



Social Work, Gerontology, and the Arts: A Creative Approach to Teaching Undergraduate Social Work Students

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore how social work students cultivated a deeper understanding and community connection with older adults through personal engagement with artistic practices. We begin with an exploration of gerontological social work, noting the trends and challenges in this specialization. Guided by extended epistemology as a conceptual framework, we consider the role of the arts within critical pedagogy and describe an undergraduate course taken concurrently during student field-placements. As part of the curriculum, students designed artifacts about their experience working with older adults, which supported critical reflection and student-led learning. As an exemplar of a creative teaching model, further considerations for implementation are also discussed.

In this article, we describe how social work students cultivated a deeper understanding and community connection with older adults through their personal engagement with artistic practices. We focus on the experiences of undergraduate students working with older adults during their first field placement to highlight how creative processes supported critical reflection and student-led learning. We begin with an exploration of gerontology and social work, noting the trends and challenges in this specialization. Guided by extended epistemology as a conceptual framework, we consider the role of the arts within critical pedagogy and describe an undergraduate course taken concurrently during student

field-placements. As part of the curriculum, students designed creative artifacts about their experience working with older adults. We share visual representations and stories and discuss further considerations for implementation in gerontological social work.

Our Background

We speak to our combined experiences as educators and learners in the field of social work. Our personal and professional backgrounds are diverse, yet we come together through our shared interest in artistic praxis and transformational learning. Kathleen has engaged in arts-based research for over 15 years. Starting out as a filmmaker and transitioning into collaborative visual media, her research involves working alongside community groups in participatory frameworks and incorporating the arts when working with adult learners. Gail has over 15 years of experience as a social work practitioner. In both teaching and research, Gail's passion and interest in gerontology comes through in her community-engaged scholarship that focuses in areas such as palliative care and aging in rural places. Jessica, Kandice, and Chelsea hold varied backgrounds as undergraduate social work students. In their third year, each had their first internship with older adults. It is through their personal stories and creative artifacts where we learn how meaningful engagement with art opens up opportunities for critical reflection.

Our Canvas: Social Work and Gerontology

Population aging is a global phenomenon; a result of declining fertility rates and improved health and sanitation practices that have substantially increased life expectancies over the last century. The leading edge of the population surge described in North America as the "baby boom" is now over 65 years of age. The baby boom period refers to the 20 years following World War II, where families grew with the return of soldiers, a bolstered economy, and government supports that subsidized housing and educational opportunities.

Although the population category "persons over the age of 65" is broad in scope, it remains a conventional marker of "entry into old age" (Chappell, Gee, McDonald, & Stones, 2003; Cheal, 2000). Using this marker, the proportion of persons 65 and

older is projected to continue to rise from 15.3% in 2013 to 20% in 2024 and 25% in 2055 (Bohnert, Chagnon, & Dion, 2015, p. 3). In July 2015, for the first time in its history, Canada had more people aged 65 and older (16.5%) than children 0-14 (16.1%) (p. 14). Over the longer term, factors that contribute to population aging will have an even greater impact in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador (NL). With the lowest fertility rates and highest levels of out-migration in the country, NL is the most rapidly aging province in Canada: 20% of people in NL will be over 65 by 2017, and more than 45% will be over 50 years of age (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2007). As these trends will have profound socio-political and economic implications, it is crucial that social work practitioners understand the challenges and opportunities that population aging presents and its lasting impact on services and care in the province, particularly amongst future social workers with respect to their potential employment opportunities and areas of specialization.

However, the profession faces a number of challenges in attracting and retaining future practitioners in this particular field. Compared to other fields of practice in social work, gerontology does not attract a high level of interest. An international study of undergraduate social work students found that working with older adults was the lowest ranking area of specialization across each cohort (Weiss, 2005). Further, research into attitudes toward aging and older people indicates that many future social work practitioners have negative perceptions of aging (Kane, 2006; Kane, Lacey, & Green, 2009). Ageist perceptions carry with them practice implications, including interventions that are predicated on age without consideration to illness, diagnosis, or personal resilience (Kane et al., 2009). The result is what Kane (2006) describes as “therapeutic nihilism”—the belief that treatment or intervention for and with older adults is futile because there is no cure for the physical and cognitive decline associated with later life. Chonody and Wang (2014) suggest that more is necessary to support advances in gerontological social work to engender lasting interest in the field. Creating frequent and ongoing interactive opportunities between older adults and students is one example that has shown to be associated with promoting and sustaining student interest in working with older adults (Chonody & Wang, 2014).

Critical Pedagogy and Engagement With the Arts

While critical thinking unfolds in various ways, creative forms of engagement invite people to take an active lead in their learning, and has been found to support different learning styles while facilitating a stronger connection with course content (Edwards, Perry, Janzen, & Menzies, 2012; Hagedorn, 1994). There are growing examples of arts-based engagement in postsecondary studies including education

(Lewis, Wright-Harvey, & Moisey, 2016), health care (Cox, Brett-MacLean, & Courneya, 2015), and community organizing (Sitter, 2015). More recently, we also hear of arts-based processes within the field of social work, as there is a growing interest in using visual art as a means to encourage critical thinking amongst undergraduate students (Clark et al., 2012; Walton, 2012; Wehbi, McCormick, & Angelucci, 2016). As a teaching method, artistic engagement not only promotes creativity, but evidence suggests it also results in deep critical thinking (Walton, 2012). For example, Clarke and colleagues (2012) found that arts-based methods “create spaces and opportunities for critical inquiry and creativity that allows students and educators to attend to the complex relations of power” (p. 83). Similarly, Wehbi et al. (2016) describe a proposed graduate course that bridges social work and socially engaged art. Here the authors stress that combining arts and social work has the potential to enhance understandings between theory and practice, while concomitantly improving self-reflection.

The need to address and change ageist assumptions requires an interrogation of how one’s own identity has been shaped by dominant ideologies. The translation of this critical self-knowledge into practice has been variously described as “conscientization” (Freire, 1970), “reflexivity” (Leonard, 1997), and “reflective / reflexive knowledge” (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). The process of critical thinking requires that we explore our own positionality and reflect on our relationship to the topic of inquiry. According to Wehbi and colleagues (2016), it is important for social work students to engage in personal reflection and contemplate their own values and understanding of their roles as future practitioners. With consideration to the role of creativity and reflection, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire argued that images are tools for people to see their reality from a new perspective and to think about their lives and the circumstances that influence their experiences (1970). Through the creative process, language and experiences become coded through the use of visual imagery; where codes are transformed into concrete visual representations that can be used to build awareness, educate, and create new knowledge (Freire, 1970).

For instance, during field-placements, student interactions involve both verbal and nonverbal communication with service-users. By using artistic processes to reflect on and represent these interactions, students are called to recognize and acknowledge implicit elements occurring within these encounters. In this context, the transitive function of art involves exploring an interaction through creative methods with consideration to how the dynamics of age, class, sexuality, ability, gender, and culture intersect and shape social differences in the world. Visually articulating our experiences and stories in an artistic representation requires an understanding of what is happening in these unsaid moments. In this way,

the student's artistic representation becomes the nexus of these concepts; it is purposefully crafted to visually depict themes associated with social locations that are at play during an encounter with a service user, community member, or client. Through this process, arts-based engagement can act as a means to support students in recognizing problems within systems that affect the lives of older adults, and potentially create opportunities to take action toward social change. The arts can serve as a pathway for students to link what they learn in the classroom setting about gerontology with their personal experiences in the field. The creative engagement thus becomes a conduit for students to tether these pedagogical spaces in meaningful ways while concomitantly making sense of their own beliefs of aging.

Theoretical Framework: Extended Epistemology

To prepare learners to engage in critical social work requires an environment that combines theoretical engagement and practice. With this consideration, we describe Kathleen's approach to teaching adult learners and how it is guided by Heron's (1981) theory of extended epistemology. Extended epistemology is a theory of how individuals come to know and experience the world, and consists of four interdependent ways of knowing: experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical (Heron & Reason, 2008). Heron and Reason (2008) contend that everyone naturally employs these four ways of knowing and "tacitly interweaves them in all sorts of ways in everyday life" (para. 6).

Extended epistemology accounts for different dimensions in how people give meaning to personal experiences. Experiential knowing is that direct encounter with a person, place, or thing (Heron & Reason, 1997). Presentational knowing is how meaning is expressed through the use of creative forms such as paint, sculptures, and stories. It manifests in images, and in the continuously creative capacity of the human individual and social mind to tell stories. Propositional knowing is knowing through ideas and theories and expressed in informative statements. Practical knowing is expressed in a skill or competence; it is knowing in action. While we focus on presentational knowing, all four are interconnected throughout this assignment. This approach to knowledge challenges the predominance of propositional knowing as the only way to learn, and provides a conceptual framework to integrate different and creative methods to engage diverse learners.

Educational Context

To highlight how the arts can be used to engage students with gerontological social work, we share with you a creative assignment completed by undergraduate social work students during their first field placement. The academic setting was at an Atlantic university in a third-year Bachelor of Social Work course (BSW) taught by Kathleen that focuses on exploring links between theory and practice. The course is taken concurrently with the student's first field placement, and is designed to assist with integrating theory and practice. The course is three hours per week, over a 13-week semester. As one of the requirements, students were asked to create artistic representations of a social work field-practice experience with communities that they serve. While the course did not focus solely on gerontology, a number of students have their placements in this specialization, and it is within this space that we focus our inquiry.

The creative assignment was developed with consideration to student learning outcomes of the course, specifically related to: 1) understanding and applying theoretical knowledge to practice with individuals, couples, families, groups, and communities, 2) communicating an awareness of the importance of reflective practice and critical self-awareness, 3) applying theories and skills in practice, 4) critically analyzing agency models and methods of practice.

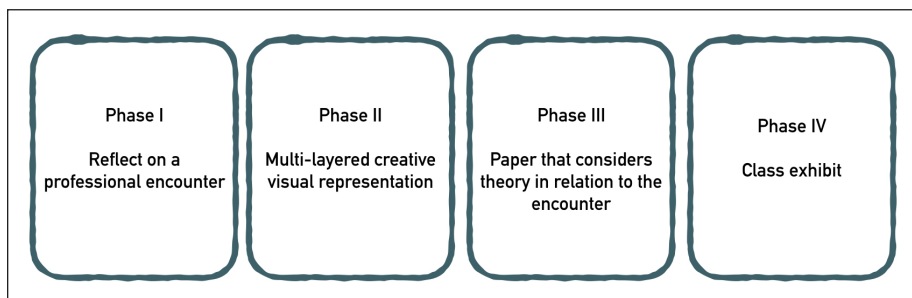


Fig. 1: Phases of the assignment

The assignment builds on Walton's (2012) work, informed by extended epistemology and focused on critical thinking. The purpose of the assignment was for students to develop an awareness of their response in practice situations, to stimulate critical reflection. There were four phases to the assignment (see Figure 1).

Phase I: Reflecting on an encounter. In the first phase, students chose an encounter they experienced in their field placement that involved significant power differences, where the subject matter was an area of focus for both the student and the other

individual(s) (Walton, 2012). These encounters included interactions with service users, supervisors, interdisciplinary teams, and so on. Students then identified and reflected on various factors connected to the situation, including 1) the physical environment, 2) the social and emotional context, 3) the influences of systems (e.g., services, laws, policies), histories, cultures, and politics, 4) one's sense of self in the situation. The timing of this reflection was important, and purposefully reviewed with students at the beginning of the course and subsequently discussed in more detail during week 3 (after submission of the first assignment). During the first class when the assignment was discussed, students were asked to focus on an encounter that occurred during the first few weeks of practicum so they would have a longer period of time to reflect on the various factors outlined above. Students were also provided with initial examples of different encounters to offer some context (e.g., interactions with service users, individuals, families, groups, local communities, and interdisciplinary teams).

Phase II: Creative representation. With consideration to these factors, students created two- or three-dimensional visual artifacts of their reflections grounded in their chosen encounters. Students also developed a 400-word description to accompany their artistic representations.

Phase III: Research paper. As part of this assignment, students identified two emergent themes they visually explored in their creative pieces, and then conducted further analyses and secondary research in these areas. Students then wrote a six-page theoretical paper where they considered their theories and practice skills in relation to their encounters.

Phase IV: Exhibition. On the day the students submitted their artifacts, descriptions, and research papers, we also had an exhibit in the class. The classroom was arranged in sections for students to display their artistic representations. We brought in music and food and had an opportunity to engage with each of the installations. This followed with everyone taking a few minutes to talk about their pieces and discuss their topics and encounters. The exhibit was not a formal presentation, but a celebration of accomplishments.

We share with you three artistic representations created by Chelsea, Kandice, and Jessica that came out of their time working with older adults in their internship. These stories are tethered together through recognition of the diverse experiences of aging. In Chelsea's story, she describes her experience of losing—and subsequently regaining—sight of the fact that the assessment files she was reading describe actual people. Her journey is a thoughtful and honest one, which is further represented

through a powerful portrait of “Paper to Person.” While Kandice, in her haunting and beautiful painting entitled “changing seasons of perception,” considers how a person is perceived and represented over time within societal constructs. Jessica’s story, entitled “A Dangerous Nest,” highlights the difference in perception between the service user and herself when it comes to risk. Jessica’s artistic rendition of her experience draws on colors, metaphors, and visual storytelling. Her story further echoes the importance of—and challenges with—supporting self-determination, which is a core part of the social work code of ethics. In all three of their first-person accounts, Chelsea, Kandice, and Jessica purposefully locate themselves in their experiences as students-in-training with temporal consideration of the past, present, and subsequent future selves as social work practitioners.

Paper to Person by Chelsea

For my internship, I was placed at a long-term care facility. During the first few weeks, the majority of my work involved screening admission applications for the unit opening in the fall. I read dozens of referrals in that time and tried to wrap my mind around the way long-term care admissions work while attempting to keep every potential resident straight in my mind. Over time, as I thought about the people being referred, they became a list of terminologies in my mind: *bariatric*, *wandering behaviours*, *cognitively well*, or *cognitively impaired*. Everything was very fast-paced with a clinical perspective. There were so many terms, many that I did not understand. During this time, I wasn’t seeing these referrals as people, but as traits with little substance behind them. Even though I was directly involved in determining their futures, I lost sight of the fact that the files I was reading described *people*.

meaningful engagement with long-term care residents, or any person for that matter. Being able to engage meaningfully with a resident also enhances a person's well-being (Kelly, 2010).

My portrait is composed of blank social work applications. The eyes are my own, which are partially obscured as I try to see through the powerful markers on the placement applications. Despite initially having a difficult time seeing beyond the applications, the resident is positioned clearly. By not being obscured by the paperwork, the image acts as a representation of the whole person, inclusive of their strengths and unique personality. This artistic piece represents the importance of physical encounters, and the need for social workers to look beyond the listed pathologies of an individual to recognize the human being.

Changing Seasons of Perception by Kandice

My painting, "Changing Seasons of Perception," was inspired by a home visit with an older woman seeking long-term care placement. This woman told beautiful stories from her past growing up in a rural town in Newfoundland and Labrador, and how she made new connections and memories when she moved to St. John's. During our time together, she also shared how she wished she were more able-bodied to experience life outside of her daughter's home.



Fig. 3: Changing seasons of perception

In the painting, the trees symbolize how temporality interconnects with our way of being in the world, with consideration to how people perceive themselves and are perceived by society. The roots of the trees indicate the woman's stories, memories, life events, and connections that continue to grow throughout one's life course. In the beginning, the roots are small with limited connections. However, social supports are developing, which are depicted through the metaphor of the leaves. The second tree is considered middle-aged and is represented during the brightest part of the day. We can see the leaves blossoming, which represents the amount of social supports one has made. Over time, the connections and networks are present, but less visible as end of life approaches. The roots that symbolize connections and experiences are large and deep, while the leaves are no longer at the forefront. The tree in the dark is least visible as the possibility of social exclusion is heightened by various factors, including physical and mental health. The small tree in the distance represents the temporality of the life cycle beginning anew.

Through my relationship with this woman, I see myself as both a means of social support as well as a new connection. Through my ongoing interaction with her during my internship, I began to understand the critical need to support the quality of life amongst older adults. By looking at—and listening to—life histories, I believe we are able to recognize that each person has a different understanding and experience with aging, which is strongly influenced by socio-cultural, economic, and geographical circumstances. With the population of older adults increasing in this province, I see the inherent need to address how we can help them achieve a better quality of life. Through our connections and relationships, I can see how people have different understandings of their individual aging process. This stresses the importance of supporting diversity while working together alongside our communities to achieve equity among all members of society, especially older adults.

Living in a Dangerous Nest by Jessica

My creative piece is inspired by an interaction I had with a service user, whom I'll refer to as "Ms. Smith." Ms. Smith was an older woman living alone and receiving services through a community supports program. She lived in a two-story government subsidized housing unit with an upstairs bedroom and bathroom. She also had a number of different health issues affecting her mobility inside her home; she could not climb the stairs on her own, therefore, her bedroom and bathroom were inaccessible. However, she refused to relocate to a different home.



Fig. 4: Living in a dangerous nest

While I recognized Ms. Smith's competency in making her decisions, I also believed she would be more comfortable in another house that offered more accessibility, based on her needs. In our discussions, Ms. Smith took an active role in ensuring her choice to remain in her home was respected. Through our encounters, I not only recognized her right to choose, but I also actively ensured other resources were in place.

My piece refers to the importance of self-determination. This interaction inspired me to create a visual piece representing the different perspectives of social workers and service users. The nest is a metaphor for the home, juxtaposing the different views between Ms. Smith and my own. I initially only saw the house holding many dangers, which are represented by the thorns. However, these thorns are brightly colored, as they also represent familiarity and comfort for Ms. Smith. It is her *home*.

The layer of cotton inside the nest symbolizes the home support that she now receives. The cotton serves as a metaphorical shield, offering Ms. Smith protection from the potential hazards of her home through resources. It is within the layer of cotton that I see myself, and the self-awareness I have gained to support Ms. Smith's right to self-determination. It is through my relationship with Ms. Smith that I saw past the thorns and recognized the nest is her home where she wishes to age in place. Mrs. Smith can choose where she wishes to live and I must accept that the nest is her choice. My artistic piece thus represents aspects of my own journey in coming to understand the choice made by Ms. Smith, and how in my own role I support her decision that she wishes to age in place.

Discussion

There are opportunities to adapt this approach in various ways. For instance, including different modalities such as moving images, digital stories, or music compilations would offer further creative depth and means for students to engage with different genres. It is worth noting that we did not invite community members to the exhibit, and this was purposeful. We wanted students to feel safe in sharing their experiences, and ensure they are not disclosing confidentiality, which is a concern for many of these placements. However, we think this assignment could be expanded to include working alongside community members in developing a collaborative artistic installation that reflects how their social locations overlap and diverge in their interactions, based on their own perspectives. Closer to the submission date, there was some initial hesitation from students. For instance, several indicated they weren't artists and were concerned about their final visual representation. To address this concern, we had an open discussion about the process, reiterating that it was about the process and engagement and how they represent their encounter and their chosen themes in their piece. Students also had the opportunity to submit a proposal of their idea four weeks prior to the due date, and were provided with feedback.

In 2016, *LEARNing Landscapes* dedicated an entire issue to the arts and education (Butler-Kisber, 2016). Our work builds on the article of Caine, Sommerfeldt, Berendonk, and Compton (2016) that considers the role of personal identities with students through artful inquiry, as well as Pithous-Morgan, Coia, Taylor, and Samaras' (2016) work of integrating artful research into practice. We also consider how reflexivity—through artistic practices—opens opportunities for students to recognize the diverse experiences of aging as well as their future role as social work practitioners working alongside older adults. During their field placement, Kandice, Jessica, and Chelsea were affected by their encounters with the older adults and subsequently created symbolic representations of how they understand their experiences. Engaging with the art mode itself allowed for a depth of awareness that may not have otherwise been attained. As Kandice tells us, “completing artwork allowed me to see that this is a realistic situation for everyone, including myself. I [have] seen that as we get older, our experiences become less vivid and our memories become a focal point of life.”

Similarly, Jessica says that working with art provided a space of reflection that “would not have been as meaningful had I simply written a paper from my own point of view.” Chelsea also indicates that her piece afforded her with engaging in a deeper form of reflexivity:

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Creating my piece required me to think about each individual aspect of my encounter, and then find a way to represent it through symbolism. This required me to consider what I represented in my artwork and how, as well as how these choices represented my values. This project helped me to analyze my values, beliefs, and prejudgements piece by piece: instead of having a general view of the encounter, I had to think about every part of the situation, allowing me to have a better understanding of both the encounter and myself.

From a pedagogical point of view, exploring their personal values within the context of professional practice reflects transformational learning and a shift to critical self-knowledge (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005).

This artful assignment provided a space for students to explore their own positionality in relation to working with older adults. Through the process, students indicated they were able to give meaning through imagery to professional contexts they perceive as critical in their own development and understanding the socio-political contexts, while also reflecting on their own experiences associated with the situation. Developing this assignment in conjunction with a student's field placement combines and recognizes different ways of knowing. With consideration to presentational knowing, the artifacts were not solely representations; the creative act of engagement also served as a conduit for reflexive practice. For gerontology, this artful inquiry can support students in thoughtful reflection about their perceptions and understandings about aging, and the opportunities within this specialization.

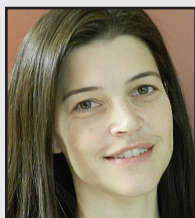
Acknowledgment

The authors also wish to acknowledge the support of Joyce Fewer, Teaching Consultant, at Memorial University. The authors also wish to acknowledge the thoughtful feedback from the reviewers.

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Kathleen C. Sitter is an Assistant Professor at Memorial University in the School of Social Work. Her research and scholarship focus on the theoretical and practical implications of participatory visual media, which includes the use of still and moving images in collaborative and participatory frameworks. Through her research, Dr. Sitter has worked with a variety of adults and youth in the areas of disablement, sex work, employment, education, mental and physical health, and homelessness.



Gail Wideman is an Associate Professor at Memorial University in the School of Social Work. Following 15 years as a practitioner, Gail began her involvement in the school as a sessional instructor in 2001. Her academic interests span the fields of gerontology and community development. Throughout her career she has been involved primarily in community-based programs and services aimed at maintaining and enhancing independence and quality of life for older persons. In 2016, Gail received funding to investigate mechanisms of support for informal providers of palliative and end-of-life care in rural places.



Jessica Furey is an undergraduate student in the School of Social Work at Memorial University. She holds a Bachelor of Arts, majoring in Religious Studies with a focus on Eastern Traditions, and minoring in Psychology. Studying in these areas led Jessica to pursue Social Work. She has a particular interest in solution-focused, single session therapy and is working toward a career in this field.



Kandice Gosine is a fourth-year Bachelor of Social Work student at Memorial University. Having extensive experience volunteering with a variety of groups in St. John's, and her rural hometown of Bell Island, Kandice has devoted herself to the social work field. She has experience working and volunteering with youth, elderly, and marginalized groups. Kandice enjoys hiking as well as spending time with family and friends. Kandice has a passion for helping people. She intends to concentrate her studies in mental health and addictions, going on to complete her Masters of Social Work in the future.



Chelsea Skanes is an undergraduate student at the School of Social Work at Memorial University. She has always loved embracing her creative side to facilitate her own learning and the learning of others. She is fascinated with how the use of various art forms can help improve memory recall, and has a keen interest in integrating the arts into the gerontological field of practice and study. She hopes to continue her studies in geriatrics and learn more about how dementia affects spirituality, creativity, and sense of self.