

Using Art to Trigger Memory, Intergeneration al Learning, and Community

*“This book
explains the
theory and
practice of CBAE
as transformative
learning”*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the use of art to trigger memory as an effective educational tool for discussion. The author is a regular guest speaker at an affluent retirement community. The attendees are highly educated and accomplished professionals with expansive and worldly lived experiences. Formally facilitating lifelong learning, however, is a special vocation and requires a secular shared praxis and other andragogical strategies. (Keywords: photographic history, community-building, shared praxis, memory).

KEYWORDS

historic photographs history, community-building, shared praxis, memory

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Using art to trigger memory is an effective educational tool for discussion but teaching and lecturing also utilize an intentional mix of pedagogical and andragogical strategies based upon the age and lived experience of the students or participants to promote learning. Recently, I presented a lecture at a senior living center entitled, "Iconic Photographs of History." For the attendees at the Men's Breakfast, including residence staff and me personally, the lecture was an intergenerational learning experience. Leading a discussion regarding history, specifically history in the participants' lived experience, can be a daunting undertaking, the tools of adult education make it an enriching experience. Facilitating lifelong learning with andragogical strategies, such as such as secular shared praxis, created an atmosphere of intergenerational synergy because the gentlemen at Men's Breakfast shared their lived experiences. Collective memory activities can stimulate community-building and elevate knowledge to wisdom and understanding.

Pedagogy and Andragogy: Know thy Audience!

Earlier in my career, I taught history in middle school and high school. While it is poor pedagogy for a teacher to presume to be the font of knowledge and act like the mage on the stage, it is a safe bet that primary and secondary educators have a longer lived experience than the students. More recently, I have taught history at the post-secondary level and I have had the wonderful experience of teaching a broader age range of students. Kisamore, Aldridge, Alexander, and Whitea (2008) lay out significant ways adult learners are different from younger college students. Formal education, whether post-secondary or earlier, has group dynamics and rules tied to the educational institution. However, non-degree granting and communal educational programming is not tied to external factors, but internal interest and motivation. Each grade level, type of institution, and age of student offers its own joys and challenges, but it is important that all educational activities integrate an activity and visual elements into lectures to touch upon audio, visual, and kinesthetic methods of learning.

Learning at Senior Living Centers

For the past several years, I have offered lectures at an affluent retirement community. The residents are highly educated and accomplished professionals. For example, I presented a lecture on genocide memorials throughout the world, many that I have not visited, but the that many members of the residential community had visited. As an educator or facilitator, how does one discuss topics in which the audience may have more lived experiences? Formally facilitating lifelong learning is a special vocation and requires andragogical strategies. The presentation of materials can be used to elicit participation and shared knowledge, not solely the rather than just a way for the lecturer to transmit information. While artist-in-residence programs are not the same as guest lectures, Richmond-Cullen (2018) explored the benefit of artist-in-residence programs kinesthetically and psychologically and there may also be similar benefits to discussing historical photographs to elicit memory stimulation. However, some kinesthetic activities may be inappropriate due to limited mobility by older adults. As audio

and visual teaching strategies may be affected by declining vision and hearing among senior adults, large visuals and microphones are imperative in facilitating adult learning. The presentation of materials can be used to elicit participation and shared knowledge, not solely the transmission of information by the lecturer. Richmond-Cullen (2018) explored the benefit of artist-in-residence programs kinesthetically and psychologically. However, some kinesthetic activities may be inappropriate due to limited mobility by older adults. As audio and visual teaching strategies may be affected by declining vision and hearing among senior adults, large visuals and microphones are imperative in facilitating adult learning. Again, know thy audience!

Communal Learning and Community-Building

Prior to the presentation on “Iconic Photographs of History,” the Director for Life Enrichment of the Senior Center shared with me that the community had had a recent influx of new members and, while all were interested in community-building, the stakeholders were not sure how to build that community. Andragogic education is as much about community-building as it is an educational endeavor. Similar to Jean Piaget (1936), education is a communal exercise influenced by the learned and lived experiences of all parties involved in the dialectical undertaking. James Poisson, theology instructor at Archbishop Stepinac High School and Bishop Hendricken High School, has described this as a Piagetian mathematical formula: prior understanding plus new knowledge equals new understanding. This approach facilitates, but also community-building.

Community is both a tool of, and a result of, good pedagogy and andragogy. In 1980, Thomas Groome developed a pedagogy of faith formation known as *shared Christian praxis* (Groome, 1980, 1991). For Groome, a learner is an agent-subject-in-relationship that is “consciously aware, reflective, discerning” and in “authentic being... with others in place and time” (Groome, 1991, pp. 8-9). Though I was unaware of Groome’s shared Christian praxis until a few years ago, it immediately resonated with me as a description of my secular style of teaching. In seeking to adapt shared *Christian praxis* more broadly to all education, I explored similar terminology and discovered similar pedagogical strategies and social descriptions. While the term praxis is common in Del Rocío Guzmán Benavente, de la Luz Ortiz Vázquez, Barragán Ledesma, and Castillo León (2013), Hernández (2014), and Koring, Killian, Owen, and Todd (2004), the usage did not capture the secularization of shared Christian praxis I was seeking to describe.

Secular shared praxis is a pedagogical and andragogical approach that recognizes that learners all have lived experiences that include prior knowledge and prior understanding. That is, understanding is an awareness akin to wisdom distinct from, and transcendent to, knowledge. Citing Blanchard (1967), Groome stated that while wisdom “may be accompanied

by a broad range of knowledge” (Blanchard, 1967, pp. 322-324), wisdom or conation is more accurately described as reflectiveness and judgement that is discerned “from reflection on [personal] experience or from the cumulative experience of the [human] race” (Groome, p. 32). Baruch Spinoza and Martin Heidegger argued that *being* and *knowing* are related (Groome, 1991, p. 29) and, therefore, Groome’s learner as agent-subject-in-relationship is both being [noun and verb] and knower that is “consciously aware, reflective, discerning” and in “authentic being... with others in place and time” (Groome, 1991, pp. 8-9).

Adult learners learn when reflecting in community. Mezirow (2000) wrote that when adults “reflect on and discuss their assumptions about the world, they often experience a shift in their frame of reference or world view” (TEAL, 2011). As secular shared praxis still needs a facilitator organizing the educational activity and asking guiding questions, perhaps the pedagogical and andragogical approach could also be described as a Socratic shared praxis. The underpinning assumption in Socratic or secular shared praxis is that the community collectively has the knowledge and the facilitator can draw out pre-existing knowledge and frame the discussion to form new understanding for all stakeholders. As the educational cliché goes, the facilitator is the guide on the side, not the mage on the stage. This philosophical and pedo/andragogical approach of shared learning is the underpinning for the term communal knowledge or communal understanding.

Voluntary Participation

In 2014, the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills published “Seven Principles of Adult Education.” The first principle is that adults must want to learn. There is no such thing as truancy in lifelong learning. Thus, attendance was, of course, optional for the presentation “Iconic Photographs of History” at the monthly Men’s Breakfast. Referencing Mezirow (1997, 2000), TEAL (2011) argued that adult learners “need to challenge each other’s assumptions and encourage group members to consider various perspectives” which parallels Groome (1980, 1991) and Mezirow (1997, 2000) who stated that reflective discourse is an “environment of acceptance, empathy, and trust” (TEAL, 2011). Trust is built when the teacher or facilitator steps back and empowers other stakeholders in the situational environment. Empowered and engaged adults, attending a lecture by choice, can then learn collectively with the presenter and each other.

Choosing and Defining Space

According to the Canadian Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (2014, Principle Six), adults learn best in informal environments. The choice of presenting a lecture involving memory to an older population during a meal setting was intentional. The senior residence has both independent living and assisted living divisions. As memory is a casualty of age and disease, an antiseptic lecture on memory could be uncomfortable for some residents. Chauvel et al. (2018) point out that procedural knowledge is often left intact by both age and disease even

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when declarative knowledge is lost. Thus, men who attended the breakfast have the procedural knowledge and routine of breakfast to allay anxiety if there are gaps in memory regarding the historical events in the lecture. While Ávila and Hernández (2017) and González-García (2017) explored andragogical strategies for populations with memory gaps, both studies involved excursions to museums and not the use of in-house exhibitions. It is less clear in the literature how historical photography can be used to foster community-building and engagement in senior living residences. It would benefit the field of literature if future research bridged the gap between museum studies, adult education, and issues in gerontology such as memory.

Traditional classrooms and lecture formats can also reflect oppressive, non-inclusive teaching, but the “non-traditional arrangement of furniture destabilizes traditional power structures in unique ways in order to propose imaginative alternatives to more oppressive [didactic] teaching” (Vella, 2015) The residence staff and I, therefore, chose to arrange the tables and chairs so that the attendees were facing each other, forming intentional intimacy by proximity and body position. And, since Yang, Becerik-Gerber, and Mino (2013) explored how acoustics, furniture, and visibility affected the learning environment, we removed the chair at the head of the table, allowing a clear line of sight to the large screen, arranged the podium off-set to the side with controls to the display, and utilized a wireless hand-held microphone system.

Teaching Isn't About the Teacher

The goal of the lecture was two-fold: to present an interesting lecture, but more importantly, it was to facilitate community-building within at the senior living center. Not knowing the specific professional knowledge or personal interests of the attendees, I chose to present on the historical events of their lifetime. I asked the Director of Life Enrichment what the ages were of the men that were expected to attend and learned that the average age was 77 years old. The men are essentially the sons of the Greatest Generation. Thinking about history by generation, I am always intrigued by Maurice Halbwachs' (1980) idea of collective memory. While Guy Beiner (2007) criticized the adjective collective and preferred the phrase “social memory,” I personally use the phrase generational memory. For example, anyone old enough to remember December 7, 1941, knows where they were when they heard that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. Since adults want to be “equal partners” in the learning process (Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, 2014, Principle Seven), I decided to enlist the attendees as co-presenters on “Iconic Photographs in History.” Bennett, Froggett, Kenning, Manley, and Muller (2019) explored the communal method of “aesthetic stimuli” to support shared and distributed memory and I felt confident that secular shared praxis would be effective in creating a learning environment during my presentation at the senior living residence.

Principles Three and Five of Adult Learning

Adults “learn by doing” (2014, Principle Three) and the only variable I knew those in attendance had in common was their age. Groome (1980, 1991) discusses the concept of *remembrance of being* as an “activity of consciously bringing to mind (engages reason, memory, and imagination) for understanding... that arises from our whole ‘being’ in the world” (Groome, 1991, p. 34). The Men’s Breakfast attendees had a lived “experience of being” in the world and I wanted to draw out their collective remembrance of being, so I turned the presentation into a “This is your life!” and “Where were you when?” interactive lecture. Experience affects adult learning (reference, Principle Five), so I began by explaining to the Men’s Breakfast attendees what I wrote earlier regarding Halbwachs’ (1980) theory of collective memory and how Beiner (2007) preferred to call the phenomena social memory and social forgetting. I then introduced my term generational memory and how I believe each generation has seminal events that act almost as a lodestone that pulls a generation together in a shared memory.



Photograph RG 128 ARC 306553; “The capsized USS Oklahoma lies next to a slightly damaged USS Maryland,” December 1941; Records of Joint Committees of Congress; National Archives.



Photograph 80-G-19930; “Rescuing survivors near the USS West Virginia after the attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. Records of Joint Committees of Congress; National Archives.

Iconic Photographs in History

I told the Men’s Breakfast group about my grandfather and how he told me how he learned about the bombing of Pearl Harbor and that he eventually became a Night Warden in New Britain, Connecticut. A tentative hand rose from across the table. I passed the microphone and one of the gentlemen said he was three years old in December 1941 and remembered

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thinking that the Japanese were going to bomb his town. We looked at some of those famous pictures taken on that Day of Infamy and the men nodded their heads in somber silence.¹

After looking at the pictures from the U.S. National Archives, I asked the group, if Pearl Harbor was the seminal event of their parents' generation, what was the seminal event of their generation? Two men spoke simultaneously and mentioned the Kennedy assassination. I passed the microphone to the closest gentleman and asked him where he was when he heard the news. Another man reached for the microphone and shared his story, and then another hand was raised asking for the microphone. All told, about half of the men shared their memories.



John F. Kennedy Jr. saluting his father's casket. November 25, 1963. Photograph by Dan Farrell.²



Lyndon B. Johnson Inauguration. November 22, 1963. Photograph by Cecil Stoughton.

The men were engaging with each other and building community. This process is interrelated to narrative gerontology in which older adults reflect back on "life or any narrative that connected to a specific area of life, can contribute to our understanding of growth later in life" (Bjursell, 2019, p. 66). The gentlemen at the Men's Breakfast indirectly learned more about one another's age, education, professional careers, and the parts of the country that each other resided before their current shared residence.

In a more uplifting iconic historical event, we looked at a series of photographs from the Apollo 11 mission. One man asked, "what year was that again", and another answered "1968." Another said, "'69." The group nodded, "yes, 1969." Community knowledge became community-building

¹ <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2011/winter/ph-decklogs.html>

² <https://www.nydailynews.com/news/back-dan-farrell-greatest-photos-daily-news-gallery-1.2183876>

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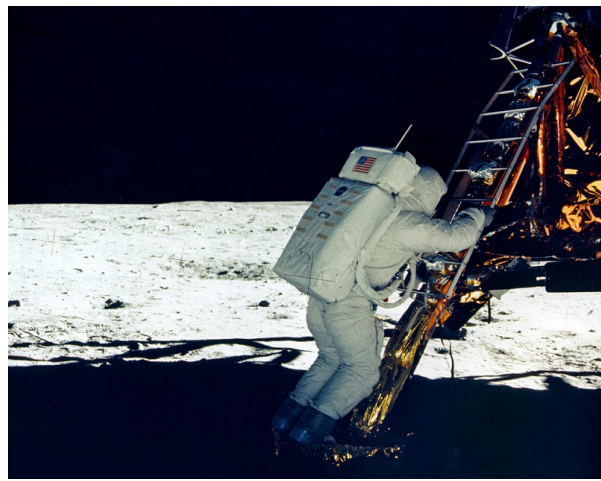


Photograph S69-39961 (Left); “Apollo 11 liftoff from launch tower camera,” July 16, 1969; NASA History Office and the NASA JSC Media Services Center.

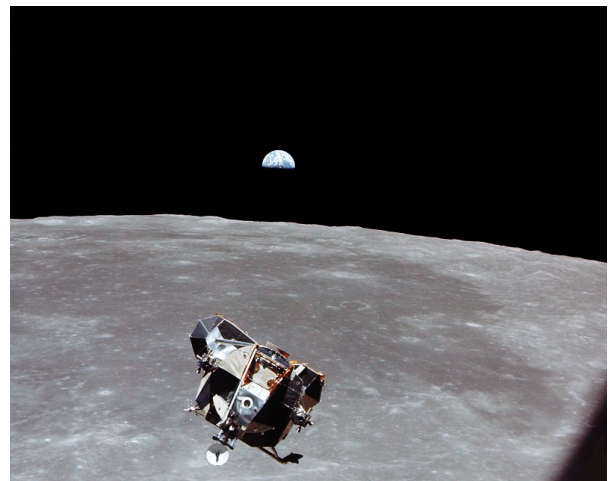


Photograph AS11-37-5454 (Above); “View from LM window just after landing,” July 20, 1969; NASA History Office and the NASA JSC Media Services Center.

The gentlemen around the breakfast table described stopping whatever they were doing at the time, so many years ago, to hear those immortal words, “Houston, Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed” as the landing module touched down on the moon. One gentleman described building his own radio so he could listen to the event while on an engineering project in northern Canada. I realized I never knew what time of day Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed in the Sea of Tranquility, so I asked the Breakfast group. The landing was at 3:17 PM Eastern.



Apollo 11 Image #AS11-40-5869 | July 20, 1969
Photograph AS11-40-5869; "Aldrin on the LM footpad," July 20, 1969; NASA History Office and the NASA JSC Media Services Center.



Photograph AS11-44-6642; "LM approaches CSM for docking / earthrise in b.g.," July 21, 1969; NASA History Office and the NASA JSC Media Services Center.

I shared what I consider to be seminal events in my own lifetime: the orbital S.S. *Challenger* explosion (1986), the fall of the Berlin Wall (1991), and the September 11th attacks (2001). We looked at pictures of all these events and shared our recollections, and together built new memories. Going back to Beiner's (2007) critic of Halbwachs' (1980) idea of collective memory, I suggested that while a generation may share the memory of a common event, the perspective of that event can vary depending on race, religion, nationality, ethnicity, gender, and other factors and influences. According to the "Seven Principles of Adult Learning" (2014), "adults are practical in their approach to learning" and prefer meaningful engagement and problem-solving. The problem discussed that day was the idea and limitations to collective memory and how photography has influenced both memory and perspective.

The Men's Breakfast hour was over, but no one moved. We kept talking. "Do you have any more pictures?" someone asked. I did. We looked at a series of pictures I had collected, from the renowned Civil Rights Era photographs of Ruby Bridges (November 14, 1960), Walter Gadsden (May 4, 1963), Malcolm X and MLK meeting on the steps of the U.S. Capitol on March 26, 1964, MLK's death on April 4, 1968, to the Vietnam Era photographs of Quang Duc (June 11, 1963), Nguyễn Ngọc Loan (February 1, 1968), Kim Phúc (June 8, 1972), and the Evaluation of the U.S. Embassy (April 29, 1975). We remembered and learned from each other.

From the optimism regarding the signing of the Camp David Accord (September 17, 1978) to the nationalistic fervor of the Miracle on Ice (February 22, 1980), we reflected on the collective memories of the attendees. We looked at the compassionate meeting of John Paul II and Mehmet Ali Ağca on December 28, 1983, the shy defiance of Sharbat Gula's famed but controversial photograph from June 1985, and the infamous and stark resistance of Tank Man (June 5, 1989). As a group, we remembered the violation of Rodney King (March 3, 1991), the triumph of Boris Yeltsin (August 18, 1991) and the reconciliation between James Earl Ray and Dexter King on March 27, 1997.

We looked at the personal and national tragedy of Chris Fields and Baylee Almon (April 19, 1995). We looked at the photographs of the hideous murder of James Byrd (June 7, 1998) and Matthew Shepherd (October 12, 1998), and then we looked at photographs of murder of nature by Hurricane Katrina and the BP Oil Spill. Finally, we looked at the photos from the Arab Spring and the tragic deaths from the Syrian Civil War. The Men's Breakfast hour had become two hours. We remembered. We talked. We built shared memory and we built community through art, reflection, and discussion.

Conclusion

In lecturing on "Iconic Photographs in History," I learned more from hearing the stories of the attendees than the gentlemen at the Men's Breakfast probably learned from my presentation. My own lived experience is now richer because the Men's Breakfast club shared their lived experiences. For me personally, and the residence staff present, the experience was an example of intergenerational learning. Van den Berg, Dewar Smits, and Jukema (2019) examined the benefits of intergenerational learning experiences resulting from collective activity. The positive experience of the discussion was reinforced by several attendees of the Men's Breakfast told later told the Director of Life Enrichment how enjoyable the lecture had been. These results are consistent with the findings of Redfield, McGuire, Ting-Chun Lin, Orton, Aust, and Erickson (2016) that relational contact-based programs can shift intergenerational attitudes and understandings. On a more personal level, I can say that the use of art to trigger memory and discussion with adults in a senior living residence is a rewarding andragogical strategy that can benefit both residents, staff, and guest lecturers.

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