

## **The 'third age' perspective: enrichment and informal modes of learning in an outdoor sketching group for older adults**

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*The proposed benefits of participatory arts for older adults continue to attract empirical attention, but how informal group participation aids personal enrichment is not yet fully understood. This qualitative case study of a University of the Third Age 'outdoor sketching group' explores the meanings its members attach to art-making in retirement and how this informal context supports their preferred modes of learning. Hermeneutic interviews with six members elicited their personal framings of what it means to pursue sketching. Participant observations of group activities and learning interactions therein afforded insights into how this group meets the needs of its members. The emergent theme from interviews, 'cultivating dispositions', represents what they consider to be a central endeavour in retirement. It reflects the judicious selecting and shedding of activities depending on whether they are deemed conducive to personal enrichment. Members hone and nurture dispositions they perceive as befitting the way they wish to pursue art-making. The group's egalitarian ethos, whereby expertise is distributed among the group rather than attached to an instructor, is valued. Within peer dialogue, ways of enmeshing oneself with certain artistic orientations are exchanged. These serve as one of various communal resources members utilise to cultivate their own desired dispositions.*

Keywords: retirement, interpretive, informal learning, tacit

## Introduction

The rise in the proportion of over 65s in the population has brought about changing patterns of demand for lifelong education (Phillipson and Ogg, 2010). Participation in group learning scenarios in old age is no longer propelled by vocational objectives or a concern with equipping oneself with skills for future responsibilities (Romi and Schmida, 2009). For those in retirement, leisure and learning choices are often interconnected (Roberson, 2005). Further, the emphasis upon active construction of one's lifestyle in current times (Usher, 2012) has placed more weight upon the retiree to define what constitutes a meaningful way to spend her or his time. The 'ends' of any learning engaged in are perhaps more likely to be 'learner-defined' (p733). While retirement may coincide with awareness of one's diminishing years ahead, it need no longer signal a gradual shutting down, as though representing an inevitable point for one to take stock of accrued skills and knowledge. Indeed, the proliferation of ways of generating and using knowledge leaves further avenues for discovery open (Jarvis, 2012).

Older adults participate predominantly in non-formal educational contexts. The most prevalent mode of learning in old age is deemed 'informal'. Contexts beyond formal education are characterised by flexible structures and a heightened responsiveness to learners' desire for authentic modes of engagement. Indeed, they depend on voluntarism and perceived relevance to personal interests of learners (Taylor, 2006). However, there is a lack of clear conceptualisation in terms of distinguishing attributes of learning beyond formal educational contexts (Romi and Schmida, 2009). There are also few directives regarding an appropriate pedagogy for third-agers and little knowledge of their aspirations (Phillipson and Ogg, 2010). Moreover, learning in old age has only recently become an object of attention as associations between well-being and learning start to become cemented (Department for Business Innovation & Skills (BIS), 2012). Participation in learning contexts is considered pivotal to remaining healthy and there are suggestions that it helps prolong mental acuity (Phillipson and Ogg, 2010). However, there is also much rhetoric surrounding the benefits of learning. In particular, creative arts-based activities are assumed to be inherently

enriching for older learners (Adams and Thomas, 2014). There is little understanding of the reasons participation in such activities is rewarding and motivating. Owing to a side-lining of the concerns of older adults, particularly regarding how they benefit from learning, research into the how certain modes of engagement promote such purported benefits is still in its infancy (Field, 2009; BIS, 2012).

The youth of this research area warrants inductive research designs (Sawchuk, 2008), with an emphasis on exploration rather than testing hypotheses or affirming extant conceptual frameworks. Indeed, conceptual structures which might direct empirical inquiry are as yet unconsolidated. This paper presents an exploratory, qualitative case study of a University of the Third Age (U3A) 'outdoor sketching group'. Firstly, the case study context and methodology are explained. The first part of the findings section concerns the meanings participants attach to art-making and the part it plays in their lives as retired persons. An emergent theme from in-depth interviews, 'cultivating dispositions', reflects participants' priorities and what they perceive to be a central endeavour in retirement. The second part relates to the attributes of the learning environments, drawing upon participant observations of group activities. I consider modes of learning fostered therein in light of participants' perception of retirement as a time for 'cultivating dispositions'. This leads to consideration of how learning in old age and an informal learning scenario integrate to produce a learning environment valued by retired learners.

### **The case context**

The group has a 20 year history. Members of a U3A walking group, which incorporated sketching into walks, had responded to a collective desire for an emphasis upon sketching. They set up the U3A 'outdoor sketching group'. Walking was kept to a minimum to cater for those with a love of the outdoors and interest in art-making but limited physical fitness. The group currently contains 15 regular members. Ages range from 60 to 75 which places members in the relatively youthful sector of old age and all consider themselves retired. Sketching in various outdoor venues represents the focal activity and the routine is for members to peruse the environment to select a viewpoint from which to sketch. After selecting a subject matter, members then sketch individually. All bring their own sketching materials and a fold-up seat. Members convene after sketching to partake in the 'show and tell' activity which involves presenting the morning's sketches to the group. The group provides a context far removed from formal education in that it does not award grades, certificates or other extrinsic markers of achievement.

### **Locating informal 'modes' of learning: some methodological directives**

Informal learning is self-initiated, unstructured and characterises much learning found outside the formal education system. It is woven through the fabric of daily living, often occurring in relation to unique life circumstances for older adults (Merriam and Roberson, 2005). As it is minimally structured, the U3A outdoor sketching group sits on the more 'informal' end of the continuum of formality to informality. However, while 'informality' is a proffered attribute of the contexts in which older adults participate, it is not easily pinpointed, nor is it exclusive to contexts beyond formal education systems. Moreover, the often incidental nature of informal learning can make it difficult to recognise as learning and extricate from everyday life. This presents challenges when trying to isolate it as a mode of learning and also when trying to ascertain its significance from a pedagogical

perspective. Further, the fact that participants may not perceive what they are doing as 'learning' serves as one reason knowledge is limited regarding the full spectrum of contexts in which older adults participate (Phillipson and Ogg, 2010).

The largely tacit nature of learning presents challenges empirically as it may not be easily articulated and is, as Eraut (2000) argues, unamenable to 'communicability' (p.119). Thus self-reporting methods may not necessarily be efficacious in giving justice to the nuances of learning occurring. However, the methodology I deploy, delineated below, acknowledges that accessing learning which is likely to be of a tacit nature requires the researcher to take an active role. Here, the researcher is an active interpreter who works collaboratively to negotiate the meanings of questions posed, something that is negated by questionnaire and remote survey methods.

### **Methodology adopted**

I adopt 'situationally located' (Eraut, 2000, p.121) methods which are sensitive to the context. This is to be demarcated from macro level surveys that attempt to draw conclusions remotely. The interpretive methodological position I assume gives primacy to meanings held by participants, that is, those forming the basis of their actions, including their decisions and intentions. I participated in the group's sketching activities to obtain more of an insider perspective, albeit from my position as 'second ager'. My involvement, which extended over six group meets, afforded insight into subtleties of the context which might be indiscernible through more detached, methodological approaches. It also helped bring greater equity to the research relationship and fostered trust and sharing of reflections.

Six members participated in hour-long, minimally structured interviews which were transcribed verbatim. Inferences derived from participant observation, which involved conversing with participants during sketching, foreshadowed the opening questions in interviews. What Van Manen (1998) terms a 'hermeneutic' style of interviewing was deemed appropriate as it helped elicit participants' personal framings of what they considered themselves to be engaged in. This more collaborative approach to interviewing fosters reflection and allows time for participants to contemplate ideas. The researcher is thus in a position to 'mobilize participants to reflect on their experiences' (Van Manen, 1998, p.99). It also allowed for exchange of ideas and reflections which, Eraut (2000) argues, helps bring tacit understandings to the surface. Moreover, by starting from participants' own constructions, I was better positioned to understand their subjective experience (Tarozzi, 2012).

In adopting this orientation to interviewing, I drew upon the phenomenographic tradition which assumes researchers can access interviewees' experiences by attending to the language they use. That is, their words are taken as symbolic markers of experience. Particular choices of wording are deemed reflective of the meanings and personal constructs harboured by participants. In the co-constructed scenario of the hermeneutic interview, the participant has chance to develop how to present their current perspective and trace what has led to it. This is pertinent in the context of informal learning as they will perhaps not have ready-made personal narratives or learner identities.

In alignment with my interpretive methodological position, the data analysis follows hermeneutic principles (Rennie, 2012). Within hermeneutic styles of analysis, understanding of the parts interacts recursively with understanding of the whole. It is essentially iterative, leading to the discerning of a

salient theme which cuts across interview transcripts. Selected excerpts help substantiate this theme, showing how the interpretation is rooted in participants' choice of language and articulation of their stances. Excerpts of participants' narratives are detailed so the full meaning of what they express is preserved. Furthermore, bringing participants' language into the texts helps support my inferences. Hopefully this style of presenting the analysis helps illustrate how the basis of my inferences can be traced to the data.

I observed and audio-recorded four 'show and tell' sessions to gain insight into modes of learning fostered in the learning environment. As 'show and tell' focused on mutual feedback and the sharing of personal reflections, it could be construed as intentional and thus easier to access from an empirical viewpoint. Observational data were complemented by audio recordings of group interactions. It was necessary to attend to dialogue as it unfolded between group members in what might be considered the naturalistic scenario of the 'show and tell' activity. Micro-level analysis, achieved through transcribing recordings verbatim, was required so any patterns within their interactions indicative of learning could be discerned.

### **Cultivating dispositions**

Interview data provided insight into the meanings given to art-making during retirement. While participants' narratives pertained to subjective experiences connected with a diverse set of life experiences, I sought to identify patterns spanning across the data and construct a main theme. This section substantiates the main theme, 'cultivating dispositions'.

The theme reflects both the judicious selection of activities deemed to foster personal enrichment and, moreover, the deliberative honing of habits and orientations - or dispositions - associated with these activities. As participants talked about their intentions, decisions and choices with respect to art-making, an underlying notion coincidental with this main theme was the perceived need for stringent management of how time is spent. A heightened sensitivity to time was especially notable - and perhaps understandable in relation to older adults. Moreover, the increase in time available when work is out of the equation is countered by the realisation that the amount of years left in one's life are decreasing. Resonating through the interview data was the necessity of being a shrewd director of time, discounting and shedding as well as selecting activities and modes of engagement.

Art-making, it seemed, could be an integral part of a chosen lifestyle, serving to weave together a wider array of chosen activities. The erosion of traditional structures and norms in the current era has arguably placed the onus upon the individual to define what is worthwhile and personally meaningful. Indeed, discerned within Teresa's\* narrative were particular 'clusters of habits and orientations' (Giddens, 1991, p.108) indicative of a reflexively constructed lifestyle orientation. Teresa had chosen to connect art-making with a certain way of being, drawing together certain sensibilities with relevant practices in personally meaningful ways. The following excerpt illustrates the particular set of dispositions she has cultivated during retirement. She recounts sketching a bridge in the Lake District whilst her husband hiked up a stony ridge, a pursuit she could no longer manage physically;

*'I spent about two hours at Slater Bridge and Bob had gone up the Langdales, and I said "ok I'll take my sketching stuff and I'll go and sit at the bridge". I sat there and while I was there a guy came with a camera. He photographed it from here, and he photographed it from there, and he*

*must have taken 30 photographs in 15 minutes – and then he went. And I thought, you haven't really looked at it at all have you? And you'll get home and you'll look at all these photographs, but they won't really mean anything to you, other than you're probably looking at the technical side of the photographs thinking ooh that one's a bit over exposed or whatever, but you haven't actually looked at this bridge at all (laughs), or its surroundings. And I'd done a charcoal sketch when I first sat down and a pencil drawing when I'd got my head around the shapes and then I did it in pen and ink and that was the final one that I kept. [Long pause] And I know what Slater Bridge looks like now – I really know that place now and how the landscape sort of enfolds it and goes behind it.'*

This personal orientation, to experience the subject matter holistically, is one that has been gradually realised. In fact, Teresa spoke of an earlier predilection, prior to retirement, for *'taking pieces of the countryside home'* via the medium of photography. Over time, she has identified a preferred mode of art-making centred upon *'being at one with nature'* and the U3A outdoor sketching helps fulfil this. This realisation arose from having participated in various arts-based groups. Those she felt impeded the exercising of authentic forms of creativity would eventually be dropped. The subject matter was also important and former art groups had not always helped her realise her passion for *'big sky-scapes and mountains'*. Indeed, holidays to mountainous areas of the UK had become increasingly important for Teresa and her husband in recent years.

Ways of looking and engaging with the subject matter, signifying an entire orientation, cohere with wider meanings surrounding Teresa's perception of retired life. Throughout her interview it became apparent that her leisure pursuits had been adjusted over time in response to having more time to spend with her spouse and her diminishing walking abilities. She explained how sitting down to sketch fits around her husband's more athletic pursuits of kite flying on the beach and hiking in stony terrain. Both had discovered a way to enjoy the time in one another's company, pursuing complementary interests, unhurried and absorbed by them. Sketching plays a central part in an entire way of being that seems to suit her subjective sense of her circumstances.

Members could readily identify what they felt to be an authentic way of practising art-making. For newcomers to the group and those for whom art was a new interest, this was discovered through trial and error. Rachel who had launched herself into art-making at the start of retirement had collected just enough information about how she wanted to practise art through participating in a range of arts-based groups. She explains the ingredient required for staying with a group;

*'It's being able to - if the group does what you want it to do. I like this outdoor sketching because -I'm really rubbish at outdoor sketching but you know you won't improve if you don't do it and it's something that I would be very wary of going out on my own to do it, so you go and try it and see how it works [pause] to see if you can handle it.'*

Although still working out how she wished to develop, she was mindful of harbouring certain predilections towards art-making. When asked about the sorts of art-making she preferred, she represented the orientation she wished to cultivate through making large sweeping movements with her hand. This, she explained, was to be distinguished from hunching over one's artwork when working at a high level of detail and realism. Copying paintings or producing what she referred to as *'toffee tin cover'* paintings, she explained, was not enjoyable. In fact, she had become disengaged in previous groups which championed such an approach. It was more exciting to work with big

canvases and experiment with a range of multi-media. She made frequent recourse to being told in her school days to not pursue art as the subject of mathematics was where her abilities lay.

Rachel, like the other members, utilised resources to help her develop as an art-maker. One such resource might be direct instruction given during workshops. However, she only valued this when it supported her in what appeared to be a mode of active discovery. She preferred to be supported through being assisted in finding the most suitable ways to meet challenges. This involved helping to generate sensibilities which would help her get through a difficult stage when working on a painting. Instructors encountered in workshops she had attended had been essentially modelling an orientation rather than imparting purely technical advice. For instance, one had shown that persevering with a painting until it was back under control was something all artists encountered and it was the belief that it 'can always be brought back' that aided them. Rachel maintained that it was beneficial to be encouraged to push one's comfort zones, *'otherwise you just select a topic you know you can do'*. However, if instructors were overly directive or technically inclined she would feel frustrated. Unhelpful instruction might be enforcing a realistic representation. She describes an interchange with a tutor on a workshop explaining her reaction to being *'badgered into'* being realistic;

*'You think, well, I don't care because it's my picture, this is my impression of this. I've moved the trees because I think they look better over there. It's exactly what you'd do as if you were sitting out sketching. You'd miss out the bits that were hard or too cluttered and I think I'll miss that tree out coz it looks better just have two trees. I'm not gonna put five trees, I'm just gonna put two trees. They take it literally and "the perspective's not quite right" and you think uh (sighs).'*

A further characteristic of cultivating of dispositions is that it is highly deliberative. Although all appear to embrace active ageing, there were different foci regarding what needed to be worked on. Elizabeth actively prioritised and focused upon what she had discovered reflexively as personal developmental needs. Sketching helps her maintain her health and personal development due to being outdoors and making her exercise her mental faculties. *'Having to concentrate and remember techniques'* is a benefit she identifies. The time and space provided by the sketching group is precious and has to be actively ring-fenced so other commitments do not dominate. For instance, her role as carer for both her daughter and mother might, she feels, easily consume her. Devoting time to being part of the group also signals to others, especially loved ones, the value she places upon nurturing her own development. She considers the social component of the sketching group, whilst not as strong a motivator as the act of art-making, to be therapeutic. Light-hearted social contact with a diverse range of people and shared focus provides stimulation, but also consistency and no pressure;

*'We don't have to tell each other about our lives, just talk about art. Some new members I don't know much about. But others I've got to know very well over the years such as Cathy - I tell her what's going on my life and she tells me what's going on in her life'*

Maintaining social connections as well as intellectual capacities are important to Elizabeth as she feels both could so easily be lost in old age. Both have to be nurtured for the sake of her own well-being and the sketching group serves this.

The social aspect associated with being a group member was interlaced with developing one's proficiency as an artist. It was common for members to arrange trips to new environments, such as the moors during winter to experiment with capturing certain types of scene. While art-making may be a leisure pursuit, it was approached quite studiously. All spoke of wanting to improve. The idea that improving one's artistic competence required persistence is discernible across participants' accounts. Even if one were a total beginner, progress was deemed to come to those who simply 'stuck at it'. Further, for Laura, the notion of being an artist was not about finding an inner kernel of the artist. Instead, it was about working out the particular way of thinking and perceiving peculiar to the artist. This was something she wished to experience and exercise to the full. Being '*visual rather than verbal*' was markedly different from the type of thinking she was familiar with within her professional working life.

The constant interpretation involved in working out the artist's imperative proved personally enriching. Laura enmeshed herself with this, as she reflected on what she would do on the day to develop a certain element within the artist's repertoire. When talking about the sketch done that day, she intimated what she was engaged in at present was '*working out what it is that makes a sketch that is worth looking at – this is what it's all about for me at the moment*'. Learning and embracing the sensibilities of the artist, including the requisite way of thinking, was in Laura's words a 'project' within retirement. Furthermore, it is wholly self-directed and requires astute management;

*'You can't just fluff about, you have to do something. You have to decide what it is you're going to do and then if it doesn't work then how long you're going to stick at it, y' know, how are you going to get from here knowing nothing to where you need to be.'*

A degree of time-related urgency can be discerned here. For Laura, the retirement phase represented the last chance to channel her skills towards whichever endeavour she chose. The learning project defined as '*turning myself into an artist*', required intensive cultivation. She relished the opportunity to follow her curiosity which is something she and Teresa identified as the most treasured aspect derived from years of formal education. This also involved working out their learning aims out after skills have been gained retrospectively which, as Roberson and Merriam (2005) note, is a key feature in older adult learning. Through looking backwards at personal portfolios participants discerned improvement. Skills development, such as getting eyes in portraiture accurate, is identified retrospectively as what must constitute, as Laura noted, '*the beginner's mistakes*'. Seeing that she '*doesn't make those mistakes with eyes anymore*' helps her identify her current stage of development.

What Laura was engaged in was honing a particular way of thinking and, it seems, exercising her mind in new ways. However, it might end as soon as it no longer sustained her interest. Indeed, she did not commit longitudinally. She envisaged further change in her tastes and that they might lead her to pursue a totally different project. Pertinently, the importance of having a self-initiated project was something she did not expect would falter through her old age. In fact, she quipped that if, as she advanced into very old age, she were to lose her sight she would take up singing, even though at present this was not a skill she possessed. The following conveys her reflections;

*'When I think about [long pause] do you ever think about what your ambition is in life, what you want to be? When I was young I wanted to be, oh, a famous something or other, y' know? A Nobel prize winning something or another. I just had to figure out what that was going to be.'*



*And it didn't work out like that because I'm pretty idle and you get distracted and so forth. For years, decades, there was an underlying assumption that I was going to be this expert in something, but just not yet. And then you carry on doing stuff. I didn't get expert coz I got bored and did various stuff. But I realised, well I never stick at anything long enough properly to get expert and that's just the way I am. I don't blame myself coz I've just been doing a lot of these interesting things and stick and know enough about it until something else seems more interesting.'*

Not all spoke in terms of the learning process or accomplishing objectives. Instead, the process of creating the sketch would be emphasised. For Martin, who had many years of experience in technical drawing as part of his working life, the experience and opportunity to experiment were rewarding in themselves. He relished creating novel ways of representing the colours in the scene. Not having the right colours on the day was not seen as an impediment to creating a colour sketch; rather, it encouraged experimentation and different ways of perceiving. Martin remarked that, when doing something complicated and involved, he would *'not keep going at it'*, as though striving to get it right. Enjoyment, for Martin, resulted from the experience of sitting undisturbed, perceiving the environment and observing the colours and shapes. This was an orientation easily realised within the sketching group. Martin described the manner in which he engaged in selecting and viewing the subject matter;

*'I sketched the statue over there with the pens I've got and I enjoyed doing that. Then I went to a very simple stained glass window because I enjoy looking at stained glass windows. As you look at the simplicity of the thing you realise what a lot of different images there are to it'.*

Here, Martin emphasises that his choice of subject matter resulted from the enjoyment he derives from *'looking at stained glass windows'*. Spending time looking was perceived as worthwhile and something he was cognizant of. The notion of art being therapeutic was reflected across the participants' narratives, especially in Elizabeth's case as delineated above. Dan drew attention to the notion of escapism that might be beneficial in working life as well as retirement;

*'When I was bringing up a family and working I never found the time and space until I retired for art as part of the mix. It does require such a total concentration that it's a relaxation in many ways, I find. If I had my head screwed on I might have joined an art club while I was working just as a way of escaping the world for an hour or two every week'.*

In sum, within the theme *'cultivating dispositions'* it is evident that participants are intent upon nurturing particular dispositions deemed conducive to personal enrichment. This involves honing the requisite habits and orientations. Being true to one's desired way of producing art involves embracing challenge and directing one's learning accordingly. Although there is a sense of time-related urgency requiring progressive shedding of activities incommensurate with one's needs, participants embrace new ways of experiencing art-making.

### **The learning environment**

During participant observation I directed my attention towards how participants used *'show and tell'*, attending to how the dialogue appeared to support certain modes of learning. The *'show and*

tell' and 'demonstration' activities provided suitable foci as they were relatively bounded instances whereby members were arguably intent upon learning.

Within the 'show and tell', group conversations are loosely structured around a taking-turn pattern whereby each member reveals his or her sketch to the group. Nobody adopts the position of facilitator or instructor. The atmosphere is light-hearted and as the subject matter, medium and viewpoint differed between members, there is little sense of comparison in terms of successful depiction of the environment. Members often choose to emphasise process when presenting their artwork, that is, their experience of creating the sketch, including challenges encountered. Responses to one another are a matter of recognising the sketcher's intentions, often involving appreciation for certain qualities the art-maker may not have noticed. This constitutes a key form of peer feedback.

It must be noted that the somewhat retrospective analysis and deciphering of one's intentions by working backwards from the finished piece is peculiar to arts-based pedagogy. Thus it cannot be assumed to represent a unique attribute of informal learning. Indeed, as much within art pedagogy is non-cognitive and tacit, communication of perceptions represents the only form of reasoning or knowledge building (Siegesmund, 1997). In formal contexts such as Higher Education, group discussions bent upon deciphering a peer's process are instated to foster autonomy and self-direction on the part of students. However, in these formal contexts such moves towards generating independence and self-evaluative capacities are predicated upon a sense of matching up to external expectations: it is incumbent upon the student to decipher, independently, the ingredients required to procure a higher grade and how to change his or her work accordingly (Day, 2013). Conversely, for U3A sketchers, it seems one only has to please oneself. As Martin had commented, '*we know nobody's marking. It doesn't matter if your sketch hasn't worked out that day*'.

While members contributed by making specific observations in response to each member's 'turn', the conversational mode of learning prevailed. Conversation serves to raise one's learning to awareness. Indeed, much is worked out as it is verbalised and made public (Tarozzi, 2014). It entails perpetual self - correction and revision and, moreover, consideration of how it might be relatable to the audience. Thus the presence of an audience is instrumental in shaping the articulation of one's learning and the realisation of it.

Laura had already relayed that the group scenario simply provided the opportunity to have what she was doing acknowledged. It seemed that having one's endeavours acknowledged by the group served to validate one's personal experience. Although questions raised by an individual member may not necessarily be followed up by others, sharing and articulating experiences allows members to 'express and explore' their 'practical experience' (Richardson and Wolfe, 2001, p.10). In the following excerpt, Laura delineates her process, from the logic behind a strategy to the experience itself. The environment that day provided a developmental opportunity for practising compositions;

*Laura: Today I thought I would just try to find compositions. It's just about filling in the three tones to see how it all works. I first tried it in pencil but it was too messy. You've got to just make it about the blocks of tone to get the idea of what it is that's going to be a good composition or not. Perhaps do kind of colour notes and a sketch and make picture from it really, that's the idea. But I finally gave up on those thumbnail plans and just did a sketch with pen - trying to think about the shadows. I was standing over by the bus stop there. It's hard, I*

*mean, that's why I was asking earlier how do you go from the big shape to gradually get more and more detail, y'know, do you just let the shadows tell you where the shapes are?*

*Dan: Some of these urban scenes are rather difficult to draw aren't they? They're rather block and rectangular - they're rather difficult. It's not easy*

Laura explains her modification of her strategy, though retains her original intention to concentrate on shadows. This, according to Roberson and Merriam (2005), is especially characteristic of learning in old age and is a key component of motivation. When adjustments are made to an initial strategy, the learner is impelled to persist which increases the intensity of the learning. In terms of the group learning context of show and tell, Laura has the opportunity to put into words, this aspect of her experience.

There were times when a more active type of feedback was offered by members, to bolster confidence and provide personally discovered ways of working through challenges. When a member showed less confidence, perhaps not feeling certain enough to define a personal strategy, he or she would present the sketch more tentatively. I noted that advice would be offered only when explicitly sought, albeit through the conversational device of 'hedging' (Conlin, 2015). In this case, hedging is seen in the omission of object in the sentence, the use of 'well anyway' and 'don't you?' at the end of phrases. The following depicts the dialogue that ensued when Nell, a relatively new member, revealed her sketch of a wooden seat which detailed the wood's grain:

*Nell: I didn't quite get the [pause] just, like, how to convey [pause] I don't really know*

*Member 1: it really looks like wood*

*Nell: I was interested in the shape of the wood. I wasn't - I tend to do it more erratic than that but then I don't quite get there [pause] so anyway*

*Member 2: How dark can you get your pencil line, just using - what is it, a 2b pencil?*

*Nell: I have three pencils. I'm not really - I'm still experimenting with how to, well, use them really coz y' know*

*Member 2: Try going in really dark and whatever's darkest make it as dark as you possibly can and then work from that*

*Nell: Yes*

*Member 2: So you get the contrast*

*Nell: Yes, I've got to be bolder. That's me, I'm not quite bold enough at the minute*

*Member 1: But at least then you can go bolder rather than the other way round*

*Member 2: Well I think if you start going in bold you've set out your stall. So it may be crap but you can then relax*

*Nell: Well, that was why I was wondering if I used a pen then that might make me bolder because then you start going don't you*

*Member 2: What is interesting about pen when I started doing it - you can use pen (makes vigorous drawing action emulating sketching) then you're committed coz you can't rub it out.*

*So if you do something wrong the only way you can compensate is to do something else next to it darker and so you just gradually get - when you're me you end up with a whole lot of black. But yeah it is very kind of freeing coz you think well I'll just 'more pen! That's wrong...more pen!' (laughs)*

*Nell: I'm still on pencil.*

Here, the dialogue helps Nell to define her process. The proffered notion of being 'bolder' and more committal is explored in relation to others' experiences. Nell does not define a particular approach herself, nor does she convey a sense of ownership of it. She starts to take on board the notion that the issue is with not yet having fused herself with the act of sketching. Although tips concerning technique are offered, discussion quickly progresses to the subjective experience with adopting a certain mentality. Moreover, member two contributes that the process could be personally enriching and 'freeing'. Thus, method (using dark pencil, or pen) is couched less in terms of mastery and more as embodiment of an orientation. Indeed, the notion of technical instruction is not espoused within the group. Here it is evident members embrace how to enmesh themselves with the process of art learning, perhaps more so than gaining competencies.

This resonates with Tam's (2014) contention that older age learning is about coming to develop 'a repertoire of insights' (p.816) rather than mastery or competence. Subjective experiences with challenges encountered and different approaches adopted were shared. Members would experiment with various ways of adopting an art mentality. However, rather than being taken to heart or being constitutive of an entire identity, these possibilities for new art 'selves' appeared to serve as just one type of resource. Although more collective narratives of 'freedom' and 'looseness' circulated and were embraced by longer-running members, they were not necessarily imbibed by those still working out how they wished to engage in art-making.

It is pertinent to note the group had been created in response to a collectively identified desire. As it is predicated upon voluntarism, it is arguably important that it does not push the boundaries of what is valued by members. As Taylor (2012) suggests, non-formal educational environments are built upon commitment through perceived relevance and members dip in and out accordingly. Certain practices such as 'show and tell' have evolved and adjustments are made to suit members' preferences. For example, the challenge of concentrating on the sketch was considered beneficial. However, a comfortable amount of time to exercise concentration was deemed to be two hours. Although overt negotiation occurred, remaining within the boundaries of what members wanted was, arguably, a matter of tacit agreement. Social dynamics appeared particularly active in shaping the activities. This was perhaps made more acute as there was no assigned group facilitator.

Tacit understandings and social norms regarding the purposes of the group were apparent within demonstrations. Demonstrations occurred when the group was indoors during winter months and involved communicating the fruits of one's experiences. They represented the only instance an instructive role was assumed. The temporary position of 'expert' was based on sharing rather than the purveying of knowledge. Indeed, I noted a reticence to assume the stance of bearer of knowledge. As seen below, there was a degree of tension regarding being temporarily in the spotlight, in the role of demonstrator, and being a part of a group. The demonstrator deployed many hedging devices to eschew expertise, though was keen to share her encounter with a watercolour technique.

In the excerpt below, the demonstrator shares her experiences with the practice of using cling film to create patterns within watercolour washes. She integrates advice over technique with humorous deprecation of her own efforts. Her encounters and identification of personal pitfalls are related to those she identifies as group-wide, though the use of 'you know' signifies she is only offering an interpretation of what others' concerns might be:

*'I was looking at - I got a Jane Smith book and I've been to her workshop and she says she always starts off painting every day by doing washes. It's like - she's a professional artist - or it's a bit like being an athlete - you do a bit of warming up which frees you up to do the painting. Y' know, it's really hard isn't it when you sit down and think 'right I'm going to paint - now'. But you're not, coz you're going to struggle, but if you feel a bit freer then you're going to. It's like at the end of the outdoor sketching, y' know, your first sketch is rubbish and then you actually get into it. So I started trying to do Jane Smith's washes, just for fun...*

*...then I did one and decided to paint sunflowers on it - very badly. You get all enthusiastic and then find yourself coming to paint very tightly. There must be a way of doing it which I haven't worked out yet. The same goes with my mountains where I used cling film. If you look at the mountains and see what I'm doing here. The only thing I've painted on there is those three rather pathetic little pine trees. Then I got bigger and bolder, but again I fell foul of the freedom of the rocks with the stiffness of the trees'.*

The construct of 'freedom', namely, being uninhibited in one's painterly style, represents the personal outcome of this demonstrator. What she shares is enthusiasm for a newly discovered line of inquiry. She identifies the personal challenge encountered along the way as being tempted to get detailed which leads to the marring of a piece intended to be expressive. This is circumvented via the practice of combining colour washes and cling film.

Demonstrations represented occasions when techniques were fully elaborated. However, like the tips members exchanged during 'show and tell', they may or may not be relevant to other members' personal development. As evident within interviews, members readily selected and utilised resources to further their own development. Moreover, knowledge accrued during group interactions concerning technique may not be used immediately but stored for later use. As Martin observed, members often show each other examples where they have used a certain technique and this memory is something to 'tuck away up there for a few years' (taps his temple).

## **Discussion**

The theme 'cultivating dispositions' reflects members' deliberative honing of habits and orientations which they feel help them make art in personally meaningful ways. It throws light upon the sharpened judgement exercised by these older adults with respect to selecting personally enriching activities. What serves as personally enriching does of course draw from wider biographical meanings that are beyond the reach of this case study. Nevertheless, there appeared a certain coherence between particular dispositions and wider meanings surrounding retirement. Indeed, during the hermeneutic interviews, they were encouraged and given space to reflect upon and share the way they viewed themselves making art. They could convey how this related to a more overarching set of personal priorities and values. The judicious selecting of activities coupled with stringent management of time might be considered to represent concerns specific to the retirement

period of life. It concurs with the idea of sensitivity to time or an age related urgency for older adults which is recurrent in the literature (see Scott, 2006; Tam, 2014).

Equally, the desire to pursue only worthwhile activities might be due to the fact that art-making occurs within leisure time. Leisure, as Roberson (2005) notes, by its very nature incorporates notions of choice and enjoyment. It does not usually involve doing anything deemed not worthwhile. Furthermore, leisure combined with learning creates the conditions for personal enrichment. Like other leisure activities, members can opt for learning activities pursued in leisure time as and when they feel like it. Moreover, Roberson (2005) draws attention to the way being able to choose personally meaningful activities serves to 'affirm' (p.225) one's interests. This means it performs important work in regard to self-growth and life satisfaction.

Selecting paths deemed conducive to enrichment appears dependent on having ample time to discover one's preferred ways of being. In addition to the U3A outdoor sketching group, various workshops in the locale presented opportunities for exploration and trial and error. Although abundant free time was not common to all participants, those such as Elizabeth who had the least free time could still engage in art-making as a personal choice. Pertinently, it was conducive to life-wide priorities she held, namely, health and well-being. The participants of this study were not all unencumbered or released from family responsibilities. Nevertheless, importance was placed upon dedicating time to personal development and growth and this need could, it seemed, be met by art-making in this group.

When art making was taken as a learning project, self-evaluation and the setting of objectives appeared to be relished. The refining of one's personal strategies, that is, the making of continual adjustments, as Roberson and Merriam (2005) note, fosters persistence and sustains interest. Indeed, even if, for instance, experimentation with techniques for depicting shadows did not work out as intended little sense of frustration was apparent. Moreover, the change of physical and thus visual environment each fortnight together with the need to select a new subject matter quickly and explain this choice afterwards stimulated reflections on what art-making represented personally. The ongoing interpretative process seemed a source of intrigue in itself for those such as Laura, constituting a major part of the learning 'project' she spoke of. There are resonances here with Scott's (2006) notion of 'congruous autonomy' which refers to cohesion between older adults' definitions of the learning task and personal meanings. This, Scott contends, is critical to adult learners' commitment to the learning activity.

It appeared instruction could be inhibiting if misaligned with what art-making represented to the learner and how he or she wished to pursue it. This lends support to Scott's (2006) contention that insights into learners' definitions of what they are engaged in will inaugurate our understanding of the learning process in self-initiated contexts. The importance of sensitivity to the learner's personal meanings was illustrated through Rachel's recounting of her frustration at being overly directed by an instructor during a workshop outside the group. Having her proclivities misinterpreted - or assumed - quashed her enthusiasm. Her preference for personalised learning support is perhaps understandable. It is also unsurprising given that relevance to the learner is a catalyst for learning in such informal scenarios (Taylor, 2012). What is more pertinent, however, is that she valued, I inferred, the modelling of particular dispositions by an instructor which could be of service to her when facing challenge. This could be utilised as a resource or moreover a certain way of being with which she could enmesh herself, if she chose to.

Self-directed learning, a notion regularly invoked in connection with older adults' informal learning, recognises the value of others largely in that they constitute a resource. Like any other resource, inputs from others are selected by the individual in the interests of her or his learning development (Roberson and Merriam, 2005). Although the exchanging of tips between members did indeed occur, my interpretation of the 'show and tell' activity suggests the sharing of experiences – not just techniques - were equally prominent in this scenario. Moreover, the case study threw light upon how a group of older adults collectively engaged in art-making could provide mutual support through interaction. The focus upon interaction sets it apart from the studies of Scott (2006) and Roberson and Merriam (2005) which focus on unconnected individuals following different pursuits. The current case study suggested support could be provided via the offering of ways of embracing artistic orientations such as 'being bold'. This also depended on members knowing one another and being sufficiently familiar to share personal meanings and reflection. Even if experimenting with enmeshing oneself with 'boldness' proved transitory, it could perhaps facilitate reflection upon whether one's current interpretations might actually be constraining.

The informal nature of the social setting was a key characteristic of the group. The group was sustained purely by the learners and there were minimal structures. The conversational mode also played a key part in constituting this learning experience. Of course, the benefits derived from peer learning are well established. However, this case study can offer some insight into a scenario wherein enjoyment and sociability were central. Members could share interpretations of what they felt their current challenge or focal interest was. Indeed, the accruing of insights rather than mastery is prevalent for older learners (Tam, 2014). Further, the tone of the social environment was such that how one responded to the environment in light of such interpretations could be openly shared. Others' responses could stimulate reflection upon one's original intentions, helping to identify what they were retrospectively. This might be beneficial in terms of validating one's subjective experience, especially if a member was unsure or new to the group.

The benefits of arts-based activities to well-being in old age are perpetually being reaffirmed (see Field, 2009; Mental Health Foundation, 2011; BIS, 2012). Regarding emotional health in particular, the Mental Health Foundation (2011) identified positive effects in helping older adults embrace new aspects of the self. However, how this occurs and the processes involved lay beyond the reach of this large scale synthetic literature survey. It was also concluded that there is little knowledge of the unique benefits of art-based activities to well-being. The current case study of the U3A outdoor sketching group has contributed in this respect by illuminating personal meanings given to art-making which may not be readily accessed through survey methods. It has also indicated types of support generated in an informal learning scenario. Further, the offering of ways of being with which the learner could enmesh her or himself, as inferred through participant observation of group interactions, may be quite enabling in such a scenario. It sheds light upon how aspects of one's self might indeed be invigorated during art-making in informal learning groups.

## **Conclusion**

This informal learning scenario fostered the sharing of subjective experiences, harmonising with the desire to cultivate dispositions which was perceived by members as a central endeavour in retirement. Attention to the interactive aspects of the group in situ, as well as to participants' narratives within hermeneutic interviews, afforded insight into the situated nature of their learning.

This brought into focus the relational dimension of members' learning in this informal context. Indeed, they had exhibited sustained interest in group participation. The way expertise or the purveying of knowledge was eschewed by members was highlighted. This appeared supplanted by the offering of ways with which one could connect with the art-making process. Further, light was shed upon the integral role that perpetual interpretation played in art-making in this context. This seemed to draw heavily on personal meanings. Whether such qualities render art-making especially compatible with informal learning for older adults is a matter for further inquiry, perhaps through comparative studies with groups pursuing activities other than art-making.

\*To preserve anonymity, pseudonyms are used throughout the paper.

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