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Remembering through Art: Imaginative Reconstructions with Older Adults Experiencing Dementia

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Reconstructions with Older Adults Experiencing Dementia

As early as 1932, Frederic Bartlett at Cambridge postulated that memory was not static, as then-current theories held, but rather a dynamic process of remembering. He wrote:

“Remembering is not the re-excitation of innumerable fixed, lifeless and fragmentary traces. It is an imaginative reconstruction, or construction, built out of the relation of our attitude towards a whole active mass of organized past reactions or experience, it is thus hardly ever really exact” (Sacks, 2012, p. 154). Memories are not like volumes in a library, organized and discrete, waiting for retrieval in the same state they were when archived. Rather, memories are fluid and malleable. Simple things, such as an aroma coming from a kitchen or the sound of a particular song can feel familiar and make us stumble into a memory, or make us feel safe, happy, or scared even if we do not know why.

Despite the relative instability of memory, we desire to remember, and culturally, we have come to fear changes in our ability to do so. More than 80 years after Bartlett’s claim, physicians and scholars debate if people who experience memory loss, such as that associated with Alzheimer’s and other forms of dementia, should be viewed as suffering from a disease or, rather, experiencing a natural part of aging. How we view this phenomenon has the power to perpetuate or to remove fears associated with changes in memory, treatment, and quality of life (Whitehouse, 2008). There is no denying that accessing memories is challenging for older adults with dementia and it can lead to frustration and even depression or anger. In efforts to address this, scholars, artists, and art educators (Basting & Killick, 2003; Boyer, 2007; Rosenberg, Parsa, Humble, & McGee, 2009) have looked to creative engagement as a means of contributing to the quality of life for both those experiencing memory loss and for their caregivers.

In this article, we examine creative engagement as a strategy to support remembering with older adults. We discuss two forms of remembering as imaginative reconstruction. In the first section, Davenport discusses artmaking as a means toward remembering specific life events, which can help older adults with dementia maintain a sense of identity through personal history. In the second section, Woywod discusses artmaking as a way to support older adults with dementia in remembering feelings of productivity, engagement, and belonging to a group, which helps meet higher level needs (Maslow, 1970) and supports a sense of selfhood. We posit that for older adults with memory loss, creative engagement can make facets of past experiences tangible, as well as commemorate new, generative moments. In the following section, Davenport describes the first form of remembering through her art making with her mother.

Reconstructing Memories

For many of us, the motivation for utilizing art with elders comes from a personal connection. While my very first job teaching art was an afternoon class at a small-town senior center, I quickly realized that what I thought I needed to teach was not what the women at the center wanted me to teach. Although this job was short-lived, I learned that the needs of older adults who seek out opportunities to engage in creative activities were not the same as those of high school students or others I might teach. Many years later, I developed opportunities for my own art education students to gain similar insights by working with older adults. However, I became passionate about this process when it became personal for me. My mother began suffering from cognitive impairment in 2002. Since she moved in with me in 2009, I have had the opportunity to learn firsthand how artmaking can support remembering in older adults suffering from dementia.

Although I had been making crafts with mom for years, and even engaged her in making animations with me, I recently started engaging her in drawing pictorial scenes as a way to reconstruct memories of her youth. This was initiated by a conversation we shared about a drawing of boats in the sunset on Lake Lanier from the view of my parents' dock in 1959.

As a gift to my mother, I had this fading, frayed image framed, believing that my deceased father had drawn it during one of their weekends at the lake in the 1950s. I had assumed that it was from his hand because he was acknowledged as the more artistically inclined of my parents, and often drew sailboats and other designs. However, when I showed my mother the picture, she began reminiscing about their place up on the lake and revealed to me that she had actually drawn this picture of their view from the dock. Reminiscing with her about this image allowed me insights into their lives together before I was born, and allowed her to express both sentimental feelings and a renewed sense of self-esteem prompted by seeing her long-forgotten artwork nicely framed.

This interaction encouraged me to begin drawing with my mother, to support her wellbeing through remembering, and to encourage creative impulses that I had not fully acknowledged or appreciated previously. Although I have not had the opportunity to seek training in Reminiscence Therapy, I have found resonance between this strategy and the process I utilize with my mother when drawing. Essentially, Reminiscence Therapy [RT] involves individuals or groups of older adults with memory loss in "evocation and discussion with another person or a group about past activities, events and experiences, using a variety of supporting materials...[such as] music, photographs and other aids, often prepared with the involvement of caregivers" (Cotelli, Manenti, & Zanetti, 2012, p. 203). Many people in such fields as Gerontology, Nursing, Psychology, and Occupational Therapy (Brooker & Duce, 2000; Chao,

Chen, Liu, & Clark, 2008; Lai, Chi, & Kayser-Jones, 2004; Parker, 1995; Schweitzer & Bruce, 2008) agree that RT can be a way to enhance the wellbeing of older adults with memory loss.

Making pictures while reminiscing is one strategy RT recognizes as a means of imaginatively reconstructing memories (Baines, 2007; Gottleib-Tanaka, 2006; Kennard, 2006; Meaker, 2010). As a caregiver and art educator, I find drawing together to be a mutually enriching experience to share with my mother. I only wish that I had more time to engage in this process with her. Below I share two of the drawings she created within several months of each other in 2010 and 2011 (figure 1; figure 2). Creating these pictorial representations of her early memories not only engaged her in acts of remembering and brought her joy, but they also revealed to me the slow but steady advance of her ongoing memory loss.

The first time we sat down together to draw, I spread out paper and colored pencils on the dining room table so that she could work beside me as I made a teacher sample for a lesson plan to present to my class. At first, she was tentative when I invited her to draw alongside me, so I suggested that she illustrate a memorable event from her childhood. I find that I remember her childhood stories that she has shared repeatedly over the years more clearly than she does, so my process began with gentle questioning:

Daughter: "Do you remember the story you told me about getting lost at the county fair as a child?"

Mother: "Oh, yes, I guess I was only about 3 or 4, one of many children, and I wandered off and attached myself to the next big family that I ran across."

Daughter: "I imagine that might have been frightening for some children, but I remember you told me that your family was far more worried than you were!"

Mother: "Yes, they split up and went around looking for me, but the family I had attached myself to let me come back to their picnic table and help myself to a biscuit. I was just enjoying myself and making new friends when I saw my older sister walk by. I said, 'Oh, there's Opal!' and that's how they found my family. When they had asked my name, I had repeated my middle name to them, because my parents had told me they wanted to change my name and give my middle name to my new younger brother, but I was having none of that!"

Daughter: "I love that story, Mama! I wonder, though, what did the fair look like back in the 20s? Was it mostly farm animals and vegetables or did they have other things for people to do?"

Mother: "Oh, there were pigs and cows and vegetable booths and other food...but there was also a Ferris wheel and a haunted house!"

Daughter: "Do you remember how it was arranged? Was it in a field or a park? Was it a pretty day? Can you show me? I wasn't there, but I would love to know what it looked like."

These questions inspired her to reminisce, and as she did so, she began drawing a birds-eye view of the scene, imaginatively reconstructed. Figure 1, from 2010, shows the County Fair as she portrayed it:

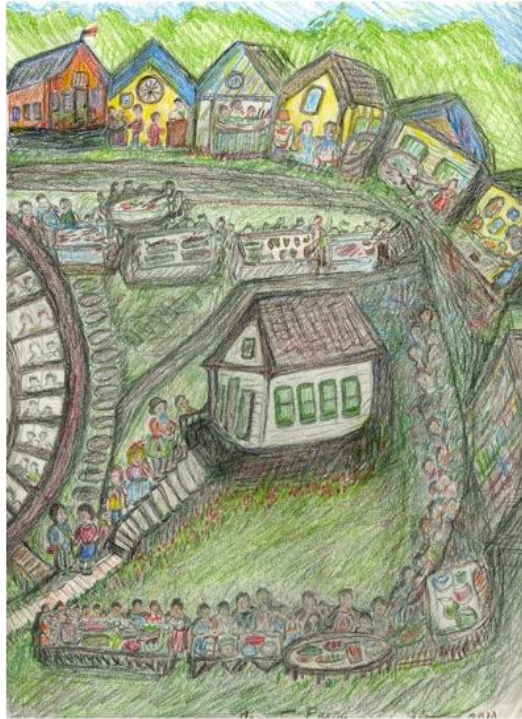


Figure 1: Lost at the 1927 county fair (2010).

In this image, she adopted the birds-eye view common among vernacular artists. I invited her to draw by helping to elicit her memories of the story she told of that occasion, but she took it from there. My hand is present in this piece only slightly, because I helped her fill in the background with trees and sky, but what is notable is her attention to the details of what every family had on the picnic tables, and the offerings of those with agricultural booths.

She placed the haunted house in the center of her image because she seemed to remember it was in the middle of the fairgrounds, and she wasn't sure where to place the Ferris wheel, so I suggested that it could run off one side of the page if it didn't fit in her composition. Through working on this drawing together, in which I intervened as little as possible, my mother was able to recall many details about the occasion and she took ownership over her drawing. But the next

time I drew with her, it was apparent that her ability to recall and to represent her childhood memories had waned and she required much more assistance.

Figure 2, below, illustrates Mama's story of how she and her siblings would climb up on the scuppernong arbor when the grapes were ripe and they would indulge until they made themselves sick.



Figure 2: Eating scuppernongs on the arbor (2011).

My hand is more apparent in the second image. In the intervening several months, Mama had lost her confidence in composing an image on her own. She asked me numerous times where the arbor was located in relation to the barn, what the barn looked like, and so on. I pulled out old photographs for her to work from and suggested ways to show depth of space in her image. Again, I asked her many questions to help her reconstruct her memories. In this instance, however, I would describe the resulting product as a co-construction.

She asked me to help her draw the figures of her siblings on the arbor, and I suggested she place her young self underneath, reaching up as she told me she would have done, but she was reluctant to do so. I have learned to respect her decision-making, even as she requests more input from me in her artmaking process. She did not want to portray herself in this image and I did not force the issue, but she did add a squirrel to the scene.

As memories become harder for Mama to retrieve, the act of reminiscing, and co-reconstructing her stories with me, coupled with communicating them visually, assists her in feeling that she can remember. Even if it is an imaginative reconstruction, she can retain a sense of herself and her life story through these activities; this form of creative engagement makes facets of experiences tangible for my mother and those who care about her.

While I regret that I did not start drawing with my mother during the earlier stages of her memory loss, every time I am able, I gather art supplies and sit down with mom. It brings such joy, focus, and determination to her face and allows her to reclaim herself and share herself with others. Creative engagement while dealing with dementia and other health problems has given me the chance to know my mother in a new way, and the artwork remains to mark new, generative moments.

Mama is open to any visual experience that I can present to her, but I have also found that she is now less able to do these things independently. I often set her up with drawing materials and visual references before running out the door to class, encouraging her to show me a story when I get home, but the absence of gentle questioning, the absence of her co-creator, and the lack of a social aspect of remembering together, prevents her from making any attempt.

Although my interest in this topic stems from the very close relationship I have with my 90 year old mother, I think it is vitally important for art educators to be attuned to the needs of

older adults experiencing memory loss and to use art to enhance their lives as they age. Demographic data remind us repeatedly that the population of aging adults is growing (Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging, 2010). Research tells us that having creative outlets enhances their quality of life (Cohen, 2000, 2005).

Helping individuals remember specific memories from their lifetimes is one valuable outcome from making art with older adults. While there are caregivers like Davenport who feel comfortable in their own artistic abilities, many do not. This raises the question: when artists and educators are willing to facilitate creative engagement activities with elders living with Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia, how do you collaborate to engage in acts of remembering and remembrance without a shared history? And when you figure it out, how do you teach other artists and educators what to do? In the following section, Woywod addresses these questions and describes a programmatic approach that exemplifies the second form of remembering, meeting higher level needs (Maslow, 1970) by helping people remember feelings of productivity, engagement, and belonging through creative engagement.

Remembering Selfhood

Behaviors have meaning and are attempts to meet unmet needs (Maslow, 1970). Though their ability to recognize or communicate unmet needs may be challenged, older adults with memory loss still feel and have a sense of personhood. As Millet (2011) stated "People with dementia continue to be participants in and co-creators of the lived lives of others.... Just like people who do not have dementia, they continue to be active subjects who create meaning for themselves as they encounter the external world" (p. 517). Therefore, older adults with memory loss have a need to feel productive and engaged, and have a sense of belonging. Creative engagement experiences are an important opportunity to do this.

There are many programs designed to facilitate remembering, art making, or creative engagement for older adults with memory loss, such as Memories in the Making (Henley, 2010) and Meet Me at MOMA (Rosenberg, Parsa, Humble & McGee, 2009). While some well-known model programs have attractive and beneficial components, artists and educators may feel they not speak to the exact population that will be served. For example, while inspired by Meet Me at MOMA, the educators behind Minnesota and Wisconsin's SPARK! programming realized that they would need to make modifications in working with populations outside of large cities (Tygeson, 2012).

In the same vein, I was approached by collaborators in a local community center to collaborate on Saturday arts experiences for a diverse group of older adults with memory loss in Milwaukee's Latino community. The result was the Pathways Project, a collaboration between a small group of highly committed art education majors and university staff, bilingual caregivers, and 55 seniors with a range of memory loss, cognitive, and physical impairments. Similar to Davenport's first experience with seniors, my students had background in K-12 instruction, but quickly realized that there were big differences between what they thought art experiences should look like in the facility and what the seniors quickly and bluntly indicated needed to happen.

The art education students and I took time to experience the neighborhoods the seniors lived in, read articles and program manuals, and visit other programs in the community in order to learn. Each week we came together, ready with reflections and new ideas to try. We had questions for the adult day center (ADC) staff so we could better understand the clients, get ideas about what was needed and what was working, and address our feelings and concerns about

working with the seniors in an emotionally challenging situation. Even though the group knew each visit could be a challenge, it promised to be highly rewarding too.

In order to try to sustain the program, we prepared to teach Certified Nurse Assistants (CNAs) and new students about what we had learned over a year and a half by analyzing reflections, observational notes, interviews, and visual data to describe qualities within the most positive and remarkable creative engagement experiences implemented through the Pathways Project. While art making in each experience helped facilitate interactions, some art making activities and the documentation of them made facets of past experiences tangible; others were larger collaborations that commemorated new, generative moments. We concluded that four overarching qualities of our most successful experiences were: 1) collaboration and celebration, 2) familiar tools and purpose, 3) movement and group energy, 4) humor and play. Examples of projects that illustrate each quality are described below.

Mural de Recuerdos was one of our early projects, developed over six months (figure 3). It exemplifies collaboration and celebration. The pieces in this ceramic mural became a physical record of the older adults' creative engagement during Saturday programs. The students worked with the seniors and day center staff to share stories and memories, enjoying the moment while forming the individual ceramic pieces. Recurring themes that grew from these conversations included family, culture, music, nature and love. For many of the older adults, this was their first experience working with clay. While creating, many participants recalled a range of memories, described a sense of happiness and demonstrated pride as they contributed to this collaborative piece.



Figure 3: An important part of our experience with the ceramic mural was the unveiling and celebration with family members, caregivers, university staff, and staff from other facilities that work with older adults.

The unveiling the mural was a memorable celebration. It was an emotional experience for the older adults, their family members, and the ADC staff. It was moving for the students and me too. Family members wanting to know more about what their loved ones had created overwhelmed us. One student, Liz (I use pseudonyms for all the students and ADC participants discussed in the following sections), shared this moment in a reflection about the event:

Jacobo wanted to know which ceramic pieces his father made and I did my best to help answer his questions. Perhaps the most astonishing moment was when Jacobo approached me again later after using our map. He had discovered what portrait his father made—it was the one that had sunglasses and a hat on. He told me that his father used to work in a foundry and wore safety glasses and a hard hat. He said as a child his father used to scare him when he came home from work wearing all of that, because he didn't recognize him. He was surprised to realize his father depicted himself. He hadn't realized his father made those connections.

There were many moments like this and many tears of joy as people found the pieces they were looking for on the mural, talked with the older adults who were able to discuss their experiences, or simply looked at it together without words.

While working with clay, some of our most utilized tools were familiar objects, such as pencils, beads, and hair curlers (figure 4). This highlights part of the second set of qualities we recognized in our most successful experiences, including familiar tools and purpose. The following image is from a weekend where we created concrete stepping stones intended for use in the preschool playground, which can be seen from the ADC's second floor location.



Figure 4: ADC participants arrange mosaic pieces together for their stepping-stones.

In a place where neat materials, like watercolors and colored pencils are used, clay was plenty messy. Concrete for stepping-stones seemed even more outlandish. However, once we learned that some of the older adults at the ADC had worked in construction, it led to a great opportunity to remember feelings of productivity and engagement. Veronica was proud to have

the responsibility of mixing concrete for others. Leo brought his own tools from home that day and was happy to teach us how to mix the concrete well. Not only did we make objects that could be useful on the playground, but also it gave several of the older adults the opportunity to demonstrate their expertise.

Familiar tools were an important starting point for large abstract paintings the older adults created too (figure 5). Creating these paintings exemplified the qualities of group energy and movement. Knowing that the older adults liked to start the morning with some modified Zumba, one of the students, Gina, suggested we try the following project involving movement. We started with brooms, mops with different kinds of heads, and plungers as painting tools used on drop cloth sized canvases taped securely to the floor. The first few painters were hesitant to make marks, but after we turned on some lively music, we could barely get people to stop painting and clean up for lunch! The brooms and mops made it possible for people with limited mobility to paint from chairs and wheel chairs. Several people who were done with their turn painting continued to be engaged by watching others paint from chairs and benches we had moved into the room.



Figure 5: The older adults used a variety of tools to create collaborative abstract paintings.

As I look back over photographs from Saturdays like this, I am reminded of the joyful signing, laughter, and amusement that we *all* felt using clay, mixing concrete, and painting with ridiculously large tools. This brings me to the fourth and final qualities of successful projects that we tried: humor and play.



Figure 6: Older adults with memory loss collaborate on a visual story, inspired by the process of storytelling learned through TimeSlips (Basting, 2009).

Anyone who intends to work with older adults with memory loss needs to be able to see the humor in most every situation. Although we deliberately planned experiences that involved playfulness as we introduced new materials, it took us a while to become comfortable with not knowing how things might turn out and to be able to laugh along with the older adults. Eventually, we realized the importance of embracing humor as part of our projects. This is exemplified through Liz's description of a final project she tried with Gina, which they designed to be a variation of the Timeslips (Basting, 2009) story telling technique.

This was a Saturday session and was probably one of the best ones yet! We brought two large sheets of black paper and mounted them on the wall, low for those in wheelchairs, high for those who could stand. I suggested we start with a drawing, have one person

change it, and then we ask them to tell us what happens next. We started with a man named Eduardo who turned the drawing into a fish. At first it was quiet when Claudia, the ADC director, asked “What happened next?”. Then Mauro yelled out, "I cooked him in onions and oil!" This got the ball rolling. Claudia encouraged other people to come up and start drawing. At one point, Jose, who was sitting in the back by the windows, yelled, “There was a buffalo in the snow with a soldier!” Claudia told him to join us, and he did. He refused to draw, but as the story continued he started speaking to me and said to make the buffalo "wooly”. Jose has been very reticent in the last few weeks and it was good to see him interacting again.... At one point Amelia and Claudia were miming the story like they were walking through the forest, tiptoeing and then screaming.

As the group became more engaged, more people participated. There was much laughter and conversation as some double entendres entered the story. It was obvious that everyone was having fun and it even inspired some flirting. As Liz described it “I think Maria enjoyed the attention and Pedro was having fun flirting. I've never seen either of them smile as much as they did.”

Similar to Davenport’s case, creative engagement resulted in benefits for both the seniors with memory loss, as well as their caregivers. Unexpectedly, for the undergraduate students involved, the Pathways Project also resulted in the transcendence of cultural boundaries, language barriers, and fears about the ability to be effective artists and art educators in this type of setting. While preservice art educators typically understand the sense of hope and joy that many people associate with working with children, the students and I realized that it can be equally engaging and joyful to work with older adults through the co-construction of meaningful experiences.

Implications

Care for older adults with memory loss may begin with efforts to address physical well-being and safety, but creative engagement offers moments of remembering through which artists and art educators can not only help individuals reconstruct identity through the remembrance of specific memories from their lifetimes, but also help people meet higher level needs through remembering feelings of productivity, engagement, and belonging.

Aging and creative engagement is gaining increased attention as an area of growing interest and need as national demographics change and the population grows older. As the population of older adults grows, so does the need to develop strategies for working with older adults with memory loss. We encourage our colleagues in the field of art education to recognize the importance of this juncture and engage in imaginatively reconstructing our professional practices to support the well being of older adults with memory loss.

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