjoyable break from absorption in her own work. Ms. Phoebe said, "Being with the children makes us feel younger." Daily activities offered an element of playful risk taking and art responses demonstrated a freedom in self-expression. Both were characterized as being fun.

A conversation between Palmer and Ms. Sandy illustrates a playful exchange between a younger and older friend. Palmer, a kindergartener, playfully described a fantastically exaggerated story to Ms. Sandy about how he was a skilled hunter with a knife. This occurred after Ms. Sandy told him she didn't like

guns. Ms. Sandy listened intently to Palmer's animated exploits and encouraged others to join in the playful dialogue of the kindergartener. She said, "Did you know that Palmer is a skilled knife warrior?" Ms. Sandy asked if he used a Bowie knife to which Palmer responded no, it wasn't a boomerang that he was using. Ms. Sandy chuckled and tried to clarify that she had not said boomerang.

Another occasion exemplifying playfulness occurred when Palmer decided Ms. Sarah needed to go for a ride in her wheel chair. Palmer pushed the wheel chair away from the meeting tables into the center of the cafeteria. He picked up his space almost as if he and Ms. Sarah were running around in circles.

The playfulness exhibited in the intergenerational class often translated itself into art making. Ms. Johanna demonstrated playfulness in writing her Memory Book journal entries. She made pictures out of her word text to describe the concept implied, such as transforming the word hug into three embracing letters.

Ms. Sandy chose to forego putting on the plastic gloves provided for grouting the tile. She expressed that she wanted to feel the texture of the paste. She pushed the sticky substance across the face of the mosaic into the cracks between the tiles openly exhibiting her enjoyment (see Figure 5). Palmer dangled his

over-sized gloves in the air saying his grout encrusted plastic gloves made him look like he had monster hands.

The kinetic and tactile art experiences exhibited in the intergenerational art class provided many opportunities for playful risk taking. Daily activities offered freedom in self-expression and play. The participants confirmed my understanding that playful risk taking was taking place during their time together by describing their intergenerational interactions as fun.

### **Conclusion**

The overall purpose of this study was to describe an intergenerational art program as a way to share experiences with those seeking to create educational situations that bring generations together (Roodin, 2004). Few studies have been conducted in this area in art education (La Porte, 2004), and the intergenerational interaction in this case provided a meaningful environment for student learning in art. For the participants in this study, art making experiences and discussions about art were useful in generating relationships between older and younger generations. The results of this case may provide insight for visual art educators and the educational community at large for developing curriculum and appropriate structure for establishing meaningful intergenerational experiences.





Figure 6. *Finished "Jaguars" mosaic.*

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