

Art Activities as a Way to the Active Age

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Abstract

The paper presents partial results of an action research, which was carried out as a part of the project called "Special Art Education". It represents the possibility of creative activities as the way of improving the quality of life stages of each individual, in this case, old age. The analysis of projects confirms the gains and benefits, especially activating creative potential of older people, but also improving their social contacts. The research also shows the requirement for the monitored group of clients to be led by an art professional.

Keywords: special art education, creative workshop, senior, socially disadvantaged individual, social welfare, self-fulfillment, pedagogical practice

Our population, as well as the entire western society, slowly but surely has been getting older. Aging is, according to Radoslav Goldmann (2001, pg. 72), a natural, continuous, irreversible biological process, which lasts from birth until death and influences each person differently. In this individual course of aging, genetic influences, body construction, health, environment and the way of life are especially crucial. Old age is a period of life which is characterized by specific needs to a social system, i.e. health care, housing, etc. It brings increasing economic dependence of the elderly on the active component of the population; the elderly often referred to as a social problem (cf. Rabušic, 1995, pg. 89-145). Society underestimated the ability of seniors and meaningfulness of their lives, there is a belief about their uselessness, there is a relatively strong gerontophobia - fear of the elderly and aging. Health disabilities and dysfunctions are highlighted and exaggerated, there is a disbelief in the possibility of improved, functional health to be regained. The elderly are viewed as an economic burden, which often implies contempt for pensioners and the preference of institutional forms of care instead of community support to preserve or restore the ability of social roles and the meaning of life (cf. Čevela, Kalvach, Čeladná, 2012, pg. 18). For these reasons, the Czech environment often does not foresee the possibility of successful and healthy aging, although the lives of seniors, however, can be lived very differently. Some of them, in their old age, are in good physical and mental condition, are active, dedicated to work and hobbies; their life experience enriches their surroundings. The desire to be independent and unassisted by the help of others, is natural for everyone.

There may be, however, situations where the care of an elderly person is unable to be provided by his family and the individual gets into an institution that is tailored to their situation and needs. Social services for older people are described and defined by Act No. 108/2006 Coll. Due to this law, for example, state residential services called retirement homes exist, in § 49: "*retirement homes provide services to persons with reduced self-sufficiency because of their age, and whose situation requires regular assistance of another person.*" (Act No. 108/2006 Coll., social Services [online], page 21). It is always necessary to make an effort to ensure that the quality of life of seniors is decent. Interpersonal care is not only about basic needs; equal to this is the support of possibly self-sufficiency in the future. One way how to do this might be to provide creative activities.

Although we assume that various institutions provide pleasant leisure activities to the elderly, as a form of assistance, the programming is often influenced by the workers' or the institutions' focus. These activities offered are often mechanical, only following the simple instructions laid out by the staff, lacking inspiration or personal investment. Although many of these activities can be considered beneficial, for example in terms of motor skills, in reality, they don't actually promote mental activity.

Special Art Education (SAE) (CZ.1.07/2.2.00/15.0210), a program co-financed by the European Social Fund and the state budget of the Czech Republic, developed a concept, during the period from 2010 to 2013, how to work with socially disadvantaged people through art activities. This program was implemented by the Fine Art students, Faculty of Education of Masaryk University in Brno. Among the participating institutions of the project was the Home for the Elderly Brno Podpěrova.

The projects realized by the SAE program were seen as a form of "creativity training" where "individuals improved artistic amplitude, perception and reaction, active level, concentration, flexibility of communication, and objectivity" (Havlík, In: Fišer, Havlík, Horáček, 2010, pg. 99). SAE prefers activities which emphasize creative thinking. The development of creativity is crucial because it helps the socially disadvantaged approach a variety of problems encountered in everyday life; situations where active behavior and seeking possible alternatives resolve the dilemma. SAE agrees with Herbert Read that "*art education is conducive to intellectual, emotional and spiritual growth*" (1967, pg. 9). The concept of special art education was first a theoretical description of the publication by Zbyněk Zicha (1981); its content corresponds with the objectives of art therapy and also with the work of educators in the process of special education (cf. Zicha, 1981, pg. 3). SAE prefers the arthiletic approach, which is associated with Jan Slavík. *Art* refers to the word art (from the Latin *ars/artis*), but also to art therapy. *Philetic* comes from the Greek root word *-fil-*, expressing a positive attitude towards something. SAE is also inspired by the idea of Henry Broudy's philetic (positive, affirmative) approach in education, "in which, intellectual development is closely linked with emotional and social development" (cf. Slavík, 2011, pg. 12).

Arthiletic approach is one of the current approaches to art education. It is characterized by intense activity and an emphasis on creativity, expressiveness, experience in art activities and subsequent reflection (cf. Slavík, 2009, 2011). Other approaches of art education including human-centered art education concept (originally in Czech language: „animocentrismus“), are connected with spiritual and sensory education and with principles of humanistic education also as well as arthiletic. The human-centered art education concept emphasizes the role of the educational impact of the object, regardless whether it is a child or an adult. This attitude is based on experience and strong emotion which motivates art activity. The interest of each individual, who is seen and respected as an individual, is also associated with humanistic psychology. There are two leaders who represent this idea, Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers. Still relevant today is the idea of Maslow, who believed in the ability of self-realization as a way to discover and improve personally. The author regards creativity as the most important component of self-realization. Rogers emphasizes an individual update tendency, so the tendency to growth, development and implementation of positive possibilities (cf. Krivošíková, 2011, pg. 81-82). SAE integrates other art forms and deliberately merges art with dramatic or musical means of expression. Therefore it can be described as interdisciplinary. Creative expression thus becomes a place for the client to express his own experiences, feelings and wishes. Many of the socially disadvantaged clients have had traumatic experiences and difficult life situations, therefore SAE encourages mental strength and the prevention of social failure. In general, society should be looking for ways to mitigate stressful situations and pressures which clients have been exposed to.

Let us describe the Home for the Elderly, where SAE programming was conducted and monitored. This nursing home recruited clients according to the urgency of their situation in life, from the age of 65. The average age of their clients is around 85. The group selected was represented by more women than men, and several couples as well. Clients came from various professional and social groups, often very different, which affect their relationships. A large number of the clients are frustrated by their family situations, the lack of interest or bullying by relatives; the fact their children have passed away. Turbulent times, dismal family background, health, as well as other weakening factors affect their quality of contemporary life. Some individuals are also struggling to cope with the fact that the location of their home has changed. Because clients are often faced with health problems, health care is provided by staff; in the institution is a staff of nurses, physiotherapists, a nutritional therapist and a team of caregivers who have completed an accredited qualification course. Furthermore, there is a system of key staff who, in addition to their professional role, also take responsibility for five or six seniors, communicating with them; focused on trying to satisfy their wants and needs, which builds a more personal relationship with seniors.

Researchers collected data from the preparation and conducting of the workshops, from direct observation in the home for elderly and data was enriched with notes from the teaching diaries, student reflections, photographs, videos and visual art pieces created. Valuable information was also obtained from interviews with the participants. The research began with the description of facts and phenomena and lead to objective understanding the meaning of these things. Our analysis is based on the ideas of Jan Hendl, who states that “*the function of describing a situation from the perspective of the subject offers deeper insight into the problematic situation being evaluated.*” (2008, pg. 73). In our study, we take a look at the interaction between the practitioner students leading the SAE program with specific clients. Effects were not only described in detail, but also interpreted. Topics of the research included: what elements are specifically needed for the creative work conducted with the elderly, what was the content of art activities (type of art technique used, i.e. drawing, painting etc.) and the benefits of projects for both the clients and practitioner students.

The research resulted in two main impacts: findings that may affect the practice of leisure workers caring for old people and especially improves the training in a brand new university subject called SAE at the Faculty of Education at Masaryk University in Brno. Although there are some limitations which make it difficult to promote creative activities for seniors, completed projects confirmed the potential benefits of this work. Working with this specific group of the elderly required a large commitment from the students, careful and thoughtful preparation involving familiarity with the specifics of life in the home for the elderly and characteristics of the clients. This impacted not only the selection of art-themed activities, or choice of art technique, but also the way of communication with the elderly, guiding them in the creative process. It was a short period of time for students to discover and understand all the dynamics between individual clients, which are often fragile and easily irritable. Situations which were climatic for the elderly, weren't easily identifiable for the leaders. The seniors had a great desire to be self-controlled (not only in their art expression) and afraid to be embarrassed. For students, therefore, it was difficult to understand the meaning of the elderly's reactions. To understand these dynamics, it was necessary to reference an insightful project called *Tame the Bull*. Each of the participants in the project was asked to select their own art medium to create animal figures and the environment which surrounds it.

The result was distinctive drawings, paintings, but also three-dimensional objects with clay depicting animals in different positions and situations. The art pieces were documented. Another plan was to animate art work via computer, which allowed these elderly people to be active creators from yet another perspective. Seniors benefited by having experience from previously implemented new media projects. Some clients were commissioned to design the computer animation and others reacted positively to seeing the demonstration. The act of "taming" the bull brought unexpected, spontaneous reactions on the seniors' parts; they relaxed, caught on to the situation, and devised a continuation of the story. The positive reaction in this event was contributed to a truly engaged student who drew from her personal experiences in Spain. She was able to transfer her enthusiasm to seniors. This activity also brought another "added value" - the physical movement of these seniors.

Completed projects can be divided into several thematic areas. One group of clients responded to life in the home for the elderly; students tried to revive it, make it more diverse. That was related to projects called *Flowers for All*, *Feeder* and *St. Francis*. In the project “Flowers for all“, the elderly visually processed the proposal for a floral composition of the flower-bed along the garden to discuss which solution would be best. Flowers were then planted in the flower-bed of their shared garden where many of them continue to care for the flowers and spontaneously put there finishing touches. In the garden, there was also another program - *Feeder*. This activity constituted a wooden stand with ceramic casts of the seniors' hands. The interior of the Home for the elderly was decorated with additional cooperation designing a collage on a glass window. The collage was created from color transparencies and drew inspiration from the work of Henri Matisse. The sports activities, in which seniors like to participate, were followed by the project called *Art Sport Games*. At this event happened activities which correlate to popular regular activities of the seniors, such as the game called *Pea*, an animation of plant growth, led by the one of the students and made by the one of the seniors.

Other types of creative activities culminated with a group meeting, which allowed the elderly in the home to enjoy *Carnival*, *Festival of Tea* and *The Garden party* (names of these projects).

The students also tried to initiate the memories of older people at important life moments. Although clients in a bigger group of people usually protect their privacy and do not like to disclose their stories, in individual interactions, they actually do the opposite and turn into storytellers.

The individual student approach was successfully used in the project called *Rooms from Childhood; How Far I Can Remember* where their narration was recorded with audio and video. Seniors remembered the places, where they lived many years ago with their loved ones. The layout of buildings or important details of rooms were recorded by drawings on canvas. Comments, which were recorded during the drawing, pointed towards "revived" old stories and tales. Telling stories were also part of a project called *Laughter Over Gold*, which was conducted with a *Shadow play*. The puppets used were the work of clients. Art activities also allowed the expression of *Unfulfilled Wishes*, a name of the next project. The clients, through traditional and new media, could find themselves in exotic and unusual situations. Through collage they travelled the world and even "entered" into images through a data projector and photos. The resulting records documented their "art travelling". New media also offered seniors a chance to meet with their *Idols from Youth*, the name of another project.

Seniors very carefully choose the activities which take their time. The offered activities which had the opportunity to be more beneficial were more popular. That is why the projects *Tactile abacuses* for blind children and recordings of fairy tales for young patients at the children's hospital, called *Fairy Tale Narrators* came into existence. Storytellers tried to make the kids healing process in hospital more enjoyable; recordings were supplemented with cover art.

It is also important for the clients to have individual attention from the social worker, knowing that somebody is interested in them. The workers make efforts to attract or even get admiration, motivated focus on another project. So there were events created called *Fashion Raid*, in which the clients met with great acclaim. Students become individual clothing / fashion consultants for the seniors and examined them with their wardrobe, recommending colour and shape combinations of clothing, which together complement the decorative elements and accessories. The "models" were then presented at a fashion show for the rest of the elderly residents. In ceremonial dress, ladies could then find themselves in unusual situations in unusual places, thanks to the "magic" of the computer program Photoshop. In the context of other projects, clients created accessories, such as painted scarves. The activities were related to learning about Japanese culture with a tea ceremony. A metamorphosis of the clients' appearances can also be enjoyed in the themed project called *Folk costumes*; they chose various parts of the different folk costumes, combined them and created a new original folk dress. The elderly didn't actually dress up, but again a projector was used and photos. Practical activity was always accompanied by a program where seniors had conversations about new information relating to the topic. Most often these were accompanied by lecture projections, which included inspirational examples of fine art.

The previously named projects were met with acclaim. A very important aspect of approval was not only the attractiveness of each project, but also the relationship between clients and the students who prepared the art workshops. Empathy, clear clarification of the concept, open-mindedness to the opinions and reactions of older people, but also patience and willingness to listen, yielded benefits, not only to the clients but to the students as well. Always, when the student practiced closer and more intimate communication, it increased the client's appetite and interest to create. Therefore, it was necessary to encourage constantly seniors to overcome their mistrust and fears of not being successful in activities. It was important to respect the ability of seniors based on their medical conditions. The students aim was to encourage active participation versus just watching the other clients' activities. This gentle encouragement hoped that at the end of the activity the participants wouldn't leave with the feeling that they had been forced into action, which is irritating. The first priority should be their personal needs. If a client trusts that the action is meaningful, he/she is willing to overcome the stereotypes. We can see changed attitudes and opinions of seniors towards the art in two projects, which were held over 3 years. The first project drew inspiration from the work of Pierre - Auguste Renoir and resulted in a "Garden Party". In regards to the first activity, we can say that the content was well selected for seniors. It initiated the memories of their youth and was linked to attributes which belonged to the time period, in terms of dress and social events. The second project, in many aspects, undermined conventional ideas about the creative activities of seniors. It differed from the first one in that no traditional lecture was given at the beginning, but rather some alternative surprise introduction. Common understandings about the way to paint were challenged with alternative practices. The self-underestimation of the seniors was overcome by experiential activity, which accentuated the process of creation. Students referred to the favorite activities which seniors love and built a project objectives around them.

The seniors, protected by covers and disposable gloves, wore plastic ponchos and played *Art sport games* inspired by darts or petanque. They threw balloons filled with paint onto canvases or rolled tennis balls soaked in the colors across the floor. During this process (with lots of cheering) they created large-format paintings.

This unique approach to art helped change the seniors' perspectives to art in general. In the elderly home a few seniors live, for whom the creativity is a common part of everyday life. Their creative expression was inspired by a previous activity coordinator who supported them, giving them advice, etc. Thus, we can admire a pastel drawing by Mrs. ZB (95 years), which depicts natural scenery. Also, decoratively conceived flowers and gardens from another author, Mrs. ZK (88 years). There is also a rich archive of computer graphics by Mr. JV (93 years), who began to use the software Microsoft Word as an artistic tool. Each of the named authors create art for their own satisfaction. Their completed work decorates areas of the elderly home. They have also been made as gifts for loved relatives. Thankfully to SAE, their artwork was presented publicly as well as in the galleries („Dům pánů z Kunštátu“, Brno; Gallery and Tourist Information Centre in Brno; gallery „Koridor“ at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ostrava; in the Art Centre, Palacký University Olomouc; gallery at the Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava).

Leisure time activities involving creativity are not going on in all institutions at the same level. Factors, which affect their quality, are: the health status of clients, spatial conditions, the financial situation of the institution and the attitude of management and staff. A significant factor is also the professional attitude of the activity coordinator, his/her dispositions and skills in art and education, but also social. The project wasn't easy to implement, but the benefits of its activities were worth it. Communication with clients (seniors) was characterized by respect, empathy, patience, as well as the confidence that clients can handle the activity. The motivation to participate in creative activities was not perceived only as an external incentive (e.g. a lecture). It tried to involve the clients in the process, to speak to their internal needs and develop activities that met their individual interests and dispositions. It was important for seniors to have a playful attitude towards the artistic projects and not to think about them like children's activities, as something humiliating. Students tried to avoid such artistic practices which would be difficult for clients and which would be difficult to manage. Although the situation occurred when seniors needed help, the effort was dedicated towards supporting the self-realization of their unique imaginations. Only through this it was possible to break their passivity, stereotypes, as well as, unwillingness to try something new. Realized projects, therefore, can be seen as successful interventions in the everyday life experience of older people, but also interventions that can change their perspective towards art creation. Unfortunately, people exist who think that any art activities are a waste of time, unnecessary effort and something which has no meaning. These people reject and have misunderstanding attitudes towards the positive program, as described by one SAE student leader: *“When I started (with the creative program), I was surprised by an ironic question (from the employees of the home for the elderly), if this meaningless activity can at least heal the people?”*

The reaction in the previous sentence is an example for all activity coordinators, who understand their profession to be simplified. There are two choices: to undervalue and ridicule new SAE activities and approaches, or to try to understand their possibilities and potential to enrich and transform seniors' lives. It is therefore necessary not only to promote creative activities, but also to defend their benefits.

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