Chapter 5
Learning Together: Intergenerational Experiences for Pre-Service Art Educators

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ABSTRACT
This chapter describes a 17-year partnership between the James Madison University Art Education Center and the Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community. The collaboration centers on a service-learning experience for pre-service art educators to provide art instruction to the residents of the retirement community. In 2009, the author became the coordinator of this service-learning experience and instructor for its corresponding art education course. The art education students work with independent living and memory care residents of the retirement community. Being a part of a collaborative, long-term program with the retirement community has provided tremendous learning experiences for the author, her students, the residents, and the retirement community staff regarding the power of art making in an intergenerational setting. This chapter includes a literature review, examples of artwork made in the program, descriptive observations, and reflections on the author’s experience working with students and residents in the retirement community.

INTRODUCTION
Entering the auditorium, I spotted Mary across the room and quickly crossed the space to greet her. Mary is an extremely loyal artist to our classes rarely missing a day in seventeen years, and I was instantly glad to see she had returned again. Exchanging smiles and greetings I asked Mary how her summer had been. Her simple reply, “well I won 70 blue ribbons at the Fair.” The astonishment must have been obvious on my face, as she humbly qualified the fact by saying, “most of them were for baking.” We continued to chat a few minutes longer as she described how it is possible to bake 70 items for the County Fair in one week. Every day I spend at the retirement community my assumptions of the elderly are challenged, this was just one of those moments. (Author’s personal experience)
The past 60 years have changed the economic structure of America. The agrarian landscape has, for the most part, disappeared and, with it, the close proximity of extended family members. Reduced frequency of contact with significant interaction has negatively affected relationships among the generations. A fear of aging, stereotypical thinking by both young and old, hostility between the generations, myths associated with aging, and deteriorations of the mind and spirit of the elderly are problems associated with segregation of the generations. (Newman, 1997 as cited in Whiteland, 2013, p. 397)

Studies have shown that ageism is common among college aged students in the United States (Fearnside et al., 2015; Knox et al., 2005; Yilmaz et al., 2012). Changes in attitude towards older adults can be fostered by common interests or experiences. Art making as a shared experience can be key to making connections between generational divides that lead to shifts in attitude and behavior (Fearnside et al., 2015). In Fearnside et al.’s (2015) study, undergraduate students enrolled in a digital photography course at Tiffin University in Ohio were given the assignment to interview residents at local nursing homes and then produce a series of photographs aesthetically representing the conversation. The students in study are not art majors and were taking the course as an elective or to fill a general education requirement including university requirements for community service. Using interview questions pre-determined by the class, students were initially fearful of the interviews, but in the course of conversation were able to find some form of commonality with their elderly partner. The photographic series were produced at the university and shared with the elderly participants at the conclusion of the course. Through analysis of class discussions, the researchers determined trends in comments indicating bias and ageism in the students. In post-project reflections, the researchers noted that students reported empathy for the elderly, surprise at what they learned about their elderly partner in the interview, or a change in the interviewees attitude to the experience once a commonality was discovered.

While we tend to focus on changing attitudes towards the elderly, it is important to recognize that biases come from both parties in an intergenerational program. Angela La Porte (2002) conducted a qualitative research study of an inner-city afterschool program connecting youth ages fourteen to eighteen with elderly persons living in their neighborhood. During a period of twelve weeks the teenagers spent six hours each week visiting a neighborhood partner who was over age 62 and who received Meals-On-Wheels services. The purpose of her study was to “investigate the development of intergenerational relationships that were encouraged through the program’s three components, social service, oral history, and artmaking” (p. 54). La Porte recounts hesitations and skepticism by the elderly participants in the Harlem afterschool programs towards the teens that would be visiting them.

Universities are well suited to provide opportunities for intergenerational programs, as community outreach is a common component of university missions (Felton & Clayton, 2011). Because teacher education programs depend on hands-on teaching interactions in diverse settings with a wide range of student populations, pre-service teacher divisions are prime sites to collaborate with community centers to provide intergenerational learning experiences. Pre-service teachers, or teacher candidates, are university students who are completing a program that results in a state certified teaching license. University faculty working in the field of teacher education serve dual roles of modeling effective teaching practice and as facilitators of opportunities for their teacher candidates to practice the modeled skills in order to acquire these skills for themselves. “The literature on service-learning in teacher education indicates significant, positive correlations between in-service training and student outcomes” (Miraglia, 2017, p. 117). The goal of this chapter is to highlight the benefits of a long standing intergenerational art program for the elderly in assisted living and memory care facilities as well as for pre-service art educators.