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The Central Role of Creative Aging

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The Central Role of Creativity in Aging

It possibly was Picasso who said that, as one grows old, life and art become one and the same. From the point of view of an artist like Pablo Picasso, living is the vehicle for the making of art—in fact, longer life gives time for the creation of masterful art!¹ More time to live gives more time to practice, to understand, and to gain insight, making one better able to create something new of value, and this is true not just for artists, but for everyone. This position paper explores the creative process and its central role in aging vitally, giving implications for future development in the field of art education.

Whether the creation is an original Picasso, Jonas Salk's discovery of the Polio vaccine, or a successful variation of one's favorite family recipe, it contributes to the individual's self-esteem and society's capacity to move forward.² Carl Jung believed creativity to be one of the most important human instincts. Jung noted that creativity, like psychological and spiritual development, is independent of age but fertile ground for aging well³.

America is graying. In 2010, the United States will have as many people over the age of 65 as there are under the age of 20. The fastest growing percentage of the population is people 85 plus. And, every day, 10,000 baby boomers turn 65 years of age. The American population has gained nearly 30 years of life expectancy since the turn of the 20th century. This demographic shift is due to better education and healthcare. It will not stop with the baby boomers of the 1940s and 50s but is expected to continue with a high percentage of children born in the millennium of the 21st century living to be 100. Opportunities and challenges abound in this demographic sea change. As the adolescence stage was invented at the beginning of the 20th century, longevity is creating the new age between middle age and old age. What this stage of life will include or even be named is still in the formative phase. There is, however, a new phase

of human development, which allows more time to live meaningfully with generative purposes for oneself and community.⁴

In a range of settings, lifelong learning in art education provides health benefits for older people, their families and community at large. Art Education is poised to benefit from this tremendous need for high-quality, cost effective creative activities. All people wish to grow older with dignity, living independent and purposeful lives for as long as possible. The arts are a key variable that provides both meaning and true connection across generations and cultures in this complex demographic change.⁵

The Creative Age

While problems certainly accompany aging, what has been universally denied is the potential around aging. The ultimate expression of potential is creativity.⁶ Awakening the human potential in the second half of life, Cohen insisted, is about being creative in using life experiences to invent new ways of living, enabling one to continue to be generative, and to contribute to one's own life and those across generations. He describes creativity as being "little c creativity" or "Big C creativity."⁷

Big C creativity includes contributions to society at large that change its knowledge base and revise structures through discoveries. It includes major works of arts and scientific discoveries that enable society to move forward by, for example, overcoming diseases or social prejudices or developing new technology or belief systems. Big C creativity allows individuals and their communities to decrease suffering and enhances the freedom to live life by producing more time to pursue happiness. From the invention of the printing press to that of the data chip, creativity comes in all shapes and sizes, in which the human experience is amplified to reach new levels of consciousness.⁸

David Galenson, author of *Old Master and Young Geniuses: The Two Life Cycles of Artistic Creativity*, describes two kinds of creative genius: the youthful burst of prodigies like Mozart and the slow and methodical work of a master like Beethoven. Galenson found that the majority of creations come later in life. Through living and experimenting, the artist or scientist gains insights and information that lead to major breakthrough or advances.⁹ Charles Darwin, for instance, discovered the animal variation of the Galapagos Islands in his twenties. Yet it took him thirty more years to gain an understanding of this variation and develop the theory of evolution. Big C creativity often takes a lifetime of work to achieve its seminal discoveries, and this makes creativity in later life extremely important.

Little c creativity is exploring and finding potential in new ways of doing everyday activities of work and pleasure. New methods of gardening, cooking, and arts and crafts are often developed from family traditions or stimulated by community settings through social engagement. Many cultures hand down methods of creative expression that define their overall society based on customs related to family, faith, and work, such as the totems of the Northwest or the grass baskets of the South. Improvements in skills and individual interpretation bring new creations to be shared and treasured.

Little c creativity can become Big C creativity as the contributions shape the next generations and inspire further exploration. For example, Mrs. Smith enjoyed growing apples late in life, and she happened upon a seed variation that produced the delicious Granny Smith apple that bears her name today and graces many a lunch box. Julia Child became interested in French cooking in her fifties, and her passion for it drove her to introduce it to America by writing books and appearing in television productions well into her nineties.

Creative expression compounds and amplifies itself, sparking increased self-knowledge and self-esteem. The potential of creative expression does not necessarily diminish with age but can be enhanced by it, through the exploration of personal preferences and environmental opportunities. Like Jung, Cohen describes later life as a time for self-reflection, evaluation, and liberation. The question, “If not now, when?” Cohen says, is the impetus for trying something creative. He explains that age brings freedom; an older person may ask, “What can anyone do to me in any case, if I try and fail?”¹⁰

There are three key entry points to the engagement by older people in creative expression or activities. An older person can become engaged in creativity for the first time late in life. Alternatively, some older people become engaged in the arts as children or young adults, have to stop because of other demands on their time and energies, and then later in life begin again. Finally, there are older people who have been able to maintain creative pursuits all their lives.

The Beginning Participant

The person who begins in later life to have a strong interest in creative expression is, according to Corbett, accommodating a rebalancing, usually stemming from an internal revelation¹¹. In fact, most folk artists and untrained artists (often called “outsider artists”) begin making art late in life using their life skills to express a story or image that they feel is important to share. Folk artists feel driven to share their beliefs about their faith or love of the natural environment, or to express the joy of making new things out of useful objects through art making.

The Returning Participant

The person who was once involved in creative activities (such as playing in a school band or singing in a chorus) but discontinued these pursuits as job and family commitments took

priority, often returns to them in later life. Both Corbett and Cohen describe this return as usually accompanied by a loss or a change in life status, perhaps retirement, the death of a spouse or other family member, or the person's own encounter with illness.^{12 13} For this older person, being involved in creativity in later life means returning to an activity that has brought joy and is now bringing comfort and a renewed sense of meaning and purpose.

The Lifelong Participant

The person who has been substantially involved in creative expression throughout his or her life is most often a professional artist or scientist or some kind of innovator in education, policy, or social services. These people found creativity early in life and have kept exploring its paths, while obtaining enough substantial support to maintain it as central to their life's work. These individuals have been identified as role models for successful aging because they stay highly engaged in a larger reality where they do not lose their purpose or meaning. Retirement is not an option, in that they would not choose another way to live and are satisfied with their life choices.

Above Ground

"How are you doing today?" the researcher asks. The 97-year-old artist responds, "Well, I'm above ground." In the research study, "Above Ground: Information on Artists III: Special Focus on New York City Aging Artists," Joan Jeffri writes, "Artists who have learned how to adapt their whole lives have a great deal to offer as a model for society, especially as the work force changes to accommodate multiple careers and as the baby boomers enter the retirement generation."¹⁴ This study interviewed 213 professional visual artists between the ages of 62 and 97 in all five boroughs of New York City and across cultures including English, Spanish, and Chinese. It found remarkable evidence that a life spent making art leads to satisfaction with

oneself and one's career choice. Despite a low average income (approximately \$30,000 annually) and discrimination because of age, gender, and sometimes an artist's discipline, these older people displayed remarkable resilience. They visited with their artist peers at least weekly and sold works continually. They found ways to adapt their artmaking when their physical abilities weakened. For instance, if a chosen medium (such as stone-carving) became too difficult to continue, the artist might turn to ceramics as a less demanding way to create sculpture. To give up making art was not an option taken. When asked about retirement, the older artists responded that to retire from making art would be for them retiring from life itself.

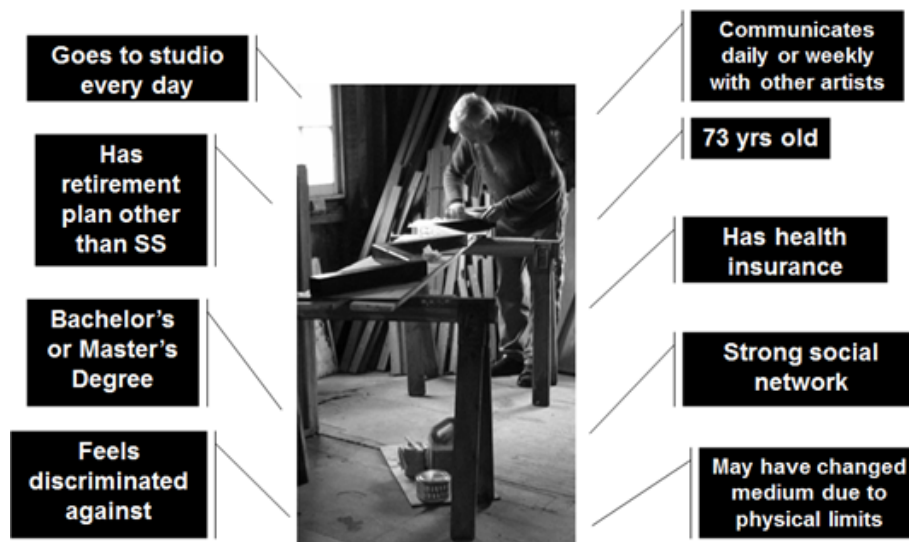


Figure 1: Profile of an older artist. Photo courtesy of the Research Center for Arts and Culture

A Framework for Accessing Creative Potential in Later Life: Policy, Research, and Practice

In March 2011, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), in partnership with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, convened leaders from the public and private sectors to explore the relationship between the arts, health, and wellbeing. Rocco Landesman, the NEA Chair at the time, opened the summit asking, “How do the arts help build us as a people and as

individuals? We share a fundamental mission: how to improve the quality of life. The arts are central to human development.”¹⁵ Human development encompasses a complex web of factors affecting the health and wellbeing of individuals across the lifespan. Together, these factors yield cognitive and behavioral outcomes that can shape the social and economic circumstances of individuals, their levels of creativity and productivity, and their overall quality of life.¹⁶

This summit focused on three key developmental areas: early childhood, youth, and older adulthood. The section “The Arts and Older Adults” made the case for arts participation because of its optimization of health outcomes through creative expression and cognitive enhancement, imagination and arts processes related to Alzheimer’s disease and neurocognitive disorders, and building community and strong social networks.¹⁷ From the summit, an intergovernmental task force developed and produced a subsequent workshop focusing solely on research on the arts and aging, “The Arts and Aging: Building the Science,” convened in September 2012.

This workshop was produced by the National Academies of Sciences and focused on research gaps and the opportunities for exploring the relationship of the arts to the health and wellbeing of older people. Presentations illustrated exciting possibilities for the therapeutic use of the arts as interventions to improve cognitive function and memory, general self esteem, and wellbeing, as well as to reduce stress and other common symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease and other neurocognitive disorders (such as aggression, agitation, and apathy). Some interventions were found to promote psychosocial benefits as well. Interventions reviewed in the five papers presented at the workshop included music, theatre, dance, and visual arts, with a strong focus on environmental design, especially the use of universal design to accommodate various physical and cognitive disabilities.¹⁸

Early studies are being replicated and expanded to further confirm findings that community arts programs have a significant positive impact on the health and wellbeing of older people. A key study focusing on chorales and using a control group of equally active people with a mean age of 80 found that health significantly improved during a three-year period. The key findings were that, compared to the control group, less medication was used, less depression was recorded, and greater social interaction occurred.¹⁹ Based on these results, possible savings in Medicare Part B expenditures in the billions of dollars were projected. A national taskforce is continuing with the aim of encouraging further research and policy changes that could result in increased funding despite the dire economic environment in the governmental sector.

Creativity in Later Life for Health and Wellbeing, Lifelong Learning, and Community Engagement

From the grassroots activism of the 1970s, when Robert Butler wrote “Why Survive? Growing Old in America,”²⁰ to the macro governmental systems of the twenty-first century with an asset-based focus on the benefits of creativity in later life, accessibility to the arts and other creative opportunities are evolving into communities of practice. Creativity supports increased health and wellbeing, lifelong learning, and community engagement. Professional practice in arts education has unprecedented opportunities to grow the field through developing support services in lifelong learning, health and wellness, and community engagement. The final section of this paper identifies ways in which creative expression can positively and significantly impact the older person, and his or her family, and community. Each area of practice is not mutually exclusive, but builds and reinforces the others in something of a Maslow hierarchical structure.

Health and Wellbeing

Health and wellness in later life certainly mean staying active by living a robust physical, social, and spiritual life. Later life is a time of reflection that should bring the resolution of past failures and a celebration of accomplishments, integrating one's life story. This is crucial to successful aging through, in Jung's term, the arc of life.

Physical health becomes more dependent on nurture in later life. The casual engagement in physical activities by youth gives way to the imperative of the body-mind connections of later life. Through creative activities the mind, body, and spirit can be renewed and refreshed. One can dance, sing, recite poetry, or act in a play, tapping all senses and engaging the body in movement. The brain processes new information and solves new problems, while the spirit's reflections provide content for meaningful expressions that build self-knowledge and a legacy to share with others.

Community-based programs such as those involved in field-tested studies, including Elders Share the Arts (Brooklyn, New York); Encore Chorale (Greater Washington, D.C.); and the Center for Elders and Youth in the Arts (San Francisco, California), are accessible to older adults with different abilities and economic status and encourage vibrant healthy living in later life. Programs like these are being developed around the country but are still the exception. Older adults who have significantly compromised cognitive abilities because of chronic diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's can access the arts through highly innovative programs such as *TimeSlips*, Songwriting Works, Alzheimer's Poetry Project, and the MoMA Alzheimer's Project. These programs focus on imagination rather than memory to create common experiences between people with cognitive disability and their family, caregivers, and the community at large, enabling them to retain meaning and purpose in later life as well.



Figure 2: Creating Poems with Alzheimer's Poetry Project. Photo by Elizabeth Thomas.

Lifelong Learning

As cited from Corbett, the misconceptions about later life learning have been part of the view of aging as relentless decline. With the discovery at the end of the twentieth century of late-in-life neurogenesis, what we thought to be true about the inability of older people to learn new things has been scientifically refuted, but these stereotypes still persist in society. As mentioned earlier, many artists and scientists, who have made creative pursuits their life professions, have always defied the aging stereotypes by producing the majority of their best work in later life. Because the mind, the body, and spiritual connections are involved in creative expression, solving the mysteries of bringing new identities into existence, the brain is fully stimulated to regenerate itself and grow. It does not matter if it is a Big C creation or a little c creation: the positive benefits are the same.

The major challenge to providing lifelong learning is finding ways for people to access community programming. While opportunities exist, there is little infrastructure through which

one can easily find classes that cater to adults, much less creative programs for older adults in such things as visual arts, music, dance, writing, and drama.²¹

Higher education classes (credit and non-credit) exist but are not uniformly open to helping adults build new skills for new jobs or life enrichment. Osher Lifelong Learning centers, which include the arts, are being established across the country through university partnerships. Oasis programs are offered in retirement or community centers. Classes based in arts organizations such as museums and theatres are finding a new market in lifelong learners. Summer camps for older adults are growing, such as Chautauqua and similar programs. One of the earliest educational services for older people, Elder Hostels, is gaining attention and increased participation. Distance learning opportunities for those with cognitive impairments are being designed by major museums such as the Cleveland Museum, where museum educators can work directly with caregivers to provide innovative programs based on the museum collection. Older distance learning programs such as Dorot use the telephone in a low-tech, high-touch way to bring quality enrichment programs to older people, especially those in underserved areas. Senior Center without Walls brings many programs to older people in a virtual way as well. Overall, the potential market is huge, but currently business plans mostly target those with economic means. As Corbett wrote, successful aging in this country pivots on social status and economic means.



Figure 3: Man leading dance class. Photo courtesy of Stagebridge Senior Theatre.

Community Engagement

Health and wellness coupled with lifelong learning enhance more than the individual and his or her family. If successful, these two protocols for aging with integrity produce, as Corbett²², Cohen²³, and Jung²⁴ wrote, wisdom. This wisdom influences neighborhoods, communities, and society at large by creating social capital. The functional work of bringing wisdom into community is creativity.²⁵

Social capital has the largely untapped potential of being built through the late-in-life creative age. This involves the mature genius of lifelong innovators such as artists and scientists as well as the contributions of late-in-life community volunteers (as Marc Friedman describes in his books, *Encore*²⁶ and *The Big Shift*²⁷). Late-in-life wisdom can be applied creatively to solve intractable problems such as school delinquency and food shortages, and it can lead to the renewal of underutilized community resources such as parks, libraries, and other public spaces.

Corbett wrote about the Gray Panthers in the 1970s dedicating themselves to changing the paradigm of older people consuming resources into one where the older person produces

resources.²⁸ Wisdom and creativity are central to this kind of resource development. As we have thirty more years to live than our predecessors of the twentieth century, the potential to gain from the active engagement of older people in community life is exponential.



Figure 4: Beautiful Mind. Photo courtesy of DSM.

Conclusion

In summary, creativity does play a central role in aging well. Creative engagement has benefits to the individual and society at large. It builds the infrastructure for an individual to gain self-knowledge and wisdom internally, as well as ways to tap the potential of the enlightened individual for the benefit of the community. Creativity comes in all forms, from the profound to the whimsical, and can be used at will throughout the lifespan. It is particularly important in later life, a time of reflection and rebalancing as one moves toward the end of the arc of life. Gaps exist in providing access to creative opportunities because of a lack of services to older adults, despite the potential market for programs promoting health and wellness, lifelong learning, and community engagement. The disparities between individuals based on social status

and economic means constitute barriers for all successful aging initiatives, including the utilization of creative programs. However, because of the instinctual nature of creative expression, given society's growing attention to the benefits of these activities in later life, with little means but self-direction, time, and a safe and supportive environment, creativity can flourish. The field of art education needs to embrace this demographic change related to longevity as a prime area of concentration for the future in research, policy and practice.

Notes

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⁷Cohen, G. (2005). *The Mature Mind* (pp. 167-182). New York, NY: Basic Books.

⁸ibid

⁹Galenson, D. W. (2006). *Old Masters and Young Geniuses: The Two Life Cycles of Artistic Creativity*. Princeton, NJ:

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