

HOW VISUAL ART -MAKING ACTIVITIES IMPACT THE OVERALL WELLBEING OF
RETIRED SENIORS: A CASE STUDY OF CREEK SPRINGS RETIREMENT CENTER IN
VANCOUVER, CANADA

by

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to inquire into how engagement in visual art-making activities can impact the overall wellbeing of elderly seniors in retirement centres. My basic interest was to explore the possibilities and limitations of visual art-making activities in the lives of the seniors. As an artist, researcher and teacher, I was guided by an a/r/tographical case study methodology of research. Using living inquiry as focus, I created openings, allowed slippages and gave way for loss, shift, and rupture to create presence through absence during the visual art-making activities with the seniors.

The research was situated in an independent living facility in Vancouver BC whereby the elderly seniors voluntarily had an opportunity to work with various materials and tools to create visual art works. Seventeen participants were involved in three workshops that took two hours each. As the researcher I documented the proceedings through detailed field notes, photographs, audial recording and videos. The process of art-making provided the seniors with an opportunity to relate to their lives. Art-making activities have the power to encourage conversations about the present, the past and the future thus giving hope and direction to the seniors. Visual art-making activities elicited humour leading to social enjoyment, boosted self-confidence and raised self-esteem for the seniors.

This research has demonstrated that making with materials, social connectedness and the flow in the process of making are essential attributes that can contribute to the overall wellbeing of the elderly. It was also clear that completion is not an end of learning, instead it is a state of continuing change that invites the seniors to explore more creative possibilities. The study hopes

to share concerns raised by the senior residents and hence benefit the larger community as programs are designed for retirement centres. This may eventually generate guidelines for directing visual art-making activities for the seniors in retirement centres.

Preface

All of the work presented henceforth was initiated and accomplished within the Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy, in the Faculty of Education, at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver campus. This thesis is an original intellectual product of the author, Lucy Mugambi. I was responsible for all major areas of concept formation and development, data gathering and analysis, as well as all manuscript composition. Dr. Rita Irwin was my supervisor on this research project and involved throughout the study.

This study required ethics approval, which was granted by the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB). The BREB certificate number is H16-01188.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to all the elderly seniors in the world and to those who give them love, care and support.

CHAPTER 1 Introduction

My Voyage

Today St Mark's Teachers Training College is a beehive of activities, where each student has a duty assigned to them and my art students are no exception. Everyone has to brave the chilly, drizzly weather in May to get their duties done. Some of my art students and I work in the studio we have converted into a big art gallery. Two-dimensional art-works including paintings, mosaics, collages and montages are pasted on display boards and others hang on the walls. The three-dimensional art forms, including sculptures, baskets, handmade pottery and papier-mâché forms, are placed on podiums at strategic spaces in the exhibition hall. The tie-dyed and batik fabrics are draped on the display boards adding colour and variety to the exhibition. I cannot forget to mention the colourful African prints that add spice to the ambiance. We are now completing the final touches of the art exhibition in readiness for this big day.

It is graduation day, the day we exhibit the art works that the teacher trainees have created all year round. This particular exhibition is important because the chief guest is Professor Margaret Kamar, the Minister for Higher Education, Science and Technology in Kenya. My students are excited as well as anxious and they have put up the best show possible, having worked very hard throughout the year. Finally, the chief guest arrives, and walks around the gallery while carefully listening to the teacher trainees as they explain their art techniques and processes. She seems quite impressed by the students' work. Of utmost interest to Minister Kamar are the crafts we made with the students using locally sourced materials, junk and recycled plastic paper. She is thrilled by the students' creativity and innovation adding that I had been a good instructor. Before signing the

visitors' book she pulls me aside and asks me if I can extend these skills to the community and offers a suggestion for me to work with the ministry of culture and social services.



Figure 1 Decorated fabrics, two and three-dimensional art works in the students' art gallery

Soon after this exhibition, I got in touch with the chief executive officer Emily Nyaga of the Embu Provincial Cultural Centre in Kenya, who was willing and happy to work with me. In the cultural centre I had the opportunity to make art with the youth who had just completed high school, children with disabilities and groups of elderly retired seniors who visited the centre once every week. The seniors, most of whom were women, became engaged in making “ciondo” (woven baskets) using banana fibres and recycled plastic papers. In the process of teaching the

seniors about techniques of art making, I discovered I had a lot to learn from them and from the whole experience of working as a volunteer in an informal setting.



Figure 2 Ciondo woven by women using coloured sisal strings

(Photo by author; a view of inside and out)

Working with these groups of people outside the school institution refashioned my thinking as an artist /teacher. It gave me the impetus to work with marginalised groups of people in our community. On receiving my invitation to study art education at the University of British Columbia in 2016, I focused on activities that would help me interact with marginalised groups of people, particularly seniors.

After meeting my supervisor, Dr. Irwin Rita, and expressed my interests, she facilitated a meeting with Dr. Ching-Liu Lin who later hired me to work with her research project working with seniors in Creek Springs Retirement Centre. This work became the source of my MA thesis research. As an artist/researcher/teacher I was interested in discovering the possibilities and limitations of the visual art activities in the lives of the seniors. I wanted to interrogate the impact of engaging seniors in visual art-making activities and its effects on their overall wellbeing.

Later in this thesis I narrate my own art practice as an artist/researcher/teacher. I discuss my experience as I involve myself in the practice of art-making. Although the thesis is based on elderly seniors in a retirement centre, including my own practice helps you and me to understand better the art-making activities by the seniors. Exploring art-making in a learning space as a student myself enlarged my self-understanding and that of the elderly seniors in my study. Being in that position of learning a new technique of art-making opened my eyes to things that I may have otherwise been unable to see during my research. I was able to view the materials I was using in a different way. Paid more attention to the materials I was using allowed myself to be guided by their flow. Eisner (2008) acknowledges that the arts develop dispositions and habits of mind that reveal to the individual a world he or she may not have noticed but is there to be seen if only one knew how to look. Making art gave me a fresh viewpoint hence eliminating my old habits that may sometimes dominate the mind. It gave me a chance to perceive and interpret the activities by the seniors with vividness that would have otherwise gone unnoticed. It probably made what would have seemed familiar strange and what appears strange familiar. Through my art making as an artist/researcher/teacher, I was able to understand my own interior landscape, which was an important prerequisite to understand the seniors during my research. Therefore my own art practice was significant in delving in the research of art -making by the elderly seniors.

This research was guided by the following two central questions, which helped to gather the necessary information needed from the participating elderly seniors. The first question is: In what ways does engagement in visual art-making activities contribute towards the overall wellbeing of retired seniors at Creek Springs Retirement Centre? Stemming from this fundamental question were the views of the elderly seniors about visual art-making and well-being. The second question: In what ways does the researcher's engagement in visual art-making activities contribute

towards an understanding of the experience of the retired seniors at Creek Springs Retirement Centre? is geared towards my own art practice as an artist /researcher /teacher to explore how this can better my understanding of the seniors in Creek Springs Retirement Centre.

Being an artist/researcher/teacher I was interested in examining how the art-making activities impact the wellbeing of the elderly seniors in retirement centres. This was with the aim to promote greater life satisfaction among the institutionalised retired seniors. To my knowledge there is no other a/r/tographical study conducted in Vancouver BC that specifically examines this aspect. I therefore deemed it necessary to promote life satisfaction among the elderly as well as add to the literature in this area of study.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Theoretical Framework

The literature reviewed in this chapter captures key theoretical concepts encountered in the study as well as literature that informs us about working with retired seniors. The literature provides an overview of the perception of the retired seniors and what they may be capable of in terms of visual art-making activities. I give a glimpse of the aging population in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada with the hope of providing a better understanding of what the elderly can expect in the future. I have also discussed some challenges that some seniors can encounter in their day-to-day living. Successful aging has similarly been addressed to give an overview of the seniors' general wellbeing. Since the research took place in a seniors' retirement centre, I found it necessary to explain the term *retired senior*. The seniors are sometimes marginalised and therefore marginalisation of the aged is discussed here. Vulnerability and old age as well as overall wellbeing are explained in order to give a clear picture of what was expected in the research.

The Aging Population

Many countries around the world are faced with larger populations of elderly persons than ever before (Cohen, 2003; Lutz, Sanderson & Scherbov, 2008). A report by the United Nations (2001) estimates that the number of centenarians worldwide will reach one million by the year 2030. Aging is a natural and inevitable occurrence no one can evade. It is no wonder that in the Kenyan culture where I come from there is a proverb that says "Not even a friend can rescue one from old age". As people grow older there is a tendency for their physical activities to slow down creating an assumption that the aged are despondent (Hummert, et al, 1995; Motl, & McAuley, 2010). In

my Kenyan culture, youth from within the family circle are charged with the responsibility of taking care of the old.

In the Western world, once aged persons are unable to take care of themselves, they may sometimes decide to live the remainder of their lives in a seniors' retirement centre of their choice (Phillipson, 2007). Conventionally, aging has been perceived rather adversely with a focus on a decline in mental and physical function, although this does not necessarily have to be the case.

Holzmann, Robalino and Takayama (2009) estimate that the number of people over sixty years of age globally is expected to increase to two billion by the year 2050, accounting for 21.7% of the world's population. According to a discussion paper prepared by the Social Policy Group, Social Development Department, City of Vancouver, in October 2010, the aging population is growing rapidly and will represent 25% of Canada's population by 2036. There is a need therefore to prepare adequately for this shift and develop services and support for the growing number of older and sometimes vulnerable seniors. This thesis study was motivated by the increasing number of retired seniors in residential centres in Vancouver Canada who may be physically and economically vulnerable hence sometimes suffer from despondency. I also wanted to investigate some of the ways visual art-making activities can contribute to seniors' overall wellbeing.

Some Challenges Faced by Seniors

In the Kenyan collectivist culture where I come from, there is always need for one to be able to engage with relevant social relations. Being part of a group helps to raise self-esteem of the individual. In the Western world, with individualistic cultures, people are taught to like themselves, and doing so is regarded as a sign of mental adjustment (Diener & Diener, 2009). Therefore, feelings of failure, rejection, and being overlooked can be regarded as risks to self-esteem. Elderly

seniors in retirement centres may sometimes be faced by this challenge due to their inability to contribute to the world of work (Grenade & Boldy 2008). This is amplified by the fact that work is considered paramount in an era where everything seems to demand a fast-moving world.

Myles (2002) predicts that the ratio of retirees to workers will rise dramatically in North America in the decades ahead where “fewer working-age adults will be supporting more elderly adults” (p. 131). Many retired seniors feel vulnerable after retirement since they do not have an adequate source of livelihood. This situation is aggravated by the fact that their pension benefits are not enough to take care of all their living expenses in the retirement homes (Bryant et. al., 2004; Green, et. al., 2008; Moore, Robson, & Laurin, 2010). This is also due to the fact that the government can only take care of the basic needs of the retired seniors. Therefore those with low income may be unable to stay in a retirement of their choice. Being in the retirement centre may reduce the contact of the circle of friends and family for the seniors hence creating a need for socialization within the Centre (Pitts, Krieger & Nussbaum 2005).

Consequently, this study aims at exploring whether engaging seniors in visual art-making activities at the Creek Springs Retirement Centre can improve their overall wellbeing hence providing successful aging. Researchers Lawton and La Porte (2013) argue that art education has many educational benefits for the aging population, such as the transformative potential for art to reveal the creative power of older adults through community-based art education. Therefore, being an artist, researcher and teacher gave me the drive to carry out an a/r/tographical inquiry into this area of study.

Successful Aging

The term *aging* generally creates an impression of loss and decline, while on the other hand success implies gaining and probably winning hence putting the two words together might appear paradoxical. However, Baites and Baites (1990) conceptualize successful aging as maximizing benefits associated with aging and minimizing the losses. Butler (1994) and Caro, Bass, and Chen (1993) have looked at successful aging as productive activity. These scholars agree and recognise that older people can be active and that it is important for them to be active and productive if they are to age successfully. Moreover, Phelan et. al. (2004) define successful aging through the older adults' perceptions that are multidimensional, encompassing physical, functional, psychological, and social health.

In this study I embrace Rowe and Kahn's (1997) notion that successful aging goes beyond potential; it involves activity. Thus, successful aging draws upon reactive and proactive capacities to respond with resilience, adapting to those challenges that are unique to later life. Hence, in this study, I intend to be a participant, although in a small way, to the successful aging process of the seniors in Creek Springs Retirement Centre.

Retirement and Old Age

Retirement may be referred to as the act of leaving voluntarily or involuntarily paid, full-time employment for the rest of one's life. However, a retiree may work irregularly or part-time thereafter. Feldman (1994) has defined retirement as the exit from full time paid labour force, taken by individuals after middle age, and taken with the intention of reduced psychological commitment to work or not to work thereafter. This would mean that the age that qualifies individuals for retired senior status varies widely in the world. Retirement at a statutory retirement

age is referred to as regulatory retirement. In governmental contexts it is usually associated with an age at which pensions or medical benefits for the retired seniors become available after working for a certain number of years. Pinquart (2002) argues that retirement may cause a loss of purpose in life, especially if individuals have previously derived their purpose mainly from their work. Old age on the other hand comprises the period of life after youth and middle age, the latter part of life that is usually associated with reference to a decline in the pace of life. Research now shows that aging is not a general or immutable process. For instance, Dannefer and Settersten (2010) have looked at aging as experientially dependent on reality that basically involves continuous interactions between the body, psyche, and social world. They note that patterns of aging are organized not only by systematically based changes but also are basically dependent on one's social circumstances, opportunities and experiences over prior decades. Therefore, old age is no longer viewed as a symbol of a set of common and universal experiences, nor as a dim period of inevitable decline. In this respect, old age is recognized as comprised of a set of experiences that are highly variable across individuals, groups, and nations, and highly dependent on health, wealth, social relationships, social policies, as well as other factors.

This means that the age at which old age begins cannot be universally defined because it differs according to the context. Rowland (2012) notes that “old age is a social construct with meanings that differ and change over time and from place to place” (p. 5). Most developed world countries have accepted the chronological age of sixty years as a definition of an older person at which one may retire from work. According to Service Canada & Canadian Government EBook Collection (2015), the standard age for beginning to receive Canada Pension Plan (CPP) retirement pension is the month after the sixty fifth birthday. However, one can take a reduced pension as early as age sixty years.

At the Creek Springs Retirement Centre, where I conducted this a/r/tographical inquiry, the average age of the residents is eighty-five years. These are individuals who have long retired from active labour service.

Marginalization and Old Age

To marginalise is to assign a person or groups of people to a place of insignificance or of oblivion within a society or group. Old age is frequently associated with social exclusion. Social isolation can be defined as the absence of relationships with family or friends on an individual level, and with society on a broader level. Chaudhry, Ahmed, and Bhatti (2015) argue that inadequate social support is associated not only with lower overall general health and wellbeing, but also with higher levels of emotional distress.

Therefore, in this study I aim to explore if involvement in art-making activities by the elderly retired seniors at Creek Springs Retirement Centre would help them to interact socially and enjoy their wellbeing in spite of their age. Moreover, a study by Moore (2009), where retired seniors were taught together with ordinary students, shows that students reported that their interaction with senior partners “personalized their understanding of those older partners as vibrant, active, and engaged individuals, negating their stereotypes of older adults as feeble, disengaged, and dependent” (p. 261).

I am of the opinion that retired seniors should not be dismissed since they hold a wealth of knowledge and experience. Kauppinen (1988) asserts that due to their mental development in advanced age older adults have special abilities. He further claims that two of these (abilities) are the “insight of life review and integrative understanding” (p. 15) adding that a successful life review can result in integration, serenity, and wisdom. In my Kenyan culture older persons are

normally associated with wisdom due to their long-life experience. In my mother tongue we refer to seniors by the term “Mukuru” (elder, old person), a term that is associated with being respectable and knowledgeable in the society. I believe that marginalization of older persons in societal activities may affect them negatively.

Ahmed et al. (2015) have argued that feeling of loneliness, ignorance and social neglect can basically harm the social life of older persons and may also be the origin of many psychological issues. It is widely agreed that participation in social networks is highly advantageous and connected with ageing that is happy, comfortable, secure and productive. When older persons participate in society they may feel valued and appreciated, and this can be regarded as a significant component of overall wellbeing.

Basford and Thorpe (2004) have also claimed that older people are marginalized by actively being excluded from equal opportunity to employment, politics, community and recreational activity. Based on these factors, I believe engaging seniors in various social activities would be a way of empowering them during their later years.

Old Age Vulnerability

I am of the opinion that anybody is potentially vulnerable at any age. This may be as a result of unpredictable and inevitable encounters in our lives such as accidents and diseases. However, vulnerability is mainly associated with old age. The term vulnerability has been defined differently by various scholars; for instance, Chambers (1989) terms it as “defencelessness, insecurity, and exposure to risk” (p.1) and suggests that vulnerability can be viewed as a way of identifying how difficult situations influence people and how people cope with them. On the other hand, Wilson (2000) suggests that society holds a general acceptance of older people as being vulnerable

members of society and that this acceptance contributes to their disadvantaged position. Johnson et al. (2006) contend that older people experience a sense of vulnerability in relation to a decline in physical and/or mental health.

A vulnerable person may be in need of special care, support, or protection due to age or disability. Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds (2014) have argued that “we are both vulnerable to the actions of others and dependent on the care and support of other people—to varying degrees at various points in our lives” (p. 6). They further note that vulnerable persons are those with reduced capacity, power, or control to protect their interests relative to other agents. Based on this, it is possible that these agents could be age, lack of finances as well as loneliness.

According to Brocklehurst & Laurenson (2008) stereotypes depict older people as either “confused and decrepit or, alternatively, as super healthy and wealthy individuals” (p.1356). These stereotypes all contribute to an incorrect view of older people, which may result in isolation, discrimination and disempowerment. On the other hand, Adger (2006) views vulnerability as the result of processes in which people actively participate and which they can almost always prevent. Consideration needs to be given to the fact that there are many elderly people who are fit and healthy.

Overall Wellbeing

For the purpose of this study, I considered overall wellbeing as the benefit brought about by engagement, relationships, meaning and purpose. Vernon (2014) refers to wellbeing as happiness and notes that “happiness is what might be called the secret motive of our actions” (p. 4). He further explains that it is secret not just because “it often lies behind what we decide to do in life, but also because it is generally pretty unclear to most of us how those actions might actually

produce the happiness we hope to win” (p. 4). Furthermore, Seligman (2002) looks at wellbeing as a construct that has five measurable elements which include; positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and purpose and accomplishment. It is the accomplishment leading to positive emotion, happiness and satisfaction. It is a good or satisfactory condition of existence: a state that is eventually characterised by good health, happiness, success and welfare.

Engagement

In layperson’s terms, engagement may mean connection or attachment. In this study I have used the term engagement in the light of Csikszentmihalyi’s (1996/1975) theory of flow. Csikszentmihalyi views engagement as characterized by the individual having clear goals and being intrinsically interested in the task at hand. The task at hand presents challenges that meet the skill level of the individual, provides direct and immediate feedback and the individual retains a sense of personal control over the activity. Consequently, action and awareness become merged, such that the individual becomes completely immersed in what he or she is doing.

Flow reflects attentional processes, deep concentration where attention is wholly devoted in present exchange. Action and awareness merge in the absence of spare attention that might allow objects beyond immediate interaction to enter awareness. Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2014) noted that a flow activity not only provides a set of challenges or opportunities for action but “it typically also provides a system of graded challenges, able to accommodate a person’s continued and deepening enjoyment as skills grow” (p. 92).

The activity should not be too easy as to bring boredom, or too challenging to cause anxiety; rather it should match the person’s skill or level hence bringing in a pleasurable flow experience. This in essence means that the individual is thoroughly involved in something that is

enjoyable and meaningful to them. Engagement in this sense therefore may bring about enjoyment and happiness to the individual, which contributes to one's wellbeing. Through a/r/tographical inquiry, this study seeks to find out if visual art-making activities can provide this engagement to the senior residents of Creek Springs Retirement Centre.

Although a lot has been written on successful aging very little work has been done to ascertain the views of the elderly individuals in retirement centres. Listening, observing and interacting with the elderly seniors as they carry out the art-making activities was aimed at capturing their views about old age and wellbeing.

CHAPTER 3 Methodology; Why, How, When and With Who?

Introduction

In this chapter, I look at the aim and purpose of the study, the research question, methodologies, and data collection procedures.

Why This Study?

There is a growing need for information on teaching visual art-making to the elderly and there are few studies that have dealt specifically with this area of study in Vancouver, Canada. Moreover, there hasn't been any a/r/tographical case study done to investigate more about visual art-making activities and the aged in retirement centres.

Through the study I examine some of the ways that seniors living in Creek Spring Retirement Centre perceive and feel about engaging in visual art-making activities. While I anticipated that the visual art-making activities could help the retired senior residents to live a more positive and fulfilling life, what was lacking in the literature were the voices and opinions of senior residents in similar residences. This study albeit small, may prompt further research into the development of intervention programs aimed at improving the wellbeing of the elderly seniors in the retirement centres.

I hope that disseminating the information would help situate marginalised retired seniors in a more empowered platform as members of the community. It may also serve to educate the general public about retired seniors. It should be remembered that this study may also share concerns raised by the senior residents and hence benefit the larger community as programs are designed for retirement centres. Focusing on the retired seniors located in retirement centres, I aim

to explore the possibility of carrying out regular workshops that engage seniors creatively, in order to understand if this engagement can contribute to their wellbeing. As Washington (2011) notes, when the objectives of our work include paying attention, responding, making connections, and yearning art teaching and learning unearths new ways to address community problems or concerns.

Moreover, I would like to use my own experience of visual art-making practice as an artist/researcher/teacher to explore how art-making enhances better understanding of the seniors' visual art-making experiences.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer two fundamental questions, which were inspired by the growing senior population in the Western world. The study focuses on Creek Springs Retirement Centre in Vancouver, Canada that has a mixed gender population with an average age of eighty-five years.

In what ways does engagement in visual art-making activities contribute towards the overall wellbeing of retired seniors at Creek Springs Retirement Centre?

In what ways does the researcher's engagement in visual art-making activities contribute towards an understanding of the experience of the retired seniors at Creek Springs Retirement Centre?

As noted earlier in this chapter, there is a growing need for information on teaching art to the elderly thus necessitating more research in this area of study, especially in Vancouver, Canada. Helderbran (2017) explains that many retirees today "exemplify active and successful aging, exude a distinctive spirit of independence, and demonstrate a desire to engage in a host of leisure and learning activities" (p. 12).

Engaging in various activities has been known to be one way of alleviating challenges for different types of people. The activity theory developed by Havighurst (1963) outlines factors that

determine successful aging and which assume there is a positive relationship between activity and life satisfaction. This position has been supported by other scholars such as Martin (1979), Palmore (1979) and Riddick (1980). Activity enables older adults to adjust to retirement and later years of one's life. The concept of activity, I believe, can apply to diverse things such as social contacts, physical activities as well as hobbies.

This study employs visual art-making activities since art is and has always been one of the most powerful instruments for producing experiences of many kinds. Dewey (1934) for instance, emphasizes that art can be looked upon as one of the highest values of human beings. He states that "the arts touch the deeper levels of life" (p. 36). Prior research also shows that seniors are receptive to learning new things. For instance, Boulton-Lewis (2010) argues that older adults can and do "acquire new knowledge outside of their domains of expertise from earlier learning" (p. 217). Kauppinen (1988) actually claims that an aged observer can be superior to younger ones in identifying historic objects and things, or motifs from other cultures. Based on these facts, and since no a/r/tographical inquiry has been done in a retirement centre, I decided to engage seniors in visual art activities at Creek Springs Retirement Centre, with the hope of adding onto what is already known about activities and wellbeing. I anticipate that researching this area through living inquiry may bring more light in this area of study.

La vieillesse (Old Age, 1970, p. 567) as quoted by Bramwell (1992) suggests that there is only one solution to avoid making old age a pitiful mockery of earlier phases of life. She argues that, we have "to continue to work toward the ends that give meaning to our life" (p.445). In this respect, as an artist/researcher /teacher I was geared towards a/r/tographically indulging myself in the seniors' lives, enquiring into the possibilities and limitations of engaging with retired seniors in visual art-making activities. I also explored my own practice of art-making in order to fully

understand how this practice would enhance the understanding of the seniors' engagement in art-making.

Lawton & La Porte (2013) indicate that older adults have a “wealth of knowledge and experience, a broad range of interests and cognitive abilities, and a unique vantage point: the wisdom acquired with age” (p. 310). While the seniors were engaged in the visual art-making activities in this study, I envisaged observing a wealth of knowledge.

Mode of Inquiry within the Methodology: An A/r/tographic Case Study

I used a case study of Creek Springs Retirement Centre (pseudonym) to carry out a detailed and intensive a/r/tographical lived inquiry of the seniors in residence by engaging them in visual art-making activities. I chose case study since it was the most suitable for this area of study that has not been investigated before in Vancouver Canada. Case studies have often been viewed as a useful tool for the preliminary, exploratory stage of a research project, as a basis for the development of the ‘more structured’ tools that are necessary in surveys and experiments as noted by Rowley (2002). She further explains that the case study is a “valuable way of looking at the world around us” (p. 18).

Yin (2003) ascertains that a case study is most suitable for studies which ask how and why questions and provides understandings and illuminates meanings. The location of Creek Springs Retirement Centre allowed an in-depth study. The case study approach can be particularly appropriate for individual researchers because it provides an opportunity for one aspect of a problem to be studied in some depth (Bell, 2014, p. 8). According to Flyvbjerg (2006), case study is suitable for both generating and testing of hypotheses and adds that it is not limited to these

research activities alone. I therefore used it hand in hand with a/r/tography to come up with meaningful understandings focusing on a case study. Flyvbjerg further alleges that interpretation of such a case study can provide a unique wealth of information. I believe that this type of methodology is appropriate to provide a holistic account of the activities that were conducted in the Creek Springs Retirement Centre. Merriam (1998) suggests that the case study can provide a rich and holistic account of the phenomenon at hand, and this was one of the major goals of this research.

Why A/r/tography?

A/r/tography on the other hand draws upon the professional practices of educators, artists and researchers. The boundaries between the artist, teacher and researcher are no longer felt with each carrying its weight in equal measure. As an a/r/tographer in this research I was not keen to being a professional artist or educationist but was committed to an artistic and educational inquiry. In the process of inquiry, I personally delved into learning and was attentive to the moment that would help me better understand the art practice of the seniors. Through a/r/tography I was able to be in touch with my life as well as that of the elderly retired seniors in this case study. Examining our lived experience helps us to understand better the world we live in. Irwin (2004) describes a/r/tography as a process of living inquiry embedded in lived experience. A/r/tography is a dynamic process of knowing performed across three moments of becoming one unfolding into the other (Irwin, 2013). It is a research methodology, a creative practice and a performative pedagogy that lives in the rhizomatic practices of the liminal in between (Irwin, 2004). It is a methodology, which is informed by the arts and therefore was appropriate for me as an artist, teacher and researcher. It is constituted through visual and textural understandings and experiences rather than visual and textural representations. A/r/tographers are committed to artistic forms of engagement

that help them to create, interpret, and/or represent new forms of knowledge. It challenges habits of knowing, and boundaries that are placed on the identities of artists, researchers, and teachers. Since my study was limited to one retirement centre and was dealing with the lived experiences of the elderly seniors as well those of myself I decided to meld the two methodologies, hence the use of the term a/r/tographical case study.

Irwin and Springay (2008) in *Being with A/r/tography* ascertain that a/r/tography is concerned with self-study, being in community, relational and ethical inquiry adding that a/r/tographical research is not subject to standardized criteria, rather it remains dynamic, fluid and in constant motion. Irwin (2013) further argues that a/r/tography as practice-based research is situated in the in between/ liminal spaces where theory as practice intentionally unsettles perception and knowing through living inquiry. A/r/tography therefore allowed me through my participants to make, learn and know embracing each action/activity, each new idea, as a new reality.

I hoped to inquire in a creative way that which may at first seem ordinary yet unfolds as searching the in-betweens during the art making activities. Moreover, as Irwin (2013) states, one needs to allow a/r/tography to unfold in the in-between spaces among the identities, practices and processes of artist, researcher and educator. I was interested in understanding the engagement of the elderly seniors with visual art-making activities as folding and unfolding ideas recursively evoking new understandings. During the moments of intensity of visual art-making activities with the seniors, I put myself in the presence of unfolding to the possibilities of knowing.

A/r/tography helped me as an artist/researcher/teacher to work metaphorically in a rhizomatic way connecting the artistic me to the teacher that I am and the researcher I was becoming. This allowed the spaces in between these seemingly separate identities to disappear

(Carter, Beare, Belliveau & Irwin, 2011). It helped me to fold together theory through lived experiences of the elderly seniors as well as those of myself hence coming to a deeper understanding of the happenings. Through a/r/tography I was able to use the visual arts activities to enhance my understanding of the elderly seniors in Creek Springs Retirement Centre. A/r/tography can help one notice, see, hear and experience the world differently by interrupting ways of knowing that are often taken for granted. It helps one to view normal things differently, thus allowing one to listen, observe, touch, and feel the ordinary things in a new way. A/r/tography gives one room to be present to new understandings in a creative manner. Irwin (2008) argues that a/r/tography is certainly about inquiry, yet inquiry also involves the presentation of new understandings (rather than findings) from time to time. As an a/r/tographer I was able to use practices and identities to understand and give new meaning to my lived experiences with the elderly seniors. I used metaphors to invoke the presence of what meaning is not and what it might become, enabling me to create tensions which allow us to see the world in a new way (Springgay, Irwin, & Kind, 2005).

Irwin et al. (2006) have argued that a/r/tography is an arts and education practice-based research which is dedicated to acts of inquiry through arts and writing. They further clarify that artist, researcher, and teacher (a/r/t) are identified in “contiguous relations and none of these features is privileged over another as they occur simultaneously in and through time and space” (p. 70). Since I am an artist, researcher and teacher at the same time, a/r/tography was the most suitable way for me to conduct this research.

My Role as the Researcher

I combine my role of a researcher with that of an artist and a teacher since I have been an art teacher trainer for many years in Kenya. I have always been interested in working with the minority

groups in my society through visual art-making activities, particularly women, people with disability and children. Working with these diverse groups of people in my provincial cultural centre, I believe, gave me a basis of conducting this research – a disposition. Furthermore, working with retired seniors is always a way of learning since the seniors carry a great wealth of knowledge.

Getting a chance to investigate some of the ways that visual art-making activities can impact the overall wellbeing of the elderly seniors in a retirement home in Vancouver opened an avenue to interact with them. Agreeing with Knowles, and Cole (2008) that one should be “willing to be creative and not be bounded by traditions of academic discourse and research processes but, rather be grounded in them” (p. 14), I aimed to fuse the knowledge of art that I have into the research process. As an artist/researcher/teacher I opened myself to this challenge through the a/r/tographical inquiry that allowed me to fit into all the three roles simultaneously.

I involved myself in the visual art-making to find out if it would enhance my own understanding of the seniors’ art-making practices in Creek Springs Retirement Centre. During the time I carried out the research with the seniors, I also immersed myself in art practice to examine how my own engagement might enhance new understanding of the seniors’ art-making practice. I therefore undertook an art learning session in an art studio as I practiced art-making in the form of pottery and ceramics. During my art practice I paid keen attention to the whole process of making and whatever else it would bring along. I opened my mind to see and feel the interstices, openings and cracks created during the time of making. As an artist/researcher /teacher, I hoped to explore if this experience would widen my understanding of the art-making activities by the seniors at Creek Springs Retirement Centre.

The Study Sample

Based on the assumption that I wanted to discover, understand and gain insight into the experiences of the seniors in Creek Springs, this study employs purposeful sampling for selecting participants. The sampling was done with the help of the administrators of Creek Springs Retirement Centre who knew the participants well. The participants' average age was eighty-five years. Only those who were willing and able to participate in the visual art-making activities were included in the study.

Information Gathering

I carried out workshops on visual art-making activities with the senior residents in Creek Springs Retirement Centre in order to develop an understanding of the participants, to allow for an in-depth picture and to discover their experiences and perceptions of visual art-making engagement. Creek Springs Retirement Centre is an independent facility located in Vancouver and has an average capacity of hundred and sixty elderly residents. The residents live independently in their own residential suites. There are spaces designed for carrying out various activities and in one such area is where I carried out the art-making activities' workshops. The space was quite spacious, well ventilated and conducive for the art-making activities. The workshops were designed to take place in the afternoons from two p.m. to four pm. This time was fixed by the administrators of the Centre to suit the residents' routine programs. The sock monkey making and the cartoon drawing required materials and tools for use and these were provided to the seniors once they entered the working space. All they needed to do was to choose an appropriate place to sit and work from. Importantly, I set the tables and chairs in a way that the seniors could mingle freely and share the materials with ease. As an artist/researcher/teacher, my goal was to gain a "holistic overview of the context under

study” (Punch 1998, p. 149). The activities involved a series of three workshops in which the elderly seniors were involved in art- making. The first two consisted of making sock monkeys while the second involved drawing cartoons. In the first sock monkey making workshop, twelve participants were in attendance but the number increased to seventeen in the consecutive workshops. It is also essential to note that those in attendance were mostly female with a few males who attended the cartoon-drawing workshop.

Following the Behavioural Research Ethics Board procedures (BREB), I gathered information by carrying out three, two-hour workshops over the span of two months. As an artist/researcher/teacher I used the lived inquiry rendering in *a/r/tography* to help me unearth new meanings of the experiences of the elderly seniors as they engaged in art-making activities. I too became a participant in their activities and immersed myself, which in turn helped me to create new understandings.

On the other hand, during my studio art practice, I recorded day-to-day activities, flows and ruptures. I wrote notes, took photographs, audio and visual videos of the happenings as I learned to create pottery and ceramics forms. I captured important moments showing the step-by-step process of transforming clay into forms that are aesthetically appealing.

To be engaged in the practice of *a/r/tography* according to Springgay, Irwin, and Kind (2005) means to inquire in the world through a process of art making and writing. It is a practice of “double imaging that includes the creation of art and words that are not separate or illustrative of each other but instead, are interconnected and woven through each other to create additional meanings” (p. 899). Through the living inquiry rendering, I hoped to create meaning from what was created through visual, textural understandings as well as experiences, rather than simple visual and textural representations.

Springgay, Irwin and Kind (2005) have argued that a/r/tography is “a living practice; a life writing, life creating experience into the personal, political, and professional aspects of one’s life” (p. 903). Through a/r/tography I hoped to create new understandings from the day-to-day experiences of the elderly senior residents as they did the visual art-making in the retirement centre.

I created video recordings to capture the activities of the workshop with the seniors focusing on the interactions occurring between the seniors and the materials, between the seniors, between the seniors and the created environment as well as between the seniors and the facilitators. I also made audio recordings to supplement other data collection methods used.

I was able to record some conversations between participants, which I transcribed. I took digital photographs of the proceedings of the workshops in order to enhance the audio and video recording documentation. The photographs helped to capture the moments in time and space making it easier for me to recount the proceedings of the workshops. It is important to note that at the beginning of every workshop I asked for the participants consent to photograph and record them. We had an agreement that no faces would be captured in the photographs and that the names of the participants would remain anonymous.

I keenly observed the activities of the workshops, concurrently taking field notes of important occurrences. This I did during and shortly after the workshops when the experiences were still fresh in my mind. I recorded naturally occurring conversations that were spontaneous, unplanned and unstructured between the seniors, administrators and facilitators.

These data collection methods allowed the participants to reflect upon and open up to individual experiences and thoughts. The unstructured conversational-style interview allowed me to ask different questions spontaneously hence allowing for a deeper understanding of the seniors’ experiences and thoughts. Informal conversations were continuously included to help make the

participants at ease. Some of the questions gave attention to how they feel about being retired, how members of the outside community relate with them now that they are in a residential centre and how they (seniors) feel about engaging in visual art-making activities. With the help of knowledgeable professional workshop facilitators; Katarina Thorsen and Beverley Pomeroy, who are community engagement strategists, and Julian Lawrence, a cartoonist and educator I was able to carry out the workshops and collect the information I needed.

As the researcher, I was guided by the concept of flow which Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2014) describe as a “psychological state, which normally occurs when people become so engaged in an activity such that they forget what they were doing and even lose track of time” (p. 90). As the seniors got involved and engaged in art-making I was keen to explore some of the ways this engagement would impact their overall wellbeing. This was due to the fact that these experiences were different from the routines of their everyday life. Allowing the seniors to be fully engaged created an opportunity for them to be exploratory, experimental and active. I embrace Csikszentmihalyi’s (1997) argument that “when we feel active and strong we are also more likely to feel happy” (p. 21), so that the choice of what we do in time will also affect our happiness.

My Challenges in the Course of Research

I experienced the following challenges during my research but was able to deal with them accordingly as I progressed. At the start of the research I had limited time to carry out the research and therefore needed to gather all needed information within the short, programmed time. In order to reach the participants in their locality prior arrangement with the administrators of Creek Springs Retirement Centre was required and that always took time to wait for their response. On gathering the information I required, I realised I had accumulated many photographs as well as

vignettes and therefore I needed a lot of time to select those that reflected the information I desired. Transcribing the audio from the videos required care and concentration in order to give accurate information. In general, the information gathered was enormous and therefore care and time was required to discriminate between what to exclude and the wealth of evidence that was necessary to appear in my thesis. I hoped to have had an opportunity to debrief with the seniors after the workshops but this was not possible due to the constraint of time.

Analyzing the data

The aim of this study is to explore the ways engagement in visual art-making activities can contribute to the overall wellbeing of retired elderly seniors at Creek Springs Retirement Centre. As noted earlier in this chapter, I accumulated field notes, video recording and took photographs of the proceedings in the two sock monkey activities and the cartooning workshop.

I recorded detailed field notes during and immediately after the workshops to remain true to the lived experiences of the seniors. I was an active participant throughout the workshops and therefore was able to work through with the seniors and collect information that was of importance to this study.

As an a/r/tographer I represented emergent understandings through creative analytic texts as I integrated knowing, doing, and making through aesthetic experiences that would convey meaning rather than facts.

I coded the field notes, observations and conversations, and photographs into three themes and analysed them individually to process the outcome of the study. I obtained the themes by identifying what I considered as important aspects that emerged from the data (Daly, Kellehear, &

Gliksman 1997). This I did by “careful reading and re-reading of the data” (Rice & Ezzy 1999, p. 258) to come up with the related themes.

Boyatzis (1998) describes a theme as a “pattern found in the information that at the minimum describes the organised possible observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon” (p. 1). Additionally, Boyatzis explains that the theme may be identified at the obvious level directly observable in the information or at the concealed level (underlying the phenomenon). This means that observation of the phenomenon comes before understanding an important moment, which he refers to as “seeing” and is in turn followed by encoding –“seeing it as something” (p. 1).

In my analysis, each observation is followed by an interpretation. I identified core common experiences obtained from my data. Listening to the seniors during the workshop as they conversed freely allowed me to pick their own words and expressions hence helping me produce and analyse verbatim data. I used photographs to capture important moments during the visual art-making processes that became instrumental to my understandings.

The photographs are an important part of the data and I relate this to Sontag (1977) who notes that photographs “alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe” (p. 3). Sontag further argues that photographs are a grammar and an ethics of seeing. Through a/r/tography, I try to create what Springgay, Irwin, and Kind (2008) describe as relational understanding of community, art, and research. As a/r/tography it entwines me as artist/researcher/teacher. I attempt to analyse the data as it weaves through my own experiences, learning and understanding.

Sinner, Leggo, Irwin, Gouzouasis, and Grauer (2006) state that “A/r/tography acknowledges the practices of artists, researchers, and educators as places of inquiry and uses those

practices to create, interpret, and portray understandings” (p. 1228). That is why I chose to bring my own lived experiences to further inform the data gathered. The data collected is categorised into three themes: process of making, social connectedness, and flowing in the process of making. These are analysed below and were prompted by my interpretation of the happenings during the workshops. For ethical considerations and anonymity, I assigned synonyms to the different participants that I worked with and a pseudonym of the Retirement Centre in question for the purpose of data analysis. I also give an account of my own experiences as I practised making visual art works. My own art- making experiences are in an endeavour to explore if my own practice can enhance better understanding of the senior’s engagement in art-making activities.

CHAPTER 4 DISCOVERIES

Introduction

In this chapter I present the information I gathered in my research using photographs and vignettes of the elderly seniors from Creek Springs Retirement Centre. I also recount my lived experience of involvement with art making process which was directed by the research study and in return informing my inquiry process.

Observations and Recordings

I carried out two workshops with two different visual art-making activities in order to find out if the engagement in these activities by the seniors in the retirement centre would provide satisfaction and wellbeing. The first workshop involved creating sock monkeys while the second one involved creating cartoons.

The Sock Monkey Making Activity



Figure 3 Completed sock monkeys by the seniors

The sock monkey making activity was scheduled for two hours with twelve participants whose average age was eighty-five years. Facilitators, Katarina Thorsen and Beverley Pomeroy directed

the sock monkey making activity as I observed and collected the field notes and photographs. I also made some audio and video recordings of the events. As part of my information gathering, I got involved in the sock monkey making as I conversed and mingled with the participants freely.

I too was able to make my own sock monkey shown below, although I completed it later, on my own as there wasn't enough time to do so during the workshop. One of the seniors confessed that the monkey making activity was a totally new encounter to the seniors in this retirement facility centre. This is explained by their comments below.



Figure 4 The facilitator demonstrating how to make the sock monkeys



Figure 5 My sock monkey

Participant S2: We haven't had a chance to do anything like this before. I hope I can do as expected of me.

Participant S4: I wonder if I can come up with anything like that (referring to the facilitator's sample of sock monkey)

From their comments and what I observed, most of the seniors were apprehensive at first, regarding expectations of the workshop to the extent that they were afraid to start the activity. The professional facilitators provided gentle art instruction and soon the seniors relaxed and started working on their sock monkeys. Within no time they seemed to enjoy the activity hence becoming fully engaged. There was increased collaboration among the participants and I was able to capture dialogue and gather information.

Socks and Monkeys Observations

During the monkey making workshops a series of events took place and I was able to capture them in my observations and recording. The participants began by listening attentively to the instructions of the facilitators on how to carry out the sock monkey activity. The facilitators and I then gave them a chance to select the socks they preferred to use in terms of colour /design /pattern and size. Using the scissors provided, they cut the socks to the required size and shape to produce desired forms of sock monkeys. Most of them were able to thread the needle, with only three of them calling out for help. I must confess that this surprised me because threading a needle is an actual challenge to me.



Figure 6 A chart illustrating how to make the sock monkeys

They stitched the socks to create the body, limbs, ears, mouth and tail of the monkeys leaving space for filling the cotton stuffing. They stuffed the stitched parts of the socks with care and finesse. They stitched the openings to make the monkey shape, effectively joining the tail, legs and ears to the body. The mouth was created using various stitches. Whereas most of them used a blanket stitch to depict a closed mouth, two seniors (participant S2 and participant S5) used the chain stitch. We allowed them to select the buttons to fix as eyes for their sock monkeys according to their preference since the buttons were in a variety of shapes, colour and size. I observed the seniors helping each other select the appropriate buttons. Some just wanting to confirm what they had selected. The participants walked around to get the materials they required and looked for help when needed and this gave them a chance to stretch. In the process of making the sock monkeys,

there were lots of conversations going on in the room. Some of which were related to the activity while others were not. For instance, participant S2 who I sat next to for a while wanted to know more about me.

Participant 2 ...and what is your home country?

Me Kenya

Participant S2 That is wonderful. One of my maternal uncles lived in Kenya in the sixties through the seventies. You have great wildlife there. He (the uncle) told us a lot of good stories about Kenya.... You know.....

Participant S4 narrated to me how she was a practicing high school teacher for many years.

Participant S4 I taught home science in high school for many years. This exercise of making sock monkeys helps me to revisit my sewing skills. I haven't done this in a long time. It makes me feel a little younger.

I observed a lot of interactive activities going on in the workshop room; among the seniors, between the facilitators and the seniors and between the materials and seniors. After the two hours the seniors were still at it and had to be reminded that time was over. The seniors identified with the sock monkeys they had made and some gave them names, others wanted to gift their grandchildren while others wanted to donate. However, others just wanted to keep theirs as reminders of this particular activity.

The Cartooning Workshop



Figure 7 Mickey Mouse by S2

We conducted the cartooning workshops one month after the sock monkey workshop to gain further insight about engaging the seniors with visual art-making activities. The seniors in this study were involved in learning how to create comics using simple shapes. Whitlock (2006) notes that “the vocabulary of comics represents figures and objects across a wide iconic range from the abstraction of cartooning to realism” (p. 968).

The seniors were expected to learn how to create cartoon characters and use them to express themselves. It is important to note here that we worked with the same group of seniors from the previous workshop on sock monkey making. However, five more participants joined the workshop voluntarily. This made a total of seventeen participants from the previous twelve. I sought to find out why the five had chosen to join this workshop and I received the following comment from one of them;

Participant S 10 On hearing about the interesting things that happened during the sock monkey making activity and on seeing the sock monkeys of my colleagues I dared not miss this one.

This response in itself implies that the seniors had enjoyed and found the sock monkey making activity useful and hence spread the word to their colleagues within the centre. I observed the seniors' eagerness, excitement and curiosity prior to the activity. These reactions were possibly prompted by the art making activities in the sock monkey workshop.

Though the workshop was in the same space and some of the facilitators were the same, it was refreshing for the seniors and there was an expectation of engaging with something new. It was also clear that there was a connection between the cartooning workshop and the sock monkey making activity. Some of the participants remembered me from the previous workshop and one of them came up to me and commented.

Participant 2: I placed my monkey on my lamp case; it could not stand on its own. It watches over me (in reference the monkey she made in the previous workshop on sock monkey.)

This is evidence that the previous workshop had made some impact on her and kept doing so long after the workshop was over.

Talking to and With the Cartoons



Figure 8 Instructor Julian Lawrence explains about cartoon drawing

Before the start of the cartooning activity, all seventeen participants were provided with paper, pencil, black felt pen and an eraser. The room was well ventilated and each person had a seat. We asked them to choose their seating position informing those that could not see far to stay close to the instructor's flipchart. The aim was to ensure that all were comfortable during the cartooning exercise.

The seniors were anxious as to what to expect before the start of the cartoon making activity. They expressed a feeling of inadequacy in cartoon drawing. This is depicted by some of the comments they made during the workshop.

Participant S2 I expect to see a good cartoon from you. Probably you have hidden talents

Participant S6 Why are you saying cartoons, I cannot draw a line. Don't expect miracles.

Participant S1 my square looks like a rectangle

Participant S2 my eyes are not the same size

Participant S1 we have never done cartoons before. I can't even draw.

The seniors were able to use the pencils and pens as instructed. They drew the outlines of the cartoons with precision and shaded the required areas and the whole process of cartoon making started becoming enjoyable to them.

Participant S3 My mickey is incredible!

Participant S1 Mine doesn't look like Mickey Mouse

Instructor You have invented a new character

Participant S5 Mine is a disaster.

Participant S6 I am enjoying this.

They used basic shapes to come up with their own cartoons as a means of expressing themselves through the characters they drew. Conversations arose amid the cartoon making activities. Some of these conversations were related to the activity while others were not.

Participant S4 She does look surprised this one.

Participant S2 How do I draw the sweat falling off?

Participant S1 The eye does have a sleepy look.

Instructor The mouth fell off the face.

Participant S3 My character wears pyjamas all the time.

There was humour throughout the cartoon workshop and the room was generally filled with laughter. After the seniors completed the cartoons, they expressed a feeling of enjoyment and satisfaction hence requested us for another workshop. They requested the director of the facility to allow them exhibit their work for others to see. Some suggested that they would gift their cartoons to their loved ones. The seniors could not hide their joy at the end of the workshop and wanted us to go for another workshop.

Instructor I do hope you had fun this afternoon.

Participant S2 I have created a ghost.

Participant S3 It was a great one

Participant S7 we really enjoyed it.

Participant S4 The sun is laughing.

Participant S5 We loved it

Participant S1 During our time cartooning was termed as a waste of time.

Participant S8 Thank you, very much.

Participant S7 Come back again if you like

Participant S1 Maybe we should display our work for others to see later.

Participant S7 I will give mine to my grandson Sam.



Figure 9 Expressive cartoon by Participant S3

Further Observations

Looking at both the sock monkey activity and cartooning workshop I observed that the seniors manipulated the materials/tools in a skilful manner, there was flow in the process of making and a lot of social interactions. I viewed the term manipulation to mean handling, managing and control of materials using hands as one uses them with skill in the art making activities. Guest et

al. (2014) have argued that one means to help preserve motor skills could be for “individuals to routinely take part in tasks that make high demands on the tactile processing system” (p. 83).

Despite their fragile hands the seniors skilfully handled the various tactile materials: needles, thread, buttons, socks, scissors, cotton stuffing, pencils, pen and paper. At the beginning, the seniors were apprehensive and anxious on what to expect in the workshops. As the workshop progressed I observed them at work and the experience of creating the sock monkeys appeared rather stress-free and engaging for them. This observation corresponds with findings by Norman et al. (2011) that older adults can “reliably perceive three-dimensional surface shapes by use of haptic touch and that there are no differences between young and older adults in accuracy and precision” (p. 293).



Figure 10 Seniors working on their sock monkeys

When the activity of cartooning started, some of the seniors expressed a feeling of inadequacy in manipulating the tools and materials that included pencils and drawing pens. However, the cartoon instructor reassured them, and with his guidance the seniors were able to create meaningful cartoons for themselves and others.

As the seniors worked on their sock monkeys and their cartoons, I could see the emotional as well as the external interaction provided by the process of interacting with the materials. It was obvious that use and manipulation of the art materials stimulate the art-maker's senses – not only physically by seeing and touching them but also emotionally by exploring the feelings they generate.



Figure 11 A senior stuffing the limbs of her sock monkey

Some of the interactions from the seniors at work included the following:

Participant S2 *What should I use to fill more stuffing in his legs and belly? I want to make him look healthier.*

Participant S5 I didn't think that socks can be used to create monkeys This is really interesting. I really like the idea.

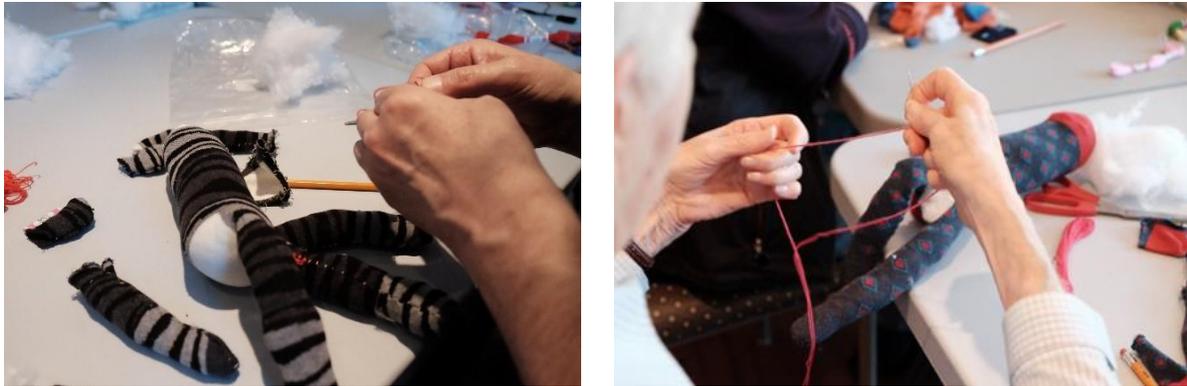


Figure 12 Seniors threading the needle.

*Participant S1 I did it! I just threaded my needle. I had not done this in a long, long time.
Thanks to this monkey making exercise.*

Participant S7 What type of stitch should I use for the mouth? Can I use blanket or chain?



Figure 13 A senior neatening her sock monkey



Figure 14 Seniors concentrating on sawing



Figure 15 Seniors stuffing the monkey legs



Figure 16 Assorted materials to work with



Figure 17 Drawing Mickey Mouse

The Flow of the Process of Making

Both the sock monkey-making activity and the cartooning workshops were guided by Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 2014). The activities were meant to take two hours but everyone was too engaged to notice the time pass. I liken this moment to being in the "Puja" described by O'Sullivan (2001), as "an immersive space, one in which all the senses are engaged... a pace and a practice of incarnation in which the invisible is made visible" (p. 1). The visual art-making activities seemed to offer a sense of enjoyment and high level of concentration providing the participants with a sense of happiness and pleasure. The sock-monkey making and cartooning activities engaged the seniors and elicited personal creative expressions with their effects.

I indeed noticed intense and focused concentration with what the seniors were doing in the moment. They were lost in making the sock monkeys and creating the cartoons showing that they were now in control of their actions. In this context "lost" refers to the flow of creative engagement that allows the seniors to explore and experiment with the process, as well as every moment of frustration and satisfaction or some feelings in between. Valuing the notion of lost as "a positive moment of encounter," as suggested by Rinaldi (2006, p. 145). Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi (2014) argue that the goal of an activity (such as sock monkey-making or creating cartoons) is a means for the process of flow that enables the fluidity and uncertainty to fuel new possibilities.

As the seniors created the art works, the focus at that moment was solely on the process of making. Questions asked, movements and actions made at the moment were geared towards the activity at hand yet opening possibilities of learning and being in a new state.

Participant S2 ooh these (referring to buttons) would look wonderful on him.

Participant S4 What do you think about these buttons on mine? One looks smaller than the otherI think he will be cock eyed.

Participant S10 oooh! I stuffed you too much....now you look a bit too healthy (talking to her sock monkey)

There was evidence that the seniors were enjoying themselves as they carried out the activities. Due to the flow of the making process they did not realise how fast time was moving and as a result they were willing to continue with the activities long after the session had expired. Mid-way through the cartoon workshop the participants were asked by the cartoon instructor if they would wish to continue with the cartooning activity and they were all in agreement that they should continue.

In my observation the seniors were fully engrossed in the act of making, enjoying the visual art-making activities and whatever else these activities offered them at that moment. In spite of their age all the seniors stayed through the workshops till the end.

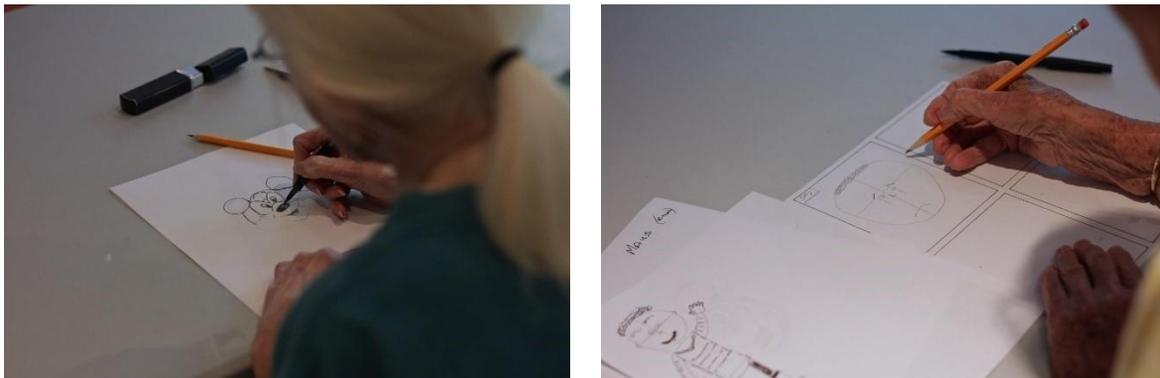


Figure 18 Seniors in the making process

Social Interactions in the Process of Making

As I observed and recorded during the art making sessions the room was filled with a buzz of activity. Seniors moved from one place to another as they looked for the materials that they needed for their monkey making. They helped each other to search for the appropriate buttons for their monkeys. They discussed the names they would give their monkeys. They talked about comic books of their times and shared their own experiences as they created their art. This made the art-making activities a path through which the seniors would socialize and relate with those within the space of making. The activities initiated conversations on varied topics making them a platform for the seniors to exchange ideas, to talk about themselves and about the pleasant and the not so pleasant pasts. The visual art-making activities ignited what would otherwise perhaps not have emerged in an ordinary situation.

Participant S2 *Stitching reminds me of those days when I did embroidery. It feels good that I can still do it.*

During the workshops there was a lot of laughter in the room, which showed a sign of joy, satisfaction and wellbeing. The cartoons elicited lots of laughter throughout the making process. After completing the sock monkey exercise one of the participants held her monkey close to her chest and remarked;

Participant S3 *Those who did not attend this session will be jealous on seeing what we have accomplished.*



Figure 19 Posing with a completed sock monkey

I observed that completion is not an end of learning. Rather, it is a state of continuing change that invites the seniors to explore possibilities. Satisfaction thus was revealed in various ways. Most of the seniors identified with the sock monkeys and cartoons they made by giving them names. By the end of the activities some of the seniors had decided who to gift their monkeys and cartoons to, while others planned to make more as presents for their friends and relatives. Some wanted to donate their monkeys to charity as they had no one in mind to give them as gifts.

Some of the seniors were delighted and willing to donate their sock monkeys to children all over the world. Art in this sense opened up a possibility of connecting with people who are in other parts of the world, miles away. Other seniors just enjoyed matching buttons for their

monkeys' eyes or hanging out with the group in the room and enjoying the conversations and laughter that came along with the flow of making.

It is important to note that even though the instructors guided the sock monkey making and cartooning activities each outcome had a unique effect and each cartoon or sock monkey provoked different responses. This made the activities special in their own way.

I believe the visual art-making workshops created a new way of seeing for the seniors as well as for me. Gold (2013) makes an interesting observation in this aspect of seeing anew when she expresses that “to dream like a hunter is to become the creatures you hunt and to see things in the ways they do. It is to open up to new possibility of being not to seek closure” (p. 12).



Figure 20 An expressive cartoon by S4



Figure 21 A series of facial expressions by S10



Figure 22 Seniors share space as they work



Figure 23 Conversations going on during the making process



Figure 24 Expressive sock monkeys by the seniors

CHAPTER 5 My Re-encounter with Clay

Introduction

Even though I do not fall in the bracket of the aged, I am enticed to offer my own personal representation into this conversation of making with materials, flowing in the process making and social connectedness. I bring forth my experience because it resonates very well with the lived inquiry I carried out with the elderly seniors in Creek Springs Retirement Centre. Being in graduate school at UBC gave me an opportunity to explore various art activities, methods and processes that I had not experienced back home in Kenya.

This process was revealing since I was engaged in art-making during the same period when I was doing my research with the seniors. As an a/r/tographer I hoped to understand the self in relation to others and vice versa. A/r/tography involves self-inquiry and collective inquiry and as Irwin (2008) notes a/r/tography is necessarily about self and hence my lived inquiry was a good way to bring forth new understandings of self and others. I could therefore not detach myself from my own artistic practice and that of the elderly seniors. Here I convey my experience in a ceramic art studio for the first time. From this first encounter I realised how the materials we work with can provide us with much more than we expect, giving us an opportunity to engage with us as we engage with them. I also recognised how art practice can be used as a way knowing. Exposing myself to the art studio practice in a way that became an a/r/tographical path of research as the process opened me up to what I would otherwise might never have known.



Figure 25 Leather hard forms awaiting the first firing

While I engaged myself in pottery and ceramics for the first time in a ceramic studio, I realised that it offers an emotional need for expression just like any other form of art. Being engaged in the hand building techniques to create three-dimensional forms using basic hand building techniques such as slab, coil, pinch as well as throwing of pottery to produce vessels gave me an opportunity to view the art of pottery in a different dimension.



Figure 26 Joining the slabs using slip

Back in Kenya I had always viewed pottery and ceramics in terms of functionality of the forms and nothing else. Ceramic forms which in most cases are pots of different sizes and shapes are created for specific functions. The pots are basically used for cooking, storing water, grains and as flower/plant pots. I had never thought of the journey that clay takes with the potter in order to get to its functionality. Neither did I pay attention to the process that the clay takes to be transformed into the beautiful pots. As an a/r/tographer there was need now to pay more attention to things that had always seemed ordinary. In the ceramic studio, I went through manipulation of the clay to create forms, the application of glazes, feeling the quality of the surface, looking for the hidden meaning(s) and integrated myself through the whole process of making.



Figure 27 Carefully shaping and moulding the vessel

As I grappled with and wondered about the intricacy and diversity of simple forms, yet complex in their own ways, it dawned on me that pottery and ceramics had exposed itself as a discipline which is involved in technical and individual achievement to experience. The vessels probably were as good as the process. Learning new terms in the process of making such as slip, score, grog, leather hard, bisque ware, and slake, to name but a few, did not go unnoticed.



Figure 28 Moulding the form while the clay is still wet.

I started looking at pottery beyond functionalism. The clay forms were truly transformative, communicative, reflective, and lively. Hence making became a powerful tool that reinforced self-definition. When I was young, I played with mud enjoying its easy manipulation, feeling in control and here I was now, all grown up, in the ceramic art studio feeling like I knew nothing about it. Perceiving what I had always encountered in a new and fresh way.

Simple tasks such as cutting a block of clay precisely to size became a challenging task. It became clear that there is a way in which every material communicates its purpose. Gude (2010) alludes that “to engage in making art, one must begin by surrendering to the process of making” (p. 23). I was in a way forced to surrender myself to the process of converting the clay into forms. I had to treat the clay in a special way each day otherwise it would not behave the way I wanted it

to. Hence the clay and I were in constant communication. Even when I was out of the studio there was never a letting go.

I had to keep the clay wrapped in a polythene bag in order to keep it moist in order for it to be malleable the following day. Ensuring that the clay was well kneaded to expel the air bubbles and to make it workable before starting the moulding process was paramount. I learned that air bubbles trapped in the clay would break the clay forms as they try to escape during firing process. While moulding the vessels it was of necessity to handle the clay with lots of care to protect the vessel from collapse. The clay consistency had just to be right; not too wet, not too hard. It was important to give the slabs only enough time to expel some water in order to curve them into cylindrical forms. In the event that this did not happen, the cylinders would never be. Hence the process would have to start from scratch.

I needed to make some sort of agreement with the clay as I pushed and pulled at it to acquire various shapes. If and when a disagreement between us arose, then the clay form would collapse requiring a fresh start. I do not remember how many times this happened. This made it frustrating yet exciting in a way. Not creating anger in me but making me want to be more careful with the clay in the process of making.

It seemed like we were having a conversation and each of us had a role to play, otherwise the dialogue would not proceed. The more I worked on the clay, the more we got used to one another hence making it easy for me to shape it into any form that I wanted. Understanding the clay gave me a leeway to manipulate it in my way. A task such as fixing the handles that seemed impossible at the start became much easier with time. However, I must say here that several handles I made broke before I was able to master the art even though I cannot call myself an expert

yet because there is yet a lot of learning to do. Becoming intimate with the clay made the process of making easier and enjoyable.



Figure 29 Treating a broken handle on a form.

Process of Making

As I got more engrossed in learning, the process replaced the object, and I was totally immersed in the making process. The concentration was on moulding and remoulding the clay forms to become expressions of themselves. It is also interesting to note how relationships grew between the creator (me) and created (clay forms). It did not matter if the person next to me was more experienced than me, hence lessening the sense of competition and envy. What mattered was the focus toward learning a skill of manipulation of clay to create forms. The clay offered me the chance to feel and touch, work and build, perform and communicate with it as well as with my colleagues.

The plasticity of clay lessened preconceived limitations of perfection. In the process of making, clay uniquely presented me with opportunities to experience artistic qualities that I would

otherwise have easily overlooked. I was able to cut, smooth, form, shape, adjust, focus, score, join, burnish, paint, glaze the clay forms and even fire them, as seen in the visuals. I would perhaps never have learnt these acts without the mutual engagement and manipulation of clay.



Figure 30 Slab made form painted with underglaze and ready for firing

Gold (2013) notes that we should perhaps allow the “materials to think in us as we think through them... Creating opening and following where it leads” (pp. 6-7). I got into the ceramic studio with the mind-set that the pottery and ceramic making is all about functionality but left me equipped with a new understanding of the same. Even after many years of experience in teacher training, there was and still is a lot for me to learn.

Hence the art-making activities became a process of self-discovery and ultimately, a lifelong process. The art studio became a space that created an opening, helping me to look beyond the surface. I connect this with what Irwin et al. (2006) talk about living inquiry as engaging in experiences in order to further learning. I relate the seniors’ art making activity to my experience in the art studio where I discovered that the manipulation and engagement of clay has the capacity

to offer a sense of enjoyment and high level of concentration providing one with a sense of happiness and pleasure. I remember in one of the sessions my colleague commenting,

This is a really good experience. Dealing with clay helps one forget all their problems. It is unique in its own way.

This activity opened another door for me as artist/researcher/teacher, helping me realise that art activities can lead one to a path that was not intended, sometimes offering multiple directions. Irwin (2008) argues that “living inquiry encourages one to experience and question the world from different perspectives and to slow down and notice that which is around one” (p.28). My a/r/tographic practice attended to and made visible explicit, implicit and tacit knowledge. The activity provided me with a different perspective of viewing life and as I continued with my research and workshops with the elderly seniors I could now see, feel, and appreciate things that I may have overlooked in the past.

Having practiced visual art-making in the ceramics studio opened a window for me to understand the seniors better and empathise with them. It also created a new understanding of art practice, opening spaces, interstices and raptures in the process of learning and making.



Figure 31 Painted and glazed clay forms

CHAPTER 6: Discussion and Conclusion

Metaphors

In this chapter I use metaphors to create meaning and interpretation of the three themes of flowing, social connectedness and process of making derived from the research. These three themes link up to the overall wellbeing of the elderly seniors of Greek Springs Retirement Centre as explained in the discussion below.

Burke (1945) notes that a metaphor is a device for seeing something in terms of something else. Ivie (2003) views metaphor as the use of a word, phrase, or image in place of another to imply a likeness or comparison. Therefore, the essence of a metaphor can be the understanding of one kind of thing in terms of another. Normally this process is usually based on cross-domain correlations in our experience, giving rise to perceived similarities (Lakoff & Johnson 2003). Metaphors are well established in linguistic practices, but Lakoff and Johnson have claimed that metaphors also permeate the way people think and structure understanding. Consciously or otherwise, both the linguistic and the conceptual levels of metaphors are embedded in our everyday thinking, language, and activity.

I use metaphors to analyse the elderly seniors' feelings, aesthetic experiences and interpersonal communications as well as my own self-understanding of the data collected during my research. From a cognitive psychological perspective, researchers have suggested that metaphor facilitates comprehension and relational knowing (Gentner, Bowdle, Wolff, & Boronat 2001; Gentner & Gentner 1983). Based on this understanding, I believe I can think through the metaphors and explain myself to my reader. Since meaning is built on understanding, which is mainly structured by people's embodiment and their creative process, metaphor is regarded as a

chief vehicle for people to achieve such an understanding, as it enables them to map their experiences in one domain onto another domain.

Moreover, I use my concrete experience with various objects/things to create meaning of my research. This will help me to “communicate the unknown by transposing it in terms of the known” (Gowler & Legge, 1989, p. 439). As Gibbs (1987) stresses “metaphors do not necessarily express a single proposition but are often seen as being ‘pregnant’ with numerous interpretations pointing out that alternative meanings can all be equally plausible (p.3). This opens and allows various ways and perspectives of understanding and knowledge creation.

With this in this view I invite you to partake in my thoughts of sense-making about the information I gathered during my research. In an aesthetic form I present metaphor to try and bring out active and integrated knowledge hoping to express the facts and information on the research as well as invoke cognition and produce sensory response. For me to convey a understanding of the themes, I will use more concrete, physical, tangible objects. Typically, our experiences with the things /objects in the physical world serve as natural and logical foundation for comprehension of more abstract domains /ideas. Metaphors become natural models that allow us to take familiar, concrete objects and experiences and re-cast them onto unknown or abstract concepts or things, giving them structure and meaning (Erickson, 1991). According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980) metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. I agree with Hogler, Gross, Hartman, and Cunliffe (2008) that a “metaphor has meaning that goes beyond, and is not reducible to, either discourse or emotive utterance...metaphor drives creativity, leading to a communal recognition of the way things are in the world” (p. 394).

In order for my readers to understand the metaphors, I have looked for commonality between the themes and their subjects, and then to describe some aspects and characteristics of these objects. With the use of this description I hope that we can learn and appreciate something new. Through the power of metaphor, I believe I am able to generate a clearer, more insightful and personal understanding with you as my readers. This follows Lakoff and Johnson (1980) work where meaning is based on understanding, which is largely structured by people's embodiment and their imaginative process.

Discussion

This thesis had the aim of exploring whether engaging retired seniors in art making activities can improve their wellbeing. In this research I looked at well-being as a combination of feeling good about one's self, having positive emotions, happiness, contentment, interest, confidence, affection as well as being able to function effectively. The art making activities involved active training of the elderly seniors in Spring Creek Retirement Centre proved to provide overall wellbeing to the seniors.

According to my observations, constant art-making brought about maintenance and improvement of sensorimotor functions affected by aging. I did notice that visual art-making activities bring together the seniors in retirement centres. They provide social connectedness within and without the centre hence cultivating love, togetherness, co-operation, sharing, conversations, satisfaction, high self-esteem, emotional support and happiness/joy.

It is also necessary to note that, the seniors got in to a flow during the art-making activities engaging thoroughly in the step-by-step process of art-making. As mentioned in Chapter Four the

themes of process of making, flowing and social connectedness surfaced during the data analysis. I now move ahead to discuss each of these themes.

Making with Material by the Seniors

It has been documented that when people age they have a tendency to lose tactile acuity as their haptic performance and fine manipulative movements deteriorate (Stevens & Choo, 1996; Stevens & Cruz, 1996). Many times we ignore the sense of touch and its vital role for coping with activities of daily living. And what are the implications of this for the seniors do you think?

Krampe (2002) has noted that since aging leads to a decrease in fine motor performance, the elderly often tend to reduce their activities of everyday life step by step. However, during my research, I did discover that in spite of their age the seniors' frequent use of their motor skills seemed to position them with control. As we continued with the art activities the seniors became faster and better skilled in their tasks. Although the seniors expressed a feeling of inadequacy at the beginning of the workshops, as heard in some of their conversations noted below, they eventually became competent through the activities they were doing. I observed them being in control of the art-making, improving each time they practiced. Being in control seemed to give them self-confidence and a sense of happiness.

At the beginning of the workshops

Participant S2 We haven't had a chance to do anything like this before. I hope I can do as expected of me.

Participant S4 I wonder if I can come up with anything like that (referring to the facilitator's sample of sock monkey)

Participant S1 During our time cartooning was termed as a waste of time.

Participant S2 I expect to see a good cartoon from you. Probably you have hidden talents

Participant S6 Why are you saying cartoons, I cannot draw a line. Don't expect miracles.

Participant S1 My square looks like a rectangle

Participant S2 My eyes are not the same size

Participant S1 We have never done cartoons before. I can't even draw.

After getting used to the practice

Participant S4 This one does look surprised. (Referring to the cartoon)

Participant S3 My character wears pyjamas all the time.

Participant S3 My mickey is incredible!

Participant S1 Maybe we should display our work for others to see later.

Participant S1 I did it! I just threaded my needle. I had not done this in a long, long time. Thanks to this monkey making exercise.

Participant S2 Stitching reminds me of those days when I did embroidery. It feels good that I can still do it."

Participant S3 Those who did not attend this session will be jealous on seeing what we have accomplished."

The elderly seniors were able to use the pencils, pens, scissors and needles as instructed. They listened and acted at the same time. They eventually were able to draw the outlines of the cartoons with precision and shaded the required areas. They cut, stuffed and stitched the sock monkeys to produce positive outcomes.

The seniors' deep engagement with the processes of creative planning and making of the cartoons and sock monkeys appeared to provide a powerful means of being in control and increasing skill. In spite of their age, they were well engaged in the learning and making process.

In this process of making, the seniors were able to use the senses of touch, sight and listening. These senses I believe are vital in a well compounded human being.

Metaphor of the Process of Making

I looked at the process of making with materials by the seniors as a metaphoric process of building a wall made of single bricks to create a house of wellbeing (see Figure 32). Wellbeing can be conceptualised, established like a brick house. The house building starts with a foundation that is laid to make the house firm, stable and durable.

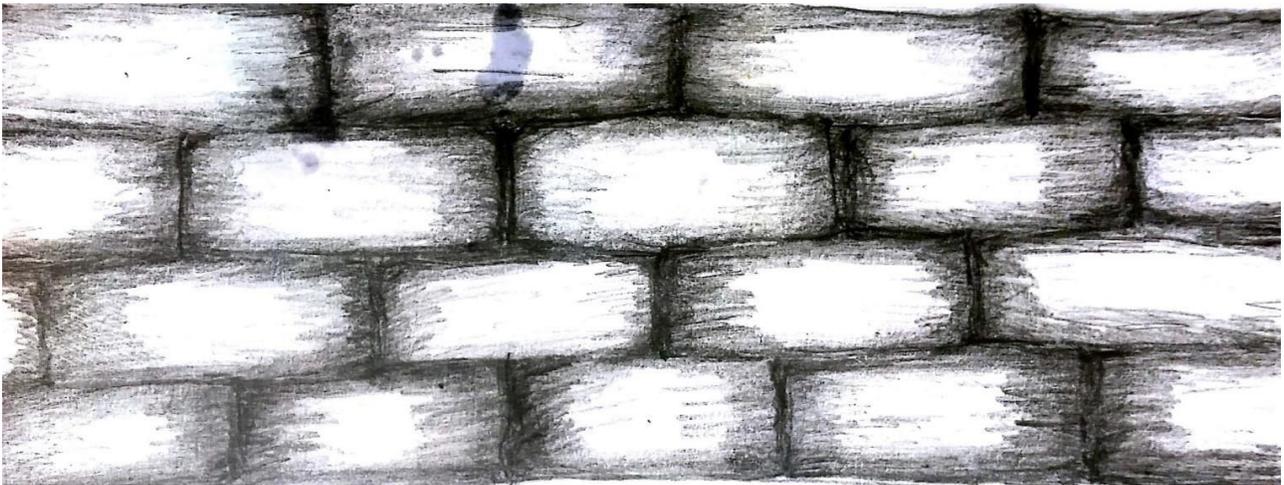


Figure 32 A wall towards wellbeing (Author pencil drawing)

Each brick occupies a unique place in the wall and serves a unique purpose. To make a compact house means all the sub-structures closely join onto the foundation. All the bricks are joined together by mortar and cement without which the wall may never stand. In the initial stages of the workshops, at the foundation, the seniors had to use their senses, feel the texture of the materials, handle the materials at the various levels in order to perform certain given tasks and follow the given process. All these activities were not performed without a measure of difficulty.

However, after repeating the tasks the same way we do when joining the bricks on a wall, the seniors gained control hence mastering the skills to perform the activities. This gave them

confidence and urge to adventure into the use of the materials they were using hence allowing them to learn and experience the limitation and possibility of these materials. As time went by into the art making, the seniors grew more comfortable as they shared ideas, materials and space.

They started enjoying fully the activities as they achieved total control of the materials they were using. The activities provided them with self-awareness as they engaged with the materials. Working through the materials and producing actual art works gave them joy/happiness, success and satisfaction while it also raised their self-esteem. From my observations it was evident that the seniors used the materials and tools to make forms and pictures that delighted them.

I also observed that through manipulation of materials the seniors found new experiences that inspired them into creating positive impacts in their daily lives. The art materials and tools stimulated the seniors' senses not only physically, by seeing and touching them, but also emotionally by exploring the feelings they generated. Going by what I learnt from my observations, building overall wellbeing requires the seniors to practice regularly, repeating the same tasks the same way we do when building a brick wall in order to keep their senses in control and functioning.

Therefore, regular manipulation of materials and tools in the visual art-making process could be an avenue to improve tactile acuity and fine manipulative movements, which in turn provides a healthy, functional life for the seniors. All of these add up to build overall wellbeing of the seniors. This research agrees with Guest et al. (2014) who have argued that one means to help preserve motor skills could be for “individuals (including the elderly) to routinely take part in tasks that make high demands on the tactile processing system” (p. 83).

In reference to my own art practice in the art studio, it was clear that the process of making with materials improved each day. Handling art materials consistently to create forms allows control of the practice making it manageable and enjoyable.

Social Connectedness Metaphor

Social connectedness is a vital human motive. As I have mentioned in the literature review, every human being old or young has an innate need to stay connected to others. It has been argued that feeling connected to others increases psychological and physical well-being (De Vries, Glasper, & Detillion, 2003). As an a/r/tographer during my art practice in the art studio and while working with the seniors in the Centre, I was able to connect socially in ways that would otherwise have been impossible. Being in that space and time allowed for social engagements, connections and learning which were unique in their own way. In this a/r/tographical case study the seniors were able to achieve social connectedness through interaction during and after the art-making activities. After analysing the data, the theme of social connectedness presented itself through various words that kept resonating during the visual art-making activities as shown in Figure 33. Social connectedness has been referred to as the relationships that people have with family and others (Buckley & McCarthy 2009; Williams, & Galliher, 2006). In this study, however, I look at social connectedness as involving relationships with family, friends, and acquaintances as well as interaction with things within one's environment. I liken the social connectedness of the seniors with a *kiondo* (a Kenyan handmade basket). The *kiondo*, (see Fig. 34. below) is made using a set of warps and a pair of weft threads that entwine to create a tight mesh -like woven mat.

The warps and the wefts must connect and stay together to create the *kiondo* as they touch, embrace, relate and entwine with each other. In order to create a big *kiondo* one must increase the

number of warps and the length of the wefts. The seniors through the workshops had a chance and space to relate, connect, and entwine with their colleagues as well as the facilitators. Increasing the contact time seemed to create a better bond of the social circle.

Increasing the number of people one socializes with also helps to increase the social circle. From my observations I believe social connectedness had significant implications for the wellbeing of the seniors in Creek Springs Retirement centre. While there has been prior research that investigates the benefits of social connectedness in relation to human well-being (Lee, Dean, & Jung, 2008; Yoon, Lee, & Goh, 2008), there is not much knowledge on how visual art-making can bring about social connectedness and in turn improve the well-being of the elderly in retirement centres.

However, what emerged from this research is that visual art-making activities promote social engagement that ultimately has a positive influence on the seniors' overall well-being. The spacious well-ventilated room created a conducive environment for the seniors to work and relate during the visual art-making activities. It worked as a good avenue for the seniors to come out and engage with their colleagues in their centre whom they confessed to hardly meet to socialise with. As the seniors performed tasks drawing, sewing, stuffing, cutting, observing, listening and following instructions, they were able to engage and make social connections.

They created a weave, a mesh, a *kiondo* connected with personal stories they told, sad and happy moments shared, helping one another, learning from each other and contacts with various people including those from other countries. The connections with other countries; widening the *kiondo* was manifest when some of the seniors offered to donate their sock monkeys to children in Africa.

The woven mesh of connectedness became neater as some seniors offered to gift their sock monkeys to their family members or friends. Through the process of making, the seniors mingled with each other easily and freely as they shared their experiences, space and time. At the end of the workshops the seniors reported that they felt better, well connected and more productive. At the close of each workshop, the eager seniors did not hesitate to find out when the next session would be.

The seniors even requested the director of the facility to allow them to exhibit their work for others to see. From my observations, it was apparent that visual art-making activities can act as an avenue to social connectedness. I believe that these visual art-making activities can keep the seniors functional both cognitively and physically, and also keep them socially active hence generally improving their overall wellbeing.

It is important to note that there was humour throughout the visual art-making activities and the room was often filled with laughter. The workshops created an opportunity for the seniors to socialize and laugh conforming to Berk's (2001) idea that humour is a social phenomenon. Fry and Rader (1977) explain that laughter can lead to physiological changes which may improve a person's overall wellbeing. Visual art-making activities brought together the seniors at the Creek Springs Retirement Centre.

The activities provided social connectedness within the centre hence cultivating love, togetherness, co-operation, sharing, conversations, satisfaction, high self-esteem, emotional support and laughter/joy. I view these as good ingredients for overall wellbeing of the seniors. Having frequent contact with colleagues in the centre, instructors and interacting with art materials in the process of visual art-making I believe is positively associated with social support. I agree with Hutcherson, Seppala, and Gross (2008) that the need for social connection is an essential

human motive, and it is increasingly clear that feeling socially connected extends mental and physical health benefits.



Figure 33 Making the kiondo

Metaphor of Flow in the Process of Making

The third theme that informs my understanding of the research observations was flow in the process of making. The visual art-making activities were guided by the concept of flow. Flow is characterised by involvement, concentration and feeling of enjoyment. According to Csikszentmihaly (1990) flow is a state of deep absorption in an activity that is innately enjoyable, as when artists or athletes are focused on their play or performance. The seniors as captured in my discoveries, were intensely immersed in the visual art-making hence being *in flow*.

They did the activities voluntarily and they were determined to balance challenge and skills without any indication of boredom, anxiety or worry. This conforms to the commonly employed sets of flow indicators by Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) work as discussed in my literature review (see p.). Furthermore, there was merging of action and awareness in which complete attention was given to the art making activities and the actions became almost automatic. Since there were set

clear goals and feedback of the activities the seniors were able to assess the potential of meeting their goals and thus became completely involved in the activity.

The seniors had total concentration in the task of making the sock monkeys and drawing the cartoons. They had a sense of control over actions and the environment and there was no conscious awareness of control but rather a lack of worry about loss or lack of control. The elderly seniors lost self-consciousness becoming one with the activity thereby causing concern for the self to disappear. As the art making activities went on there was a transformation of time. Where time was altered by the rhythm of the activity rather than the reference of time of day.

Hence time appeared to speed up making the two-hour allocation of the activities to appear too small. Since they were in *flow* the seniors eventually seemed to enjoy the activities and yarned for more time and more activities. Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi (2002) have noted that individuals in this state perceive their performance to be pleasurable and successful, and the activity is perceived as worth doing for its own sake, even if no further goal is reached and I observed this phenomenon in this research.

I viewed the process of flowing in terms of a flowing river. The activities flowed freely being led by the gravity of the moment. Once in a while being stopped by a few interruptions, just like leaves floating in a river are stopped by rocks and twigs before continuing with the flowing journey. As I observed throughout the making process, the seniors in Creek Springs Retirement Centre were fully engaged in the act of art making since they were in flow which as I witnessed, the seniors, in the process of making would drift to another place, another world away from their normal life.

In the words of Eisner (2002) they seemed to “lose a sense of distance and time” (p. 202) and occupied a space less and timeless universe that in retrospect yields high degrees of

satisfaction. They were totally immersed in their activities allowing these activities to direct them in the same way a river flows. The process, absorption in the activity itself at the moment and losing track of time seemed to bring enjoyment to the seniors hence making them feel good about themselves as reflected in their conversations. This feeling good appeared to bring a feeling of being more in control of their lives at that moment.

This is reflected in Csikszentmihalyi and Graef's (1980) research on experience of freedom in daily life that people feel better and relaxed when engaged in voluntary activities. This is also supported by the fact that the workshops were scheduled for two hours each but the working room was a buzz of activity even after the two hours were over. The visual art-making activities engaged the seniors and elicited personal creative expressions with their effects.

I noticed intense and focused concentration on what the seniors were doing in the moment. They were lost in making sock monkeys and creating cartoon drawings, an indication that they were in control of their actions. In this context *lost* refers to the flow of creative engagement that allows the seniors to explore and experiment with the process, as well as every moment of frustration and satisfaction or some feelings in between. Rinaldi (2006) suggests valuing the notion of lost as “a positive moment of encounter” (p. 145) and to “recognise doubt and uncertainty, to recognise your limits as a resource, as a place of encounter, as a quality” (p. 145).

During my own practice as an art/researcher /teacher in the art studio, I was able to experience flow which in turn helped me to understand the flow in the seniors' visual art-making process. My own understanding of flow brought in my childhood memories, taking me back in time and creating a whole new level of enjoyment. Below is a vignette of my childhood memories brought about by the art practice during my research. The short story gives an idea of my

understanding of flow in the process of making. Figure 34 is a picture of the environment in which I grew which was triggered in the process of art-making in the art studio.



Figure 34 Mt. Kenya with childhood memories

Growing up at the foot of Mount Kenya, the second tallest mountain in Africa, made me fall in love with rivers and streams. I have had an intimate relationship with rivers from a very young age. Watching every day, streams flow down the mountain was always so refreshing. Now that I am all grown up, the process of remembering the site and the feeling brought about by this is like a snowball rolling downhill. Starting small but picking up a lot of mass as it continues. The streams and rivers flow freely down the mountain regardless of the mossy logs and bedrocks that stand on their path fighting the natural flow. Slowing down once in a while but never stopping. They break

through with perseverance not strength or ammunition but inherent power not applied force. Lively, wild, confluence, a silent bend are a part of these dynamic streams. The flow is always changing yet remaining the same. I watched the streams rush forth with assurance and power, shaping to their environment yet remaining unyielding in their goal and final destination and paying no attention to their limit



Figure 35 Streams created in the flow of the process of making (By author, surreal water colour painting on paper)

I argue that the goal of an activity such as the sock monkey-making and cartoon drawing is a means for the process of flow that enables fluidity and uncertainty to fuel new possibilities. Figure 35 above shows my own understanding of flowing in the process of making by the seniors at Creek Springs Retirement Centre. The art making activities by the seniors were wells that fed different streams flowing steadily in different directions and sometimes creating tributaries.

The streams moved and building momentum gathering experience of present and past. Never stopping but slowing down once in a while, maybe only to change direction. The streams

were filled not with water but with opportunity to feel useful, remember loved ones, adventure, bring back memories of youth, share journeys travelled full of professional and other experiences. Amid the stories and discussions during the flow of the process of making, there was enjoyment, confidence, success, happiness /joy, satisfaction and, most all, learning. In a nut shell the flow of the process of making made the seniors to perceive their performance to be pleasurable and successful.

The activities were perceived as worth doing for their own sake, even if no further goal was reached (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). At the end of every session, on seeing what they had produced, the seniors were always overjoyed. As already noted in Chapter Four, after completing the sock monkey one participant's observation of

Those who did not attend this session will be jealous on seeing what we have accomplished.

Conveys not only a sense of connection and satisfaction but also how they valued the opportunity. Otherwise there would be no need for jealousy.

Most the seniors identified with the art works they had made; they gave the sock monkeys names and expressed themselves through the cartoons they drew. I did, however, observe that completion is not an end to learning, and neither is old age. Rather it is a state of continuing change that invites the seniors to explore possibilities. It was evident that there was a considerable amount of learning taking place during the visual art-making. The seniors were well attentive to the learning process of making, they engaged in the process of making, they engaged with the art forms that they created, integrated them in their day-to-day lives and also related the making to their community and cultural contexts.

Hence, I agree with Nettleford's (2009) observation that the making of art (regardless of age) is not just an "escapist activity into some netherworld about beauty or setting or rising sun, it is a form of action that provides a zone of comfort in which to renew oneself without denial to the continuity of action" (p. 40). From my observations I am convinced that visual art making activities provide a wide range of benefits thereby transforming the experience of growing old into a healthier, productive, meaningful and purposeful aging. Being in a retirement centre therefore is not the end of living but a beginning exploration into what life can bring through the process of art making.

CONCLUSION

Although various research has been done on wellbeing of the seniors, to date no a/r/tographical inquiry has been carried out to ascertain if art-making activities can improve the well-being of elderly seniors in retirement centers. This a/r/tographical case study has added the voice of the elderly seniors about their engagement in art-making activities and to research done on successful aging. This research, albeit small can serve as a base for further research in this area of study. For the elderly seniors, social connectedness, flow in the process of making and making with material during art-making became important attributes of their overall wellbeing.

In my above observations about the engagement of seniors in visual art-making, it was clear that the activities provided self-awareness to the seniors who engaged with them. The process of visual art-making provided the seniors with an opportunity to relate with the happenings in their life. The visual art-making activities have the power to encourage conversations about the present, the past and the future giving hope and direction to the seniors.

Visual art-making activities elicit humour leading to social enjoyment, as well as boosting confidence and raising the self-esteem of the seniors. Through the art making activities the seniors were able to reach out to different people including family members, friends, acquaintances and those in need. As they gave their art works as donations, it provided them a feeling of being useful to the larger society. The visual art-making activities appeared to be reflective, reflexive and affective for the seniors who were involved.

Visual art-making activities provide an avenue for learning an indication that learning is a lifelong process that brings meaning and purpose in peoples' lives. Making with materials, social

connectedness and the flow of the process of making in this research have proven to be essential attributes of the overall wellbeing of the elderly.

Involving oneself as an a/r/tographer in the process art-making provided me with new ways of knowing and understanding creating slippages, exposing interstices and providing rapture that would have otherwise not have been experienced. Paying more attention to materials, space and ourselves while we indulge in the art practice can be another form of learning which perhaps should not be taken for granted.

Points to Ponder

It is important that the aging population in retirement centres be provided with avenues to practice creative art activities on a regular basis. Using arts-based research methodologies such as a/r/tography helped me as the researcher to immerse myself into the process of knowing rather than only being an observer. In this sense the researcher is able to learn about the self as well as the experiences of the participants. There is a lot to learn, discover and unearth from that, which appears ordinary. If we pay more attention we may be able see more, feel more, hear more and probably live more fulfilling lives.

Carrying out a research in a community of practice such as sock monkey and cartoon drawing in Greek Springs Retirement Centre, provided an avenue to share and analyse human experiences in a collective way. The whole process allowed teaching and learning to take place simultaneously. Living enquiry provides a connection between art and scholarly work as one reflects on lived experiences yet creating ruptures and interstices that would otherwise have gone unnoticed. Involvement in the act of making during research gives one a broad way of

interpretation of experiences, thus making the process of making and the art form a research in and of itself.

Some Limitations that were Encountered and Possible Solutions

It is however important to note here that although this research ultimately achieved its objectives, I cannot overlook some limitations and shortcomings. To begin with I conducted the research in only one retirement facility and therefore the results may not be generalised to all other retirement centres. However, the observations can be used as a basis for other research to dwell further on the issues of visual art-making engagement and overall well-being of seniors. I worked with the seniors in three workshops each lasting two hours. I sincerely feel that working with them longer would have provided even greater insight. For instance, it would be of great interest in the future to know how much more the seniors can learn through art -making and this can only be achieved by spending more time with them. Being able to do my own art works in their midst would also be of interest to me to further explore possibilities and limitations of visual art-making activities. Probably by spending a normal day routine with the seniors would give a better understanding of their needs and wants in order to improve their overall well-being. The research would not have worked if I was doing it alone hence I required assistance of facilitators, administrators of the facility, video taking and all this needed a lot of planning that took quite some time. Some of the participants did not attend all the workshops especially the first one, but the number increased with every subsequent workshop and therefore would like to know what would happen if the workshops took place regularly.

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