

# Adding life to your years: transformative learning for older people at the Irish Museum Of Modern Art<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Life expectancy has increased by 30 years during the past century. By 2150 the percentage of the world's population over 65 will be 30%, up from 7% at present. A high percentage of older people are actively involved in adult education (Lamdin and Fugate, 1997, p. 85).

During the United Nations International Year of Older Persons (1999) the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA), with EU SOCRATES funding, undertook a study of its education work with members of St. Michael's Parish Active Retirement Association, a group of older local residents. The aim of the research was to identify the learning outcomes of the programme and how that learning was facilitated.

The Irish Museum of Modern Art is housed in the Royal Hospital, Dublin, founded in 1684 by the Viceroy to Charles II as a home for retired soldiers. It continued in that role for almost 250 years. The Irish Government restored the building and it was re-opened as the Irish Museum of Modern Art in 1991.

## Research Methodology

Interviews and focus groups were held to gather quantitative and qualitative data and conceptual mapping (Deshler, 1990) was used in the analysis. This method allowed the researchers to represent sets of concepts that are embedded in the data in map form. The concepts were summarised under various headings; thoughts, feelings, values that arise in the interviews. Reflection on the maps revealed new connections and relationships between the concepts.

## Findings

In the group researched there were eleven women and two men. Six were over 78. Four were single and nine married, four of whom were widowed. All the single and widowed were women. Seven lived alone. Eleven of the thirteen members left formal school after their primary education and all worked as police, shop assistants, factory workers and catering and clerical staff.

In the interviews people spoke about joining the programme because they were asked; they were looking for something to do; they had time. Some mentioned the desire to improve conditions for older people or the need to make new friends after a long period of isolation, and a wish to become involved in a new prestigious national institution opening on their doorstep. Two sets of concepts arising from the research are briefly outlined here – well being and identity development.

## Well-being of participants

The older people spoke eloquently about the programme contributing to their health and keeping them active. They expect, as a result, to live longer and healthier lives and contrast this with the lives of many older people who stay at home, isolated, watching television, becoming melancholy and frequently unwilling to leave their homes. This is important to them because *it stops you from getting Alzheimer's. I'm hoping it does.* Or another asserted;

*It has added life to my years....I was getting older and I suppose feeling, you now, older and useless...and I wanted still to do things...*

Inactivity, many were convinced, would lead to melancholy;

*Well, I've learned to use my brain, and one thing I'm not sitting back and letting me head go numb 'cos I find if you sit back and do nothing and look at the telly you go brain dead. You would, you'd go melancholy...*

## **Gigging, growing and sexuality: Towards identity development**

The Royal Hospital, a reminder of a British history in Ireland, was also part of the local place in which they grew up. Then it was a 'no-go area' but now is a place of which they are proud. In reclaiming a national heritage and local institution long out of bounds, they may be also reclaiming and setting free that within themselves which was out of bounds, unaccessed and undiscovered.

Through reminiscence and art the participants revisited their childhood. They established new relations with teachers and artists. They did things not allowed in their youth or at school. Though they were more constrained by age and infirmity they found a freedom to experience the excitement of the unknown and unpredictable in lives, which paradoxically, are expanding and breaking free of (long-internalised) restrictions. They speak both of fulfilling dreams and of doing things undreamed of. They are growing while playing, having fun, messing with clay and sometimes giggling at the art.

School is frequently spoken about as closing down options;

*I went to school in 1941...you were never ever brought to museums you were never brought to anything...the only thing I ever did in school was cooking...sewing and once a month brought walking to confession.*

Leaving school early imposed a ceiling on their education, career and life prospects. Some spoke of growing up and living in difficult economic circumstances; having to start work early in life, working hard and all this always circumscribed by family responsibilities. Their engagement with the museum was an opportunity to redress matters, to have a childhood and reclaim lost ground.

Through the art they speak of being more aware of the world around them and see it in new ways, *it's like a window being opened*. They link art and the ability to see things differently with awareness of poverty and homelessness.

I had to go on the bus down to Kingsbridge...Last year when I was there there was a small little bush and someone was sleeping under it and I see now they have a bit of plastic over it you know and it sort of activates your mind ...I'd love to do something but what can you do? You don't know whether they're sleeping under all these blankets or what and they were soaking...and I suppose if you were good enough you could paint what you feel about that situation.

Many are finding their voice for the first time; expressing opinions; talking of their experiences in an atmosphere free from threat of humiliation and punishment.

It was really great because you had the freedom of expression, you could express yourself without feeling embarrassed. You know I'd go other places...and you were afraid, you were always afraid to speak out you know...

Some have spoken at public gatherings about their art and memories. Others have found a voice with which to challenge injustice.

I'm a person that doesn't like injustice...I used to sit there, and I'd be kind of all inside I'd be thinking if I could only get up and say something about it. But now I can...if I feel there's something not right I'll say 'well I don't think that's right,' ... I'm able to stand up now and say it. Years ago I wouldn't have had the guts.

This increased sense of agency was a common experience.

Horizons and the realm of the possible are expanding for those whose younger lives were circumscribed by gender, economic circumstances, the society of the time and family responsibilities. They now see themselves as more powerful, more empowered. They are developing their identities. This is illustrated by their comments on how sexuality and their views about the human body have changed. By looking at and thinking about the human body in art and discussing and sharing their reactions, many have come to be more at ease and open with nudity and sexuality. When the participants first came to IMMA they were like giggly children. They are no longer shocked and are less embarrassed. The merits of different nudes can be discussed and they don't see anything wrong in

them anymore. The body and sexuality are seen as natural, it's natural it's just like part of life and a part of modern art.

The newfound celebration of freedom and imagination is transmitted to a younger generation; in the way they play with grandchildren (using ideas from the workshops to construct games); in bringing them to the museum and asking them what they see in the artwork; in encouraging them to experiment with painting and drawing. Grandchildren and others are beginning to take an interest in and reveal a talent for art.

## **Discussion**

The findings briefly presented point to significant consequences for well-being of participants and their learning. They have major implications too for national policy, for the policy and practice of IMMA and for educators working with older adults.

### **Adult education and well-being**

Though research indicates that the brain continues to lose cells as it ages, it appears to have an inherent plasticity, i.e. it has a modifiable and regenerative capacity (Boucouvalas, 1988, p. 16). The readiness on the part of group members to learn, explore, and work towards their aspirations is a powerful reminder of the 'lifelong' nature of learning.

Strong and moving stories are told in the interviews about the realities of life for older people. References to 'melancholy' and the experience the connection between health, mind, art and learning.

Social and productive activities are good predictors of longevity according to research undertaken in America (Glass, 1999, p. 478); Finland (Kaplan, 1988); Sweden (Bygren, 1996; Fratiglioni, 2000). In other research a link has been established between educational attainment and a reduced risk of Alzheimer's disease (Stern, 1994; Albert, 1995) and a poor or limited social network increases the risk of dementia by 60% (Fratiglioni, 2000). Living alone is contrasted with being alone – the latter being detrimental to health (Berkman, risk of Alzheimer's disease indicate how they 2000, pp. 1291-1292). Adults who occupy multiple social roles in later life have been shown to have higher levels of well-being (Adelmann, 1994). Adult education has serious health implications – longevity and well-being.

The stories of the older people and the supporting academic research findings have social and political implications for Government policy in culture, education, social welfare and health. Participation in programmes such as this is life-enhancing, health-promoting and people believe, correctly, that they live longer as a result. They delight in their resulting well-being.

### **Adult education and identity development**

The change in the role and image of the museum and art gallery in the late twentieth century has been characterised by Benson (1989) as a transition from temple to forum. In a museum as temple, the visitor is worshipper and in awe of the exhibitions. People look in only one direction to worship; do not interact and are disconnected from each other and from the object worshipped. A forum, in contrast, is a space for citizens to meet for discussion and debate, where opinions and multiple voices can be heard; a space in which people interact and connect. Openness is the defining quality of the forum. Reclaiming the heritage of the Royal Hospital is about transforming what for many is a symbol of British power and domination (rather like the temple) into a space open to and owned by ordinary people.

Art allows people to make meaning and to construct an experience with the artwork. Making meaning (Greene, 1995) is central to the developmental and learning process in the lives of individuals; one that continues throughout the life span as new experiences, challenges, questions and crises are encountered.

Laughter and humour play an important part in the group's experience. The power of humour to break through barriers of fear, anxiety and tension is well-recognised. It is part of well-being. Their laughter is a way of defusing the discomfort, the anxiety of confronting images and artworks that may be embarrassing. It allows them to look at something they may not otherwise confront and makes it easier to return to it and look again. In the workshops laughter releases creativity.

Opportunities to revisit childhood, have fun and play, provide important opportunities for development and learning. According to Erikson (1977, p. 191) in play one is;

on vacation from social and economic reality - or, as is most commonly emphasised: (in play) he does not work....even the most strenuous and dangerous play is by definition not work.

Erikson clearly identifies how taking our time in trifling, in dallying, we lazily thumb our noses at time which is our slave driver (Erikson, p. 191). This is both developmental and therapeutic.

For many of the older people, brought up in an era in which looking at images of the naked body was thought to be sinful, museums and art galleries were places where young teenagers could see nudes. It is an appropriate completion of the circle that the museum now provides a place and context in which to deal with sexuality, to confront, to stand in front of that which previously some were inclined to run past.

The adults on this programme have engaged in the process of their own development; they have consistently worked on their own identities, who they are. Erik Erikson (1977) spoke of achieving a sense of identity as the main task of adolescence. Many of this group left school early, began work in their teen years and started a life of adult responsibilities before others from a different social background had completed school or university. Participants' references to growing up now and having been old before their time bear out this idea that in IMMA they have got a chance to reclaim a missed opportunity to grow. They had to navigate another path toward maturity, one that is not always the most conducive to growing and maturing since adult responsibilities intervene before the individual may be quite ready for them.

In this experience at IMMA they have revisited the task of achieving a sense of identity. It is here that the programme achieves its spectacular success. It has provided precisely the environment in which adults of any age can explore who they are, what they believe in, and what they wish to do with their lives and relationships.

James Marcia (1980) called this process of questioning a developmental moratorium. It is characterised by two things: the leaving aside of responsibilities and commitments and engaging in a process of wondering and questioning. Both of these activities are part of the experience of this programme. The programme is a process of development for the participants. It allows people to step away from commitments to ideas, beliefs and attitudes in politics, religion, sexuality, etc. and engage in a process of wondering what beliefs, ideas and values to hold. The time given to the programme and the unhurried pace are important in this context; these are not tasks which can be rushed. It is ironic that working with older people whom one might think were working in a more limited time frame than younger adults, there was no time constraint. This was not a semester, a pilot, a year but an eight year engagement between the institution and the group. Time may be a crucial ingredient in this kind of learning.

Such a developmental experience facilitates the emergence of the mind-set required to live in the modern world. The participants are well situated to cope with and find a space for themselves in a modern culture which makes profound demands on the mental capabilities of each person (Kegan, 1994).

Throughout this research we noted the theme of connectedness as it permeates the activities and impact of the IMMA programme. In his work on human development Robert Kegan (1994, p. 217) identifies the two 'fundamental longings' of connection and separateness. In the lifelong activity of meaning-making the processes of integration and differentiation of the two longings occur again and again. Without outlining in detail the importance of these processes, we can state that the participants on the course have achieved an integration of these longings. They have achieved this by developing self-reliance on the one hand and connection on the other. Opportunities have been provided for integration and differentiation. This has allowed the participants to develop new ways of connecting with the world and has also fostered identity development which strengthens their individuality and autonomy. They are both more connected and more self-reliant. To put it more correctly: they have achieved a connected self-reliance. This refers again to the link with well-being as a connected life is life-enhancing.

In relating to younger members of their families, for example, by introducing them to art and by being more relaxed about play, questioning, nudity, they are contributing at the family level to broader cultural and social change. In the activism they demonstrate in this arena, and in their ability to act out of their new sense of self, their development can be described as transformative.

However, the emphasis on critical reflection as a rational, analytical, cognitive and social process, usually associated with Mezirow (1996), was not easily identified. What is clear is that a more creative, intuitive, emotional process was involved in this experience (Scott, 1997; Grabove, 1997, p 90). This research underlines the need to broaden the base of transformation theory which gives most significance to rational thinking and critical reflection. It is suggested here that because the medium of the project was an experiential engagement with modern art the learning was less inclined to be oriented to critical social theory, enlightenment and changing frames of reference but more concerned with 'expansion of consciousness or even a change in personality' (Grabove, 1997, p. 92) and other intuitive and subjective processes (Taylor, 1998, pp. 33-38). If transformational learning takes place in both rational and extrarational processes, in both cognitive and unconscious modes then this has implications for the development of theory, the teaching of adults and research.

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**1 This paper is based on the findings of a report co-authored with Anne Gallagher, NUI, Maynooth (Fleming and Gallagher, 1999)**