

Visual art dialogues with older people in long-term care facilities: an action research study

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Abstract

This article reports on the outcomes of a programme of ‘visual art dialogues’ held over a seven-week period with ten older residents in a long-term care facility in Malta. The mean age of participants was 81 years. The action research project investigated the learning impacts of a number of well-known visual art images, particularly in terms of personal gains, identity capital and social/peer interactions. The project explored the reactions of older adults with limited cultural capital to visual art images and captured their feelings of what they learned. The article concludes that the programme resulted in substantial visual art enrichment and informal art appreciation and improved levels of self-expression, social interaction and emotional wellbeing.

Introduction

The unprecedented level of influence of the concept of lifelong learning on policies on active ageing led to a ‘renaissance’ moment in the practice and research of older adult learning (Findsen & Formosa, 2016). Whilst this is certainly a cause for celebration, the field of older adult learning tends to be hinged upon the ‘successful ageing’ paradigm which fails to identify the “cumulative disadvantages, status divisions and life chances that marginalise and devalue the lives of older people” (Katz, 2013, 61) and thus renders the presence of physical and cognitive frailty in ageing studies as a *persona non grata*. Recent years, however, witnessed the emergence of a specialised niche of literature focusing on the interface between lifelong learning, frailty and later life. This occurred as adult educators and educational gerontologists alike triggered a renewed focus on 1) the possible roles of learning to assist physically and/or cognitively vulnerable people to maintain an optimal level of independence and wellbeing and 2) what meaning can be attributed to ‘learning’ in the context of long-term care (Aldridge, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c; Guzman *et al.*, 2011; Withnall, 2012; Hafford-Letchfield & Lavender, 2018). Aldridge’s (2009) report on the

rich variety of examples of innovative programmes devised with and for residents in a range of care homes in the United Kingdom - including the use of trained volunteer personal learning mentors to help develop an individual's interests and needs and a series of reading groups in a care home providing both intellectual stimulation and chances for residents and staff to learn from each other - is especially noteworthy. Hafford-Latchfield & Lavender (2015) concluded that:

learning interventions to older people within care settings promoted participation, advocacy and relationship-based care which in turn helped to create a positive culture. Given the current challenges to improve quality in care services, drawing on a paradigm of learning may encourage older people to retain their independence as care homes strive towards a person-centred approach (op.cit., 195).

Although it is clear that further longitudinal studies are required to measure the real impact of learning on the quality of life of older persons in long-term care facilities, the emergent evidence from small-scale qualitative studies is indicative of the possible range of benefits that may result from policy initiatives in this area

Motivated by the authors' interest in fourth age learning, this article reports upon an action research initiative that planned, coordinated and executed a learning programme in a long-term care facility for older persons in Malta. The learning programme followed a 'visual art dialogues' geragogical strategy, whereby a facilitator showed a number of art images to learners to elicit rational and emotional dialogic responses (Wikström, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2011). This article is divided into six sections. The subsequent section examines the context of 'visual art dialogues'. The third section provides a brief outline of the study's research design and the fourth and fifth sections present the study's results and consequent discussion. The final section considers the potential of visual art dialogues shown by the outcomes of the project.

Visual art dialogues

The use of 'art appreciation' in liberal and transformative learning projects, and its positive impact on the general wellbeing of learners, are well-documented (Kokkos, 2013; Lawton & La Porte, 2013; Clover *et al.*, 2016). Later life is no exception to such outcomes and many educational projects make use of 'art-making' programmes in their attempts to improve the quality of life of older people (Noice *et al.*, 2013). The term 'visual art dialogues' was coined by Wikström (2000) to refer to learning environments that promote structured dialogic interchanges following the showcasing of one or more visual art artefacts. For example, Wikström's studies found that putting up visual art artefacts in hospital wards and senior apartments' buildings functioned to stimulate conversations and social interaction among health professionals, as well as between them and patients (Wikström *et al.*, 2010; Wikström *et al.*, 2012; Bygren *et al.* 2013).

According to Wikström (2011), this occurred because visual art objects served as a link between residents' inner psychological realities and their external reality. However, the practice of 'visual art dialogues' is certainly more than putting up visual art artefacts in spaces inhabited by patients in acute hospitals or residents in long-term care. It actually involves *trained* facilitators presenting residents, even if uneducated in art appreciation, with a number of visual artefacts, and guiding them to engage in dialogues based upon their impressions of the works of art. The emphasis on 'trained' is deliberate since Wikström (2003) agreed with Jarvis (2001) that personnel who are responsible for the creation of appropriate learning environments in hospital and residential care settings require specialist training to be able to do so. Indeed, Wikström's (2003,184) study on health professionals' experiences of visual art as a conversation tool, which also included a one-day workshop with older persons, reported that "health professionals in the present study were asked to use these paintings as a conversation tool with elderly persons and then to keep diaries regarding the strategy's effectiveness in achieving positive conversational outcomes". In visual arts dialogue, learners are generally invited to describe, in their own words, their interpretation of the paintings, and accordingly, engage in active discussion. In a research study which investigated the link between visual art discussions and social interaction (Wikström (2002), older women were assigned to visual art and control groups. The study found that whilst the former engaged in multifaceted discussions stimulated by pictorial artefacts, the latter engaged in relatively mundane discussions relating to daily events and needs. In the former group, exposure to the paintings also encouraged reminiscence and participants remained more socially active even after the programme end. Moreover, reminiscence encouraged by the images of the paintings permitted the first group to generate new meanings of their own. In Wikström's words, in the visual art group:

the dialogues changed over time and caught increasingly more of the elderly persons' experience and knowledge. The visual art dialogues were characterized by imagination and happiness and there was an inexhaustible source of topics originating from pictures of works of art that were discussed in this group. A still life by Jan Breughel, 'Vase with Flowers and Insects' ... inspired a discussion about flowers, flower arrangements, trees and birds.

The control group's dialogues:

dealt with daily events in the elderly persons' lives such as television programmes ... newspaper articles and books ... also ... their physical health. The dialogues in this group were characterized by downheartedness, and it was difficult to find topics of conversation during the final phase of the studied period of time (Wikström, 2000, 34).

According to Spencer (cited in Wikström, 2002, 86), such positive results occur due to the fact that visual art reflects the nuances and characteristics of human nature: "art objectifies human feelings, and contributes to an understanding of the world we live in". Aesthetic forms of expression have the potential to generate feelings

of happiness and sadness (Khatchadourian, 1980), the ability to understand one's feelings (Coleman, 2005), and to link private and public concerns: offering "a social network and a sense of community that lessen the isolation from our fellow human beings" (Weitz, 1976, 20). Visual art dialogues also enable learners to experience past and present life involvements through a "dialogue between the individual and the work of art" (Venäläinen 2012, 458 - emphasis added). The crux in visual art dialogues is that the art images facilitate a connection with oneself, the surrounding environment and with other people. Dialogue does not refer to any casual conversation, but denotes a spirit of democratic reciprocity and is inherently interactive. As clarified by Aloni,

dialogue is a conversation in which those involved are attentive to one another and exhibit a mutual interest on the basis of their shared humanity and individual personalities; out of a shared sense of trust, respect and openness, they jointly advance to a more comprehensive understanding of themselves, others and the circumstances they share. (Aloni, 2013, 1072).

Visual art dialogues, therefore, relate to Maderer & Skiba's (2006a, 2006b) 'person-centred objectives' for geragogical practices with frail older persons in that they prioritise the conservation of physical and mental competence, independent behaviour, as well as fellow-centred objectives in supporting learners to remain attentive to their personal situation and social environment.

Research design

The aim of this action research study was to explore the potential impact of a particular kind of learning - that of 'visual art dialogues' - on 'fourth age' learners who reside in a long-term care facility. Action research:

is a group activity...founded on a partnership between action researchers and participants, all of whom are involved in the change process...involving a dynamic approach in which problem identification, planning, action and evaluation are interlinked (Waterman *et al.*, 2001, 11).

Objectives included facilitating (i) a visual art and aesthetic enrichment experience stimulating social interaction, (ii) creative art appreciation and self-expression by relating to personal and group interpretations of paintings through reminiscence, and (iii) a person-centred empowerment process via discussion of emergent topics. The research project was carried out through a number of stages as influenced by the methodological advice in work on action research of Sagor (2011) and McNiff with Whitehead (2002).

The first stage consisted in the decision to conduct 'visual art dialogues' in a long-term care facility on the grounds that this area remains heavily under-researched, and in parallel, securing the necessary ethical approvals. The identification of the long-term facility, recruitment of learners and the planning and execution of the

learning programme was the second stage. Authors opted for a public long-term care facility which afforded them all the required logistic assistance and extensive moral support. The facility contained 131 beds and is run by a private company in a public-private partnership - that is, a mutual, cooperative arrangement between the government and private sector. Its ethos is to provide residential care that retains a high degree of dignity and integrity to all residents. The recruitment process included the handing of information flyers to all qualifying residents through a gate-keeping mechanism. Ten learners were admitted in the programme through convenience sampling. By coincidence, learners included an equal number of males and females, with ages ranging from 70 to 92 years, and with the mean age being 81 years.

Table 1: Participants in the ‘Visual Art Dialogues’ programme

Pseudonym	M/F	Marital status	Age	Education	Hobbies
Leo	M	Widower	85	Secondary level	Fishing
Gina	F	Widow	92	Primary level	Knitting, making sweets and savouries
Pat	F	Widow	85	No schooling	Tombola, coffee morning
Joel	M	Bachelor	70	Primary level	Stamp collector and collector of items
Mona	F	Married	71	Secondary level	None
John	M	Married	77	Primary level	TV, Football
Cynthia	F	Married	75	Secondary level	Knitting
Johann	M	Widower	81	Primary level	Birds
Omar	M	Married	84	Tertiary level	Reading, woodwork, gardening
Martha	F	Widow	87	Primary level	Animals, knitting

Following an introductory session with enlisted learners and a second one (topic: childhood) to establish the overall layout of the programme, the older learners decided during the third session that the programme would discuss images relating to the following topics: love, iconic images, women, spirituality, and men at work. Table 2 shows the visual art artefacts prepared by the facilitator for discussion under these topics (although not all, as it transpired, were used).

Table 2: List of visual art artefacts prepared for use in the study

See: <http://www.associationforeducationandageing.org/international-journal-of-education-and-ageing.html> for links to internet locations

Childhood	
Gustav Klimt	Mother and Child (c. 1905) *
Antonio Sciortino	Les Gavroches (1904)
Mary Cassatt	Young Mother Sewing (1900) **
John Singer Sargent	Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose (1886)
Love	
Richard England	Love Statue (2002)
Auguste Rodin	The Kiss (1882)
Gustav Klimt	The Kiss (1907-1908)
Robert Doisneau	Le Baiser de l'hôtel de Ville (1950) *
Iconic images	
Steve McCurry	The Afghan Girl (1984)
Charles C. Ebbets	Lunch atop a Skyscraper (1932)
Nick Ut	Napalm Girl Vietnam (1972)
Arthur Sasse	Albert Einstein (1951)
Shannon Stapleton	American Pieta (2001) *
Unknown	Mother Teresa and Princess Diana (1992) *
Women	
Sandro Botticelli	Birth of Venus (ca. 1482)
Jan Vermeer van Delft	The Girl with the Pearl Earring (c. 1665)
John Singer Sargent	Madame X (c.1884) **
Religion	
Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio	Beheading of St. John (1608)
Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio	St. Jerome Writing (c. 1607-08)
Gian Lorenzo Bernini	The Ecstasy of St. Teresa (1647-52)
Men at work	
Gustave Courbet	The Stonebreakers (1849)
Jean-François Millet	The Gleaners (1857)
Jean-François Millet	The Angelus (1859) *
Edward Caruana Dingli	Orange Picking Season (1927) *

* depicts an image shown to learners but discussed only briefly

** depicts an image not shown to learners

The programme was spread over a 7-week period, with 90-minute weekly sessions, that also included coffee/tea at the end. During these sessions, the authors loosely followed a blue-print for the practice of visual art dialogues as advocated by Wikström:

The visual art dialogues were performed in a free and independent form. The subjects' own resources were intended to provide them a scene for a mental walk. Necessary for this adventure was their knowledge, fantasy and experience. The role of the researcher was to support and encourage the elderly persons to combine earlier memories and experiences with new impressions from pictures of works of art - 'Pretend you are the artist, you know all about the picture, why, how and when it was made! Nothing you say is wrong; to tell what associations appear when looking at a picture of works of art; like feelings, memories and thoughts' (Wikström, 2000, 32).

The collection and analysis of data, and reporting of outcomes, constituted the final stages of the study. The action research was embedded in a qualitative methodological framework whereby the researcher commits a relatively long period of time in the field to gain an 'insider' perspective. This enables him/her to gather data that represents "the personal meanings of individuals' experiences and actions in the context of their social environments" (Polgar & Thomas, 2008, 84). The visual art dialogues programme was planned and carried by one of the authors (Cassar) who sought guidance from the other co-author (Formosa) when required. Keeping in line with Wikström's (2003) preference that facilitators conducting visual art dialogues require training, Cassar is a certified cultural geragogist from a German University of Applied Sciences and an Institute for Education and Culture. The learning sessions were audio-taped and video-taped with Cassar also noting the observed group dynamics throughout the learning sessions in a reflective journal. Following the termination of the learning sessions, Cassar also conducted a focus group session to collect improved data on the impacts of the visual art dialogues programmes as perceived by learners. Data analysis followed a qualitative coding procedure, whereby Saldaña's (2013) open, in-vivo and selective coding strategies were followed. Initial coding consists in "breaking down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, 102) to "remain open to all possible theoretical directions indicated by [one's] reading of the data (Charmaz, 2006, 46). In-vivo coding enables researchers to "preserve participants' meanings of their views and actions in the coding itself" (*ibid.*, 55) - thus, providing imagery, symbols, and metaphors for rich category, theme, and concept development. Researchers thus look for words or phrases that seem to stand out, for example nouns with impact, action-orientated verbs, evocative word choices, clever phrases or metaphors. Finally, selective coding functions like an umbrella that covers and accounts for all other codes, the core category which "consists of all the products of analysis condensed into a few words that seem to explain what 'this research is all about' " (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, 146).

Results

The first session proved to be a learning curve for everyone involved, as the facilitator acquired much-needed experience on the best way to accomplish project objectives and as learners came to terms with the programme's ethos and the guidelines for the sessions. The uneasiness of learners at having to comment upon and discuss art artefacts, considering that none had a background in art appreciation, was a key concern. Thus, the facilitator reassured learners that the programme was not about 'art criticism', but about the generation of dialogue based upon their personal interpretations and impressions of the images presented. Although learners remained relatively apprehensive about the sessions, they were resolved to enrol in the programme and experience visual arts dialogue at first hand.

During the second session, on childhood, nearly all learners recognised Sciortino's *Les Gavroches*, and debated actively their varying knowledge of the local artist's personal life. Sciortino created a bronze sculpture representing three poor street children inspired from the novel of Hugo's *Les Misérables*. *Les Gavroches* led most learners to mention the French revolution and the book's ban by the Church was also brought up by the facilitator. Learners made associations with poverty, wars (with special reference to current events in Syria), and a range of personal experiences during World War II. Much recollection occurred about people's internal displacement in Malta as families had to translocate from urban areas adjacent to the shipbuilding industry to take refuge in relatives' or strangers' dwellings in rural areas. Of great significance was Gina's comment, voiced with a sense of regret, that once her generation passed away a part of lived history would be lost: "It will soon be forgotten...When we die now, people will not know these things anymore".

The picture *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* by Singerr Sargent reminded learners of childhood games with watermelons and other vegetables. The painting depicts two small children, dressed in white, lighting paper lanterns in twilight; they are in a garden strewn with pink roses, accents of yellow carnations and tall white lilies behind them. This led the learners to compare their childhood games with contemporary modes of play. At this stage, the first emergence of a spirit of camaraderie manifested itself among the learners as they teased each other in a friendly manner. At the end of this second attempt at visual art dialogues, a general sense of fun was clearly evident, with Gina and another two learners remaining in class long after the session had finished. The two images generated so much discussion that no time remained for the presentation of two other prepared images.

Due to the facilitator's efforts to go with the flow of the learners' interests, rather than follow a rigid pre-formulated plan, the third session which focused on love also experienced some time-management issues, with visual art dialogues being restricted to only two art reproductions: *Love Statue* by England (local artist) and Rodin's *The Kiss*. In the *Love Statue*, the sculpture of letters forming the word 'Love' is inverted so that the word can be read upright in a reflection in water. Rodin's *The Kiss* is an 1882 marble sculpture depicting an embracing nude couple. The first piece of art was immediately recognised by all and it was intriguing to hear Gina describing this artefact as a form of 'educational art', confirmed by John who

described it as a form of art “which passed on a message”. John commented:

When I see something like this and I know it is of the architect England, I say: when a person who thinks and makes certain abstractions - which in fact are facts - but he makes an abstract object, [it is] simply perfect...He finds a way, with his intelligence and art, to convey the message he wants, whichever way he wants. For example, he wanted to convey a message of love, he found a way which appeals to everyone and attracts the attention.

Learners debated among themselves in confident tones whether this form of art is considered as either classical or modern (‘old’ and ‘new’ in their own words). When prompted to explain the artist’s choice of word depicted upside, the dialogue developed into a discussion on love, and its different types, ranging from fraternal to the more intimate. *The Kiss* engendered a cheerful atmosphere as laughter and giggles erupted amongst learners, as they observed the passion between the two lovers in the sculpture. There were loose associations made with other works of art such as the frescoes at the Sistine chapel. However, the issue of adultery was also raised, with learners making reference to the biblical David and King Henry VIII.

The fourth session, focusing on iconic images, commenced with Steve McCurry’s *The Afghan Girl* where the immediate focus centred on the model’s gaze. The image is a 1984 photographic portrait of the then unknown Sharbat Gula which appeared on the June 1985 cover of National Geographic. John commented:

The photo...is something special. But is it because it is the photo or is it because the girl was special? ... I am looking at the photo and I noticed some tension in the face of this young girl. So I reasoned ...was it because it was a young girl or because the young girl was special, because she had something special?

A brief discussion ensued on the plight of refugees and the traumas experienced during wars. Gina commented on how photographs speak about the past yet also relate to the present. Charles Clyde Ebbets’ *Lunch atop a Skyscraper* - a photograph taken on top of the steelwork of 30 Rockefeller Plaza in 1932 Manhattan, during the construction of the Rockefeller Center - led learners, quite unpredictably, to discuss the fairly recent (2007-2008) financial crisis in the United States. As the workers in the image were perceived as immigrants, there was also mention of the migrants currently coming to Malta who, likewise, are ready to do all kinds of hazardous jobs to earn money. As one learner mentioned how she had migrated to Australia only to return to Malta when the Vietnam war broke out, the facilitator took the opportunity to present the third image, Ut’s *Napalm Girl*, which depicts a nine year old Vietnamese girl running naked on a road after being severely burned on her back by a napalm attack during the Vietnam War. Learners expressed much interest in this image and also expressed attention to the facilitator’s reference to the controversy that erupted when Facebook censored this photograph on the basis of nudity, even though none of the learners had a Facebook account. Again, due to time constraints, two last images were only shown briefly.

The subject of 'women' was the focus of the fifth session. On viewing the first image - Vermeer's *The Girl with the Pearl Earring* - an oil painting of a girl wearing a headscarf and a pearl earring painted during the Dutch 'Golden Age' of the 17th century - learners attempted to guess the nationality of the model but without success. However, the additional material used to back up this image - a book on Vermeer and another book with picture postcards of 24 of his paintings - provided key visual clues as Omar recognised the artist's name as Dutch. The second image, Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* depicting the goddess born of the foam of the sea, prompted light comments on the nudity of Venus. Johann was teased because he had worked in a women's clothes retail outlet. All appreciated such light banter, even Omar who generally displayed minimal emotion during sessions. It was positive to witness these older people share such fondness for each other and catch a glimpse of their dynamic identities which often seem subdued in long-term care settings. Whilst Mona communicated some awareness of Botticelli's life and works, Gina recalled when she had visited the Uffizi, in Florence: "When we went there - and there are many paintings - you look at one and forget the others". Johann proposed a deeper association and interpretation of the image, in that Venus could possibly symbolize Eve. Learners both encouraged and validated his interpretation, as they appreciated his attempts in eliciting a more profound interpretation of the image.

The sixth session centred on 'spirituality' and Gina immediately opened the dialogue by claiming that "Art began in religion...because first there were the churches", to which her co-learners replied by stressing how lucky the Maltese are in that they are exposed to magnificent paintings in local baroque Churches even from a very early age. The first image, Caravaggio's *The Beheading of St. John*, was immediately recognised by all, with John reflecting how absolute power can lead to abysmal actions and Gina mentioning the current persecution of Christians in Isis-held territories. By now, learners were taking on a highly active role in viewing and interpreting images, even using a magnifying glass at times to inspect the images more clearly. As additional material - magazines and a book on the artist - were distributed to supplement the visual information, John commented: "What if we had books, books like these, in a library upstairs?", implying a thirst for beauty and knowledge. Upon presentation of the second image - Caravaggio's *St. Jerome Writing* depicting Saint Jerome, the translator of the Bible into Latin and a popular subject for painting - Leo reminded his co-learners of the local robbery of this very painting during the early 1990s, enhanced with insider knowledge as he had worked in the police force at the time. The third image, Bernini's *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa* - capturing a moment in which St. Teresa sees a vision of an angel - was looked at with much admiration. John commented, by way of appreciation, "how do they manage to create these characters?". The facilitator asked learners what kind of spiritual impact these three works of art had on them and the learners replied "great holiness...they exert a strong pull...inevitably you are drawn into them and cannot egress. Because you see one and forget the other" (Leo); "I get impressed a lot...I stop and observe..." (Martha).

The final session focused on 'men at work' with the first image being Courbet's *The Stonebreakers* which depicts two peasants, a young man and an old man, breaking

rocks. Although Johann spoke minimally throughout the sessions as he thought himself to be less knowledgeable next to his co-learners, this time he was the first to comment, making reference to the image's colours, and even going as far as risking a comparison with another previously mentioned painting. As expected, this image led learners to recall memories of men digging shelters during WWII, girls sewing shirts in 1950s Malta, people weaving sheep's wool at the loom (*newl*) to make blankets (*farda*), The Maltese island of Gozo's *Casa Industriale* where women were trained to become weavers was also mentioned. Gina even closed her eyes to sharpen her memories and demonstrated to co-learners, through accompanying gestures, how to weave. The second image, Jean-François Millet's *The Gleaner*, depicting three peasant women gleaning a field of stray stalks of wheat after the harvest, encouraged Martha, usually a listener, to share a word specific to the image, *mungbell*, referring to a heap of clover or hay. There was a brief discussion of the kind of work women used to do in the past, which belied the popular belief that women were only housewives. One such 'job' was when women were hired to cry at funerals (*'il-bikkejja'* - mourners) or the original innocent meaning of the word 'barmaid' which initially was devoid of negative connotations. Asked whether they enjoyed this image, John reflected "When you see the picture like this, it doesn't make sense. But then when you extract what there is and you study them and you start saying, these are doing this, these are doing this...you also start feeling that suffering they suffered". Learners reacted to John's comments by referring to the Second World War when wheat and grain were scarce. They reminisced about ways of refrigerating food/drinks before refrigerators were affordable, but also about the turbulent 1950s and 1980s which were characterised by relentless politico-religious friction. At one point, John jokingly uttered: "How we can go off on a tangent in conversation!" - a comment which highlighted the flow of their conversations from one association to another.

Discussion

The analysis of data engendered six key themes: 'dialogue and socialisation', 'reminiscence', 'inter- and intra-generational learning', 'debating contemporary issues', and 'appreciation of art' and 'stimulation of cognitive abilities'. Only the first five are discussed in what follows because of limitations of space. The following questions were of immense help during the reading of the data: What is this saying? What does it represent? What is this an example of? What do I see is going on here? What is happening? What kind of events are at issue here? What is trying to be conveyed?

From the outset, the study confirmed Pike's (2014, 75) statement that "art serves as a means for older adults to communicate with one another around issues of culture and identity". The images shown facilitated much interaction amongst learners, as well as replicating Venäläinen's (2012) findings in creating a positive rapport and networking ambience amongst all present. One can say that the sessions served to aid the learners to find their authentic voice, and consequently, to remember who they were as human beings. A bonding experience was generated that facilitated collaboration whilst also nurturing relationships between the learners that fostered

an appreciation for diverse and pluralistic points of view. The fact that learners addressed each other as 'friends' was a testament of a feeling of camaraderie within the group, a sense of ease, and a sense of belonging - hence, confirming Aloni's (2013) contention that dialogue is the medium through which humans present themselves and affirm their humanity. This project also affirmed Withnall's (2012) study which found that in fourth age learning the social benefits of attendance at courses overshadow the learning outcomes. Of great pertinence to this study were John's insightful comments: "here we do not only learn about art but we also dialogue between us". The emergent socialisation process consolidated group solidarity - as happened in the case of 'art making' in the research of Wali *et al.* (2002) - which is certainly an extremely positive outcome in long-term care contexts.

The sessions which were most conducive to reminiscence included the ones on childhood and men at work, although it also occurred to a lesser extent during the sessions on love, iconic images and religion. Visual art dialogues enabled learners to recollect personal and collective memories and thus generated a sense of nostalgia. As confirmed in Wikström (2002), such dialogues enabled learners to re-discover their own and others' life histories and, hence, succeeded in gaining an understanding of experiences alternative to their own. This occurred as learners listened attentively to each other and then took turns to narrate their own experiences. Since such narratives 'celebrated' each individual, a learning process occurred via shared knowledge and experiences. As Kade (2009) suggested, many autobiographical memories were accessed as they reflected on their personal and social identities. As in the case of exposure to contemporary visual arts in the United Kingdom (Newman *et al.*, 2012), although learners lacked the necessary 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1986) to 'decode' the images of the works of art, they still succeeded in making erudite associations between the images and past socio-political themes that dominated their lifetime experience. Through the process of reminiscing, learners experienced an overwhelming sense of responsibility towards the younger generation, especially with regard to how the older age cohort bestowed younger peers with an enriched Maltese national heritage - thus, engendering what Khatchadourian (1980) termed as 'temporal continuity'.

The sessions served as a spring-board for inter- and intra-generational learning, as all sessions served to increase interaction, cooperation, or exchange between the facilitator and the learners as well as between the learners themselves who originated from different generations born some 15 to 20 years apart. On one hand, much exchange of information occurred between the facilitator who was in her 40s and the relatively older learners. In this respect, the visual art dialogues served as a primary source of information about the images to the learners, but also as information on past social history and events to the facilitator, as she learnt about traditional customs and daily lives during, and in the aftermath, of the Second World War. On the other hand, dialogic exchange also occurred between the younger and older learners within the learning group, as the former group were fascinated to hear, at first-hand, how the previous generation lived their lives during the war and how political events a few years before their birth had played a primary role in the availability or lack of opportunities during their lives. This served to foster

a positive ambience, improved social engagement and self-confidence, and boosted opportunities for relationship building and growth between learners. This final outcome should not be underestimated since it is well-documented how little residents in care homes and long-term facilities know each other and the low density of networking and friendships in such contexts, despite the fact that many live together in close proximity for a number of years (Casey *et al.*, 2016). Indeed, the results demonstrated that the practice of visual art dialogues has the potential to improve long-term care residents' quality of social and emotional wellbeing well after the sessions terminate.

Despite the prevalence of reminiscing, a strong connection to contemporary social events was ever-present during the sessions, as learners took an active part in linking past and present happenings. Reference was made to socio-political events, both past and current. It was the learners' way of 'engaging' - via dialogue - with these issues by voicing their opinions (for example, when they were debating the 2016 United States presidential election). It ties in well with Newman and colleagues' (2014) research which concluded that memories have a primary role in fostering present-day identities and standpoints. This was particularly evident when learners discussed women's roles in traditional times and then compared them to contemporary norms and values on the position of women in present-day society. As was the case in Newman *et al.*, the learners utilised their life experiences to map out changes that happened over time so as to articulate past and present generational differences. Learners' responses to the reproductions of the works of art generated meanings that led them to make sense of their place in contemporary society. Indeed, throughout all sessions, the learners not only felt the need to speak about the past but also about the present. As Rubinstein (cited in Newman *et al.*, 2014, 441), stated: "older people do not 'dwell in the past' as is often asserted about them...in a complex way, the past is incorporated into a present-day identity and is pressed into the service of present-day identity needs".

Although the learners had no background in art appreciation, and even doubted their ability to have anything to say about art images, one immediately noticed a strong interest in discussing informally populist impressions on the images presented. It is noteworthy that learners always carried on discussing the last shown image well into the coffee time. Whilst Leo expressed a consistent eagerness to visit Valetta's St John's Co-Cathedral to appreciate, first-hand, recently restored tapestries, all learners conveyed a general appreciation of Maltese works of art, and like Leo, yearned to visit a local art museum. There was even much enthusiasm to obtain further information on local contemporary and modern representations of art, even though such images were not specifically selected as topics for the sessions. As Newman *et al.* (2014) argued, even 'naïve' beholders of art can appreciate and respond to art representations from the repertoire of their own cultural and lifetime experiences. Moreover, although Formosa (2000, 2010) suggested that the art appreciation programmes run by the Universities of the Third Age might not be so 'appealing' to older adults with a low level of cultural capital, this study showed the opposite, as the learners clearly appreciated the art images and even enjoyed the aesthetic experience.

Conclusion

This study aimed to counter two key lacunae. First, the relative dearth of research studies on fourth age learning, and secondly, the absence of studies on visual art dialogues in long-term care facilities for older persons, apart from those of Wikström and colleagues (1992, as cited in Wikström, 2002). The study has rebutted the widely held perception that frail and vulnerable older persons in long-term care settings do not possess a capacity for learning. Not only were the residents highly motivated to participate in the learning programme but they experienced important benefits as far as their social and psychological wellbeing was concerned. The energetic discussion, humour and, sometimes, teasing that occurred during the sessions created for the learners a safe arena with like-minded persons so that they could express themselves with confidence. Such moments implied strongly that residents were feeling comfortable with each other and had reached a certain level of friendship that was both a benefit and a key motivating factor for attendance. Moreover, it is noteworthy that one participant who during the first session complained of constant shoulder pain following a fall, persistently moving his shoulder and flexing his arm, voiced no further complaints during subsequent sessions - providing some evidence for the argument of Wikström & colleagues (2012) that visual art dialogues have the potential to impact positively on learners' levels of physical health. Motivating factors for participation included updating their general knowledge, learning something new, occupying time in a meaningful manner and making up for lost time as many were forced to miss out on learning when younger due to their social class and/or gender.

The study confirmed the significant potential of visual art dialogues, using trained facilitators, in care homes and long-term care facilities for older persons. Although the learning programme echoed the presence of the values championed by critical educational gerontology - namely, love, tolerance and listening (Formosa, 2011) - its key contribution to learners rested upon liberal-humanistic educational values. The sessions offered learners a possibility of validating their self-esteem, dignity and development - hence, a learning programme as an end-in-itself with no curricular targets but rather, as Hickox & Moore (1995) suggested, just aiming to be 'intrinsically worthwhile'. In hindsight, it is evident that the visual art dialogues, by evoking the learners to remember and share their life history experiences, also have much potential in meeting the objectives of the gero-transcendence school of thought (Moody, 1990). Indeed, the results show that visual art dialogues have the potential to act as a vehicle for meaning-making and creating deeper levels of conversation about what matters - thus, developing reflection, creativity, community and connection. The use of visual art dialogues is a potent catalyst for a deeper inquiry into personal and societal issues, providing the means for 'artful reflection' on past and contemporary events, by creating a safe space where fourth agers ask deeper questions that lead to emotional truths on a range of events and circumstances.

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