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Accessibility for the Older Population: Seniors and Arts Participation

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Nowadays, people are living much longer; the senior population is increasing at a rapid rate (Saxon & Spitznagel, 1991). In the United States, since 2010, people aged over 65 were as many as the population under age 20 (Hanna & Perlstein, 2008). Although the number of older people in all states has risen, there is a notable percentage of the elderly in Florida (Esri, 2012; Holt, Colburn, & Leverty, n.d.; Larsen, 2012; Office of Economic and Demographic Research, 2012). The fast growing number of the retired who move to the sunshine state has important implications for recreation facilities, especially arts-oriented facilities, such as senior centers and art museums, provided in the state.

Issues of time and money dominate leisure activities, which include visiting arts museums (Falk & Dierking, 2000) and other arts facilities. The good news is "older people are currently, and projected to be, more educated and wealthier than previous generations of Americans" (Hanna & Perlstein, 2008, p. 2). However, when visiting art museums and other arts-oriented facilities, the retired who have both time and spending power might encounter accessibility problems such as *physical*, *communicational*, and *attitudinal* barriers (Korza, Brown, & Dreeszen, 2007). Accordingly, understanding how seniors engage in visual arts, from passive observation to active participation, will help art museums in Florida address inclusion of the aging population (Thongnopnua, 2013).

Statement of Problem

Given the rapidly increasing elderly population (Hanna & Perlstein, 2008), and the corollary notion that their well-being would be a benchmark for civilized living (Kinsella and Phillips, 2005), Cohen (2000) introduced the arts and creativity as a new paradigm for aging. Twenty-five years after the major federal research programs on aging were launched in the mid-1970s, the idea of understanding older people for their great potential rather than their problems was pronounced (Cohen, 2000, 2006; Thongnopnua, 2013), and since the pivotal articulation of

potential is creativity, the elderly have been encouraged to engage in art activities (Cohen, Perlstein, Chapline, Kelly, Firth, & Simmens, 2006; Hanna & Perlstein, 2008). Arts participation is not only fast becoming accepted for its benefits to seniors' health and morale, but it also paves the way for social well-being by building meaningful connection among individual seniors, their families, and our communities (Thongnopnua, 2013) and has earned a place in transforming the experience of being old into healthier, productive, meaningful, and purposeful aging (Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 2010; Cohen, 2000; Cohen, Perlstein, Chapline, Kelly, Firth, & Simmens, 2006; Cutler, 2009; Hanna & Perlstein, 2008; Sherman, 1996). Furthermore, funding institutions started to realize and recognize the significance of making artistic and creative services accessible to senior citizens (Hanna & Perlstein, 2008). As a result, resources have shifted to support arts and creativity programs provided by and for the aging population. Therefore, senior centers and nursing homes, as well as museums have expanded their embrace of arts and crafts (Butler, 2002) into professionally conducted arts programs (Hanna & Perlstein, 2008). Through eliminating physical, communication, and attitudinal barriers (Korza, Brown, & Dreeszen, 2007; Salmen, 1998; Thongnopnua, 2013), art museums have committed to making the arts, facilities, and programs accessible in every phase of people's lives (National Age Discrimination and National Bureau for Accessibility, 2000) including for senior citizens (Heffernan & Schnee, 1981; Hooper-Greenhill, 1994; Sharpe, 1992).

But there has been a critical gap between the desire to provide arts to seniors and the actual provision of arts services (Hanna & Perlstein, 2008; Thongnopnua, 2013). There are insufficient arts organizations that offer practical professional arts engagement to the aging population (Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 2010; Cohen, Perlstein, Chapline, Kelly, Firth, & Simmens, 2006; Cutler, 2009; Hanna & Perlstein, 2008; Korza, Brown, & Dreeszen, 2007; National Age Discrimination, 2000; Sherman, 1996; Thongnopnua, 2013). In addition, little

empirical evidence about how seniors experience and make sense of the arts participation is available. This study seeks to address that issue.

Focus and Methodology

Understanding how the aging population engages in art, from passive observation to active participation, in particular settings may help art museums and other arts-centered senior facilities become more aware of contextual influences on seniors' physical, communicational, and attitudinal access in art museums (Thongnopnua, 2013). Accordingly, I have conducted a field-based study on the experience of a selected senior group focused on older people's attitudes about arts participation that also explored issues of accessibility for the aging population in art museums.

I conducted this study to understand how seniors experience and make sense of arts participation. Specifically, I wanted to explore the meaning of seniors' experiences of a watercolor workshop at the Tallahassee Senior Center and how they articulate those experiences. My research procedures included building connections with the Tallahassee, Florida, Senior Center and doing fieldwork at the Senior Center's art workshops (observation, interview, document review, and questionnaire survey).

Research Model and Data Collection

For the purpose of illuminating a societal concern, I chose to use an *applied research model* (Patton, 2002) to direct my methods decisions. My goal was to contribute knowledge that will help everyone understand a context-bound nature and essence of seniors' experiences of arts participation and the potential value of that participation.

Figure 1. Watercolor workshop at Tallahassee Senior Center.

My focus was on seniors who were participating in a watercolor workshop at the Tallahassee Senior Center. Thus, the primary focus of data collection was on what was happening to individual seniors in that setting and how they were affected by the setting. Since this research was context-bound, sampling methodology played a big role in giving me strategic information. The first strategy I started off with was *criterion sampling* (Patton, 2002). I picked all cases that meet the following criteria: all seniors who were participating in the watercolor workshop, taught by Rosemary Ferguson, at the Tallahassee Senior Center every Friday, from 1:00 to 3:30 p.m., from September 7 to October 26, 2012. Later, *opportunistic or emerging sampling* (Patton, 2002) came up when I was in the field. This sampling strategy gave me opportunities to discover some unexpected issues about seniors and arts participation. As for interviews, I also used *criterion sampling* strategy to obtain two interviewees. Both interviewees are seniors who showed continued engagement in the watercolor workshop. I spent six sessions

at the Senior Center as recorded in my field notes including three observation periods, two

interviews, and a document review.

It also is important to determine the role of the researcher before beginning the fieldwork.

For my observer's role, I determined not to participate in making art because such participation

could distract me from my study. But due to the nature of the observation I could not be

removed or anonymous. I kept in mind that the seniors in the watercolor workshop that I

observed also observed me. Some of the 12 seniors came to talk to me and asked some questions

about my background. During observations, I made notes and took photos. In my field notes I

used descriptive language, trying to use participants' words where I could and addressing

tensions in my role as a researcher, recorded chronology of events, used direct quotes, and

included the length of time for each of my fieldworks.

I applied the phenomenological interviewing method to the study of participants' lived

experiences and worldviews (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) that served my purposes for developing a

deeper understanding of the phenomenon of seniors' engaging in a watercolor workshop at the

senior center. In addition, I used the interviews as a vehicle to develop a colloquial connection

with my interviewees about the implications of their experience (Van Manen, 1990). A

standardized interview was used in my data collecting process focused on the "life history,

specific details of their experiences of the topic, and their reflection on the meaning*"* (Rossman

& Rallis, 2003). Questions asked were developed from reviewing the purpose statement of my

study and what I learned from the site visit. As a result, I came up with seven questions, which

can be categorized into three groups: (a) motivation for taking the watercolor workshop, (b)

experience of the workshop, and (c) reflection on their arts participation experience. After I

thought about types of questions to ask, I also sequenced the questions from simple to complex,

from broad to narrow.

Data Analysis

The methods that I used to analyze the data are an integration of my theoretical approach (phenomenological construction of meaning) and a conceptual framework, Falk and Dierking's (2000) *Contextual Model of Learning*. The Falk and Dierking model involves three overlapping contexts: *the personal*, *the sociocultural*, and *the physical*. Learning is the process and also the product of interactions between these three contexts. Basically, the Contextual Model is used to describe and analyze how people learn in a museum, which I adapted to analyze how seniors engage in arts participation at the Senior Center.

The personal context includes interest, motivation, affect, and flow experience. Learning is facilitated by personal interest. When people are in a supporting environment, they are motivated to do free-choice learning and feel satisfied. During free-choice learning, people can select challenges that meet their skills to be most personally rewarding. And then, people have flow experiences and learn more about themselves.

The sociocultural context views people as individuals but also as members of a larger group or society (Falk & Dierking, 2000). Therefore, learning is an individual and also a group experience. In other words, people share the same experiences and meanings in the delimited communities. The collection of shared beliefs and customs is cultural. Through the process of social cognition, people learn to conceptualize themselves, interact with others, and imagine another's thoughts and feelings and develop a shared understanding of the group.

The physical context is what visitors see, what they do, and how they physically feel in museums. For the purpose of survival, people have the need to find patterns in a state of chaos and make sense of the environment. Therefore, the physical context plays an important role in learning.

Coding schemes. The phenomenological perspective helped me develop the super

categories (L. Schrader, personal communication, October 25, 2012): *motivation*, *experience*,

and *reflection*—to find the essence of the seniors' experiences of a watercolor workshop at

Tallahassee Senior Center and how they articulate those experiences. Under each super

category, I used *the Contextual Model of Learning* to conceptualize the categories: *personal*

context, *sociocultural context*, and *physical context*. Under each category there are sub-

categories; and each sub-category has codes (see Figure 2).
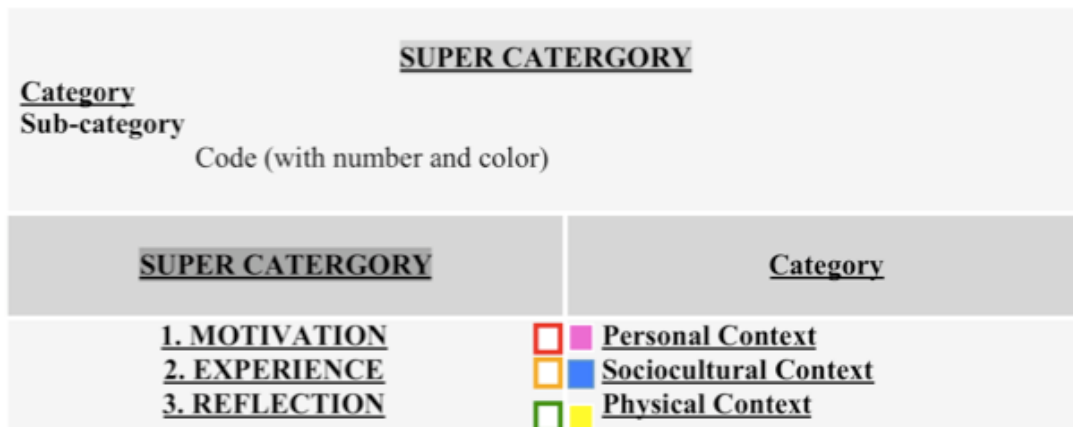

Figure 2. Coding Schemes.

My coding strategies included using colored outlined squares to represent super

categories and shaded colored squares to represent categories.   Therefore, the representation of

each sub-category is comprised of both frame and square. For example, motivation from

personal context is represented by red frame enclosing pink square; motivation from

sociocultural context is represented by red frame enclosing blue square; and motivation from

physical context is represented by red frame enclosing yellow square.

After a long and intense immersion process, sub-categories and codes started to emerge

focusing on utility, clarity, relevance, and applicability. *Inductive analysis* is the strategy I used

to help myself identify salient sub-categories within my data (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

Furthermore, I identified *sensitizing concepts* (Patton, 2002), which is the concepts I, as an artist

and arts administrator, brought to setting, which was the watercolor workshop. First, I generated

sub-categories and codes by hand-drawn mapping. Afterwards, I re-organized them again and

again until I came up with the more digestible coding system. Coding is the way I linked my

data to a conceptual issue. Accordingly, I used different letter(s) and numbers to represent each

code. The letter(s) used in each code is/are the same as the letter(s) that represent(s) the sub-

category that the code is under.

      Generating themes. According to my heightened awareness of the data, I tried to find

patterns of actions that signal something more subtle and complex than categories. This required

that I review my coded data again and again. To find some emerging patterns, I decided to tally

my codes. After I gained some sense and started to discern patterns of meaning, I began to

create a concept map (Figure 3). My concept mapping helped me visualize the connection

between the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that I used to analyze my data:

phenomenology and the Contextual Model of Learning by Falk and Dierking (2000). Thus, the

emerging patterns to generate themes are range-bound to: *Motivation* from *personal* context;

Motivation from *sociocultural* context; *Motivation* from *physical* context; *Experience* in *personal*

context; *Experience* in *sociocultural* context; *Experience* in *physical* context; *Reflection* of

personal context; *Reflection* of *sociocultural* context; and *Reflection* of *physical* context.
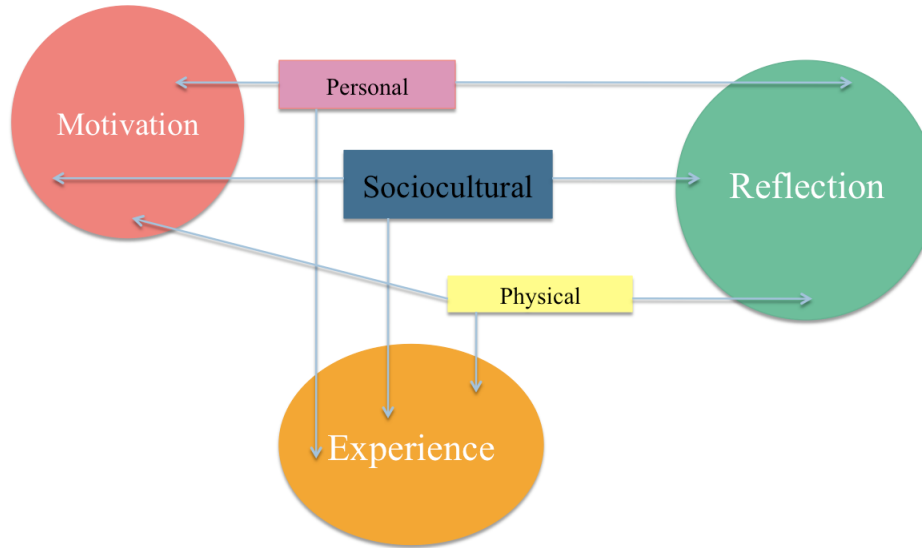
Figure 3. Concept mapping.

Findings and Emergent Themes

As a result of the findings of this study certain themes emerged:

Theme 1: *The sociocultural context is an important factor in motivating seniors to participate in the art workshop at the Tallahassee Senior Center.*

The data confirms that *family*, *friends*, and *the teacher* play a big role in encouraging the seniors to participate in this watercolor workshop. From analyzing my coded data, I found emerging patterns that support this theme. I used not only multiple methods, but also source triangulation to support this theme. For example, in both interviews, the seniors said that their families and friends encouraged their painting and supported them. Furthermore, both senior interviewees said that they started to participate in the watercolor workshop because their teacher at their church taught at the senior center. From this, I could see the pattern that the seniors see the teacher as an important motivator. Moreover, from my observation field notes, I could see the pattern that arts participation is not only an individual but also a group experience. The seniors appeared to enjoy sharing the collective experiences in the art workshop. Through the

process of social cognition, the seniors seemed to conceptualize themselves, take pleasure in interacting with one another, and imagining another's thoughts and feelings. On top of that, when they interacted and discussed with others, they appeared to provide opportunities to reinforce their experiences and develop a shared understanding of the group. And my document review about the senior center offering variety of classes also supports this theme: "TSC offers the basic foundation to meet new and intriguing people. Through classes, active adults are able not only to branch out into new activities and explore their own originality, but also have the opportunity to learn about others while sharing the experience" (Santoro, 2012, para. 4).

Theme 2: *Participating in the art workshop at Tallahassee Senior Center helps seniors to enhance their perception of things around them and their interpretation of the arts.*

From analyzing my coded data, I found the emerging patterns that support this theme. I used source triangulation to support this theme. In both interviews, the seniors said that participating in the art workshop gave them a new way of looking at art. For example, one participant said: "I think this class, in particular, has given me a new way of looking at my art. I think sometimes I always want to hold myself to some standard, like something I saw in the museum or show. And I think this class is certainly helping me to break away from that seeing that all of us using the same technique, but with pouring our color in different ways that we come up with different patterns. And they are all unique and they are all nice."

Another interviewee said: "Another benefit is increased observation skills, I see nature, scenes, buildings, ocean, etc. so differently now. One of the main benefits I think of taking art classes is it gives me the opportunity to look at things differently to see things with an artist's eye. To see shapes and textures and colors, to look at nature and see flower, or buildings, or the ocean….I can see them differently now because I'm looking through the eye of an artist."

My document review about the variety of classes offered by the senior center also supports this theme. Seniors' sharing of experiences in the art workshop not only encourages their free thinking and creativity, but also promotes the exchange of the ways they perceive and interpret art and other things in their daily lives (Santoro, 2012).

In addition, from my observation field notes, the seniors appeared to feel more and more comfortable about talking about and discussing their own and others' artworks. Their perspective about art seemed to change; most seniors appeared to become more open-minded and excited to discover a variety of styles. At the same time, their skill in interpretation of the arts increased. On top of that, the seniors appeared to enjoy discussing about how they look at things around them differently; everything seemed to give them great aesthetic pleasure.

Theme 3: ***The seniors get more out of the arts participation because of the non-threatening and noncompetitive environment.***

The data triangulation confirms that seniors' experience in the art workshop is meaningful to them in part because of the friendly, non-threatening, and noncompetitive atmosphere. For example one participant said, "I think classes like this at the senior center are also different because students support each other. Not only do we become friends, but I think there are a tendency when you are younger to be more competitive in everything that you do, in your job, and you know in the sports you participate in, and just everything. That would probably have carried over for me in art if I had started at an early age. But now, I do it because I want to learn and I want to see, you know, what I can produce. But my friends, you know, they are not threatening anymore because they're doing that because they want to do it, you know, and see what they can learn too. So we are able to support each other in a very non-threatening way. And, I think we get so much more out of it now as a class because we don't worry about the competitiveness of each other." Another interviewee said: "It is such a positive experience to

be here. While I don't feel my art is 'good' I can see so much improvement in my work and get

excited about my progress. Everyone, teacher and fellow students are so positive and

supportive."

Also from my observation field notes, I could see the pattern that the class's atmosphere

was very friendly and students appeared to be positive and supportive. For example, after the

teacher finished the demonstration of how to use gesso to make an effect in watercolor painting,

one student went first to try it with her painting. The other students gathered around and cheered

her on: "Yay yay yay!." At the same time, some students were clapping their hands and kept

saying, "Nice! You can do it! You did a good job!"

Furthermore, my document review suggests that it is actually a goal of the Center to offer

a variety of classes that support this theme: "Conversations while working on the next artful

masterpiece, stretching to the music, playing a game or learning a language can lead to new and

lasting friendships. Members not only find a creative outlet, but also a social one" (Santoro,

2012, para. 4).

Figure 5. High ceiling with square glass windows and good lighting.

Additionally, the physical environment provided by Tallahassee Senior Center in the art

workshop facilitates seniors to focus not only on art participation, but on feeling safe and

enjoying their experience. The classroom is well organized physically but also helps orient

seniors to the site through that organization. From my observations, I could see that the site

accommodates seniors' experience in art participation by being wheelchair accessible, for

example, through which seniors' mobility is promoted throughout the site. Moreover, to aid

seniors' eyesight, a very high ceiling and with large square window glass in the walls and good

lighting allows a lot of light to come into the room (see Figure 4). The temperature was always

moderate and comfortable when I was there.

Figure 5. The counter at the back of the room.

Last but not least, to maximize seniors' ability to participate, not only physical but also

communicational and attitudinal access are provided in the art workshop. Promoting

communications access, a bulletin board, which has some news posted, such as exhibiting

opportunities at the senior center, helps seniors create their sense of belonging to the community.

A coffee maker, a computer, and other office supplies provided on the counter on the back of the

room (see Figure 5) not only help create the non-threatening environment, but also make seniors

feel at home. For example, one participant said, "I thoroughly enjoy this experience and look

forward to the excitement and learning in an environment that has never been a part of my life

before. In this environment, there is no pressure. In this environment, there's no

'great'…there's no marks of success, except the success that I feel myself."

Conclusion

Conducting this field study on the experience of seniors, who participate in the art

workshops at the Tallahassee Senior Center, helps me understand the essences that form seniors'

reflection on the meaning of engaging with visual arts. Allowing the participants to speak for

themselves instead of generalizing the participants' experiences, supported my observations and

document analysis seems to confirm that the personal, social and physical aspects of the

experience are all important to seniors who are participating in the art experience at the Senior

Center. Particularly important to the seniors is a physically safe and facilitating environment and

a non-competitive and emotionally supportive social and psychological context. Although the

themes from the study are context-bound, I hope that my findings can serve as the springboard

for making arts administrators in Florida and elsewhere to be more aware of how *personal*

context, *sociocultural context*, and *physical context* make an impression on seniors' motivation

of, experience in, and reflection on arts participation.

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