

Connections: Building Partnerships with Museums to Promote Intergenerational Service Learning and Alzheimer's Care

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects upon the development of Connections, a service-learning collaboration between a Research I university and an urban art museum that trains students to work with patient groups from the community using Visual Thinking Strategies. This method of art exploration helps people with Alzheimer's disease express memories and relieve anxiety. In describing the collaboration, instructional design, and ongoing research, this reflection seeks to encourage educators to partner with museums for intergenerational service-learning experiences.

Keywords: art therapy, dementia, undergraduate research, community engagement, pedagogy

In 2015, the University of South Florida (USF) was approached by the executive director of the Tampa Museum of Art, who was seeking to create specialized programming for museum patrons with Alzheimer's disease. The museum's interest in developing such activities and services was, in part, responding to a great local need; among U.S. states, Florida has the highest percentage of residents over the age of 65, and nearly 12% of older adults in Florida have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease (State of Florida, n.d.). As Baby Boomers age and life expectancy increases, Alzheimer's is becoming more prevalent nationwide, with the Alzheimer's Association predicting that nearly 14 million Americans will be diagnosed with the condition by the year 2050 (Alzheimer's Association, 2017). This statistic suggests that community institutions across the country should be preparing to serve the growing segment of the population diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and their caregivers, whose lives are also impacted by the disease.

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE METHODOLOGY

Research has demonstrated that individuals diagnosed with Alzheimer's as well as their caregivers experience isolation, anxiety in social settings, and increased cognitive decline due to a lack of stimulating experiences (Camic, Baker, & Tischler, 2016). The ability to visit a welcoming "safe space" can combat these detrimental effects and provide opportunities for positive intellectual and social engagement (Rhoads, 2009). Over the past decade, many museums around the country have demonstrated foresight and vision by instituting programming designed for individuals affected by Alzheimer's disease, with subsequent research demonstrating the efficacy of their efforts in terms of reducing stress and loneliness for patients and caregivers (Lamar & Luke, 2016).

The pioneering program in this arena was "Meet Me," the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York's Alzheimer's Project, which adapted the museum's traditional teaching methodologies and approach

to suit an audience with potential communication and cognition challenges (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2009). “Meet Me” advocated for interactive, discussion-based engagements with art, led by a museum curator and accommodating up to eight individuals with Alzheimer’s disease and their caregivers. Deliberate questions posed by the curator allowed for structured conversation in these small groups to progress from observation to description, interpretation, and connection building around and about a work of art (Rosenberg, 2009). Research conducted at New York University found that this approach promoted feelings of intellectual stimulation, information recall and retention, and positive emotional carryover among its participants (Mittleman & Epstein, 2009). Around the country, more than 60 cultural institutions now offer art appreciation programming for persons with Alzheimer’s disease similar to that developed by MoMA (Parsa, Humble, & Gerber, 2010). Other museums have cultivated a more hands-on approach to Alzheimer’s-related art therapy. The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Tate Britain Gallery in London, for example, both incorporate the experience of making art in planned museum excursions for Alzheimer’s patients and their caregivers (Chancellor, Duncan, & Chatterjee, 2014).

As cultural cornerstones of the community and historically safe spaces for self-expression (Salom, 2008), it is both logical and laudable that museums have stepped in to provide therapeutic experiences for Alzheimer’s patients and their caregivers. However, museums should not be expected to serve alone; institutions of higher education also have the potential to play an important—and public—role in meeting the needs of these populations. Existing research has illustrated several benefits of intergenerational service-learning experiences for both college-aged students and older adults in the community (Roodin & Shedlock, 2013), from improving the emotional well-being of older adults (Requena Hernandez, 2008) to reducing the prevalence of

negative stereotypes about aging (Hawkins, 1996). Particularly in the case of older adults with Alzheimer’s disease, such a service-learning experience can attune students to the existence and needs of a population group that often goes unnoticed in the larger community, due to both the invisibility of the illness itself as well as self-imposed social isolation among patients and caregivers (Ortigara & Scher McLean, 2013). Intimate interactions with people suffering from Alzheimer’s disease provide students with the opportunity to see these individuals as more than a diagnosis; such encounters build empathy and deepen students’ understanding not just of the disease itself, but also of the human condition in general (Zeisel, 2009).

USF was, therefore, pleased to respond to the call for collaboration around the development of Alzheimer’s-specific programming for the Tampa Museum of Art, viewing this opportunity as not only a manifestation of the University’s sense of responsibility to the community, but as a partnership that would also be beneficial to students. The collaboration found a home in the Honors College at USF, which is dedicated to providing unique educational opportunities to highly motivated and intellectually curious students, while engaging with the community through service-learning endeavors and interdisciplinary collaborative research. This article will reflect upon the creation of Connections, the resulting intergenerational service-learning partnership between USF’s Honors College and the Tampa Museum of Art inspired by MoMA’s “Meet Me” Alzheimer’s Project, in the hopes of encouraging and enabling other universities to collaborate with art institutions in the community.

In Connections, Honors students learn about medical conditions including Alzheimer’s disease, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, and are trained in the Visual Thinking Strategies method of art exploration, which allows participants to give their own personal interpretations of works of art without fear of judgment or failure. Particularly in people diagnosed

with Alzheimer's disease, this method has been found to help participants access and express memories, practice or regain their communication skills, externalize emotions, relieve stress and anxiety, and promote positive feelings (Yenawine, 2013; Bennington et al., 2016). Students, meanwhile, master core competencies such as detailed observation, deep listening, critical thinking, and empathy. Through this immersive experience at the intersection of art, medicine, and mental health, students in Connections also have the opportunity to further the research in fields such as art therapy, museum education, and service-learning pedagogy. In describing the logistics of the collaboration, instructional design for the course, and ongoing undergraduate research, this reflection seeks to encourage other educators to partner with museums in their communities to provide a service-learning experience that benefits students and those impacted by Alzheimer's disease.

PARTNERSHIP FORMATION

In fall of 2015, 18 Honors students from a range of majors including biomedical sciences, psychology, and art history volunteered to travel to the museum once per week to learn about the medical conditions they would encounter in visitor groups. With the help of dedicated faculty and staff contributing their expertise on a voluntary basis, these students were trained to use the Visual Thinking Strategies method of art exploration to engage participants from the community in meaningful conversation around a work of art.

Selection of Visual Thinking Strategies Method

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is a method of engaging with art in which a trained facilitator stimulates and moderates discussion among viewer-participants. It is characterized by extended observation, critical thinking, discussion, careful listening, positive reinforcement, and the construction of connections among concepts (Yenawine,

1999). VTS was developed in the early 1990s by Abigail Housen, a cognitive psychologist, and Philip Yenawine, former Director of Education at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, as part of an initiative to better engage, educate, and empower museum visitors to cultivate their viewing skills. Positive response to this method of engaging with a work of art has since led to VTS being used beyond the museum, in educational as well as clinical settings (Yenawine, 2013). In a VTS session, viewer-participants are invited to closely examine a work of art as a group, before being asked a sequence of open-ended yet precise questions by a facilitator. The questions—"What's going on in this picture?," "What do you see that makes you say that?," and "What more can we find?"—are phrased in order to promote deep, patient observation, evidenced-based analysis, and narrative meaning-making. Following a response from members of the group, the facilitator provides feedback by paraphrasing the comments made by each viewer-participant and building links between such remarks, without judgment or evaluation of whether the comment is "correct." Studies have shown that participating in this specific format of interaction and engagement with a work of art improves communication skills and builds a sense of mental clarity, confidence, and curiosity through its emphasis on sustained looking, guided questioning and discussion, and positive reinforcement (Yenawine, 2013)—all benefits that are particularly relevant and helpful for Alzheimer's patients (Camic, Baker, & Tischler, 2016). Research demonstrates that VTS can also be advantageous for college-aged students, enhancing visual literacy, pattern recognition, verbal and listening facilities, tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty, and cultural openness (Childress & Chen, 2015).

Engaging with Participants

After learning about VTS and practicing with one another for the duration of a semester, the initial group of students began

working with patients recruited from local Alzheimer's disease support groups and assisted living facilities. The museum was responsible for enlisting patients, and did so by reaching out to activity directors at the types of facilities described above with information about the program. Individuals diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and their caregivers were invited to attend what was billed as a "free mental healthcare and community art engagement program" on the second Wednesday of each month (Tampa Museum of Art, n.d.). Two-hour sessions were held in the morning so as to avoid "sundowning," (Jakel, 2017) and featured a social mixer for the first 30 minutes of the meeting time, which allowed participants to become more comfortable inhabiting the museum space and interacting with one another. Students worked in pairs to facilitate art interactions using VTS with groups of no more than 10 patients and caregivers, with the group size limited so as to ensure that all participants would have an opportunity to contribute to the conversation. Instructor observation and feedback from students indicated that student facilitators were most comfortable and confident working together in teams, and were also better able to field comments from and manage the participant group if they had a partner.

These first sessions were so successful that the museum soon began offering student-led VTS programming weekly, on regularly scheduled days and times, expanding the scope to also include people struggling with depression and individuals diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. These sessions quickly attracted the attention of dozens of community members in need of Alzheimer's-friendly programming, as well as businesses in the community interested in supporting such a venture. In its first year, Connections received corporate sponsorship as well as grants from two non-profit foundations that assisted in offsetting the museum's costs and raising the public profile of this unique cross-institutional partnership (Lake, 2016). Cul-

tivating relationships with external financial partners expanded the reach and more deeply embedded Connections into the community; it also assisted in alleviating any concerns about the fiscal viability and sustainability of a free-to-the-public museum program, and illustrated the willingness of community agencies to contribute to what they perceived to be a worthwhile cause.

Connections was equally popular in the academic setting; in the second semester offering the volunteering opportunity, twice the number of students applied to participate. In 2016, the first group of student recruits continued to work with patients. Inspired by research that demonstrates the efficacy of peer mentorship in advancing student learning, the initial trainees were also asked to serve as trainers for new volunteers (Bichy & O'Brien, 2014). This system of peer mentorship assisted in the onboarding process for new volunteers, and also helped promote increased consistency and stability in the Connections program.

COURSE CREATION

The Honors College was compelled to convert the voluntary program to a credit-earning, service-learning capstone course due to the increasing visibility of the Connections program in the community, as well as high student demand for the type of intergenerational service-learning and research experience it provided. Doing so has allowed for the inclusion of much greater academic rigor as well as deeper engagement with the topics of the course. This has been achieved via tested pedagogical methods including active learning, service-learning reflection, and cooperative research, which shaped the creation of reading, writing, participatory, and research requirements for the class.

Learning Outcomes and Pedagogical Design

Connections was developed as a special section of the pre-existing Honors capstone course (IDH 4970), which histori-

cally has been interpreted as the culmination of the undergraduate learning experience in directed individual research. Existing learning outcomes for the course were:

- Students will develop an original question, problem or other project; forms include, but are not limited to, traditional research, creative design/production, business plan, construction of an artwork, or another approved format.
- Students will draw on course content in conjunction with prior disciplinary training, and/or other undergraduate experience in developing an approach to inquiry.
- Students will execute and complete a major project, documenting frameworks, methods, analysis, findings, and conclusions as appropriate to the project.

In Connections, the research component was retained, but retooled to align with the theory of cooperative learning. Instead of requiring students to attain the learning outcomes described above as individuals, students in Connections instead were asked to work in teams to develop and pursue a research question, as a means of promoting positive interdependence, increased face-to-face interactions, individual and group accountability, improved interpersonal skills, and opportunities for group processing (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1990). Specifically, this course employed the model of group investigation (Sharan & Sharan, 1992), wherein students were permitted to form their own two- to six-member groups, cultivate a unique research question (rather than being assigned a path of inquiry), and determine individual tasks that would contribute to the completion of a major project. This particular methodology corresponds to the values of cooperative learning, but also requires the skills of individual responsibility, autonomy, and independent inquiry (Slavin, 1999) that the existing learning outcomes for the capstone course sought to promote.

Additional learning outcomes were added to Connections, in order to reflect the

service-learning focus and the active learning approaches employed in the course. The new learning outcomes were, however, left general enough so that they might apply to any section of the capstone course that might in the future embrace an active service-learning concentration. The new outcomes were:

- Students will actively create connections between theory, course content, and community engagement through reflective assignments, experiences, and research.
- Students will participate in active learning approaches by focusing on activities in which the learner discovers meaning and acquires knowledge from experiences, the development of questioning skills, synthesis of material, and/or through comparison and contrast.
- Students will provide assistance to a community agency by contributing time, expertise, training, and/or research gained through the course content that is applicable to the needs of the community.

The infusion of service-learning into a course that had traditionally possessed a research focus was justified by recent scholarship highlighting the ways in which community partnerships can provide students with unique opportunities to conduct applied research (Stark, 2013). Additional support was provided by pedagogical research demonstrating how service learning, in general, makes learning more meaningful to students (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2008), while intergenerational service learning, in particular, can reinforce course content and make it more relevant to students (Hamon, 2002). Active learning strategies were embraced and embodied in these learning outcomes in part out of necessity; students required hands-on training and practice in VTS to prepare to work with patient groups. However, the pedagogical philosophy of active learning was also suffused throughout other elements of the course—from discussion of readings to a final research project—as a means of pro-

moting the acquisition of critical competencies through experiences in the classroom and museum setting (Paulson & Faust, 1998).

Structure and Assignments

The class meets once per week at the museum, for a three-hour session that encourages extended engagement with the service-learning community partner, an essential contributor to the efficacy of a service-learning experience (Connor & Erickson, 2017). Generally, each meeting is comprised of two distinct components. The first half of each session convenes in the museum's educational space, and is modeled after an active classroom experience. Weekly reading responses due in advance of class help students prepare to debate and discuss readings and peer-reviewed research from fields including psychology, art history, medicine, and educational pedagogy. Discussion is guided and moderated by the faculty member teaching the course; guest speakers from organizations such as the Alzheimer's Association and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs are also invited, to enrich the students' perspectives on the diseases they will encounter in patient populations. Since critical reflection is considered a crucial component to meaningful service learning (Molee, 2010; Karasik, 2013), students are required to keep a learning journal in which they write weekly on the ways in which class activities and discussion connect to readings, guest lectures, their understanding of Alzheimer's disease and other impairments, outside experiences, and their overall sense of self and community.

During the second half of each weekly session, the class heads into the galleries of the museum with their instructor and the museum's education curator. Here, students practice VTS as well as other unique methods of engagement with art, such as a word association game. For this activity, facilitators shuffle a deck of cards, each imprinted with a word describing an emotion such as "joyous," "frustrated," or

"loving." Participants draw a card, and are tasked with finding a work of art in one room of the galleries that evokes that emotion for them. Each participant then has the opportunity to share their selected artwork with the larger group and explain what they saw in the work that led to its selection, with facilitators directing the conversation and paraphrasing all responses. As with VTS, this activity asks participants to use evidenced-based thinking, access their emotions, and practice communicating with others, while having their interpretations and experiences validated by others.

Students are also encouraged to develop their own activities in the gallery space that creatively elaborate on the fundamental principles of VTS. Open-ended discussion, support for multiple perspectives, and a demonstration of positive reinforcement are always required, but students can otherwise design and implement unique interactions with works of art. One of the most successful variations on VTS took place in Fall 2016, when a group of students experimented with selecting musical accompaniments that might complicate or challenge a viewer's initial understanding of a work of art. While viewing *Goodbye My Love #7*, a sculpture of a red fiberglass airplane with a heart-shaped body by Esterio Segura, participants first heard the Cuban national anthem played over a facilitator's smartphone in the gallery. A VTS session was then held, Frank Sinatra's "Fly Me to the Moon" was played, and another VTS session took place in which participants were asked to reflect upon the difference that the musical selections made in the way they interpreted the work of art. This activity generated such engagement and enthusiastic discussion among participants that variations of the "musical VTS" session have been included in student trainings since then.

In these weekly gallery sessions, students have the opportunity to learn about the art on view, design a tour, and practice VTS with each other. The class of 19 students is divided into four groups; the small-

er numbers not only make movement in the galleries easier, but more importantly, it allows for every student to have the opportunity to practice as a facilitator. Because the class is divided in this manner and the groups are not confined to a single area of the museum, it is essential that at least two faculty/staff supervisors are available to shadow the groups and provide feedback and guidance. It is ideal for each group to have its own dedicated mentor; students who have completed Connections training in prior semesters often volunteer to return to assist with supervision and provide mentorship to current students. Mentors take on various roles during each class, sometimes taking on the position of teacher by providing critical feedback and positive reinforcement, and on other occasions playing the part of a participant and enacting challenging situations in which the student facilitators will need to improvise or troubleshoot.

Assessment

Before students are able to work with patient groups, each group's mock tour is evaluated; students must pass with a 70% or higher to be allowed to return to the museum as a peer mentor and leader of facilitation sessions for patient groups. A rubric is generated and distributed in advance, which illustrates how students are assessed on factors including clarity of instructions and activities, positive body language, listening and paraphrasing well, and the ability to respond to unplanned variables. The successful mock tour provides a model for students to use when they then lead tours and interactions with patient groups in the museum. This end-of-semester mock tour is also an opportunity to invite community partners to the museum, along with friends and family, to witness the fruits of the students' labor. Students have expressed feeling a sense of pride, ownership, and success in the work they have accomplished, while community partners gain valuable insight into the activities their patients experience and a higher degree of confidence in Connections, having witnessed the level of pro-

fessionalism present among student facilitators. The end-of-semester mock tours are an essential form of outreach that helps sustain enthusiasm for and interest in the program from year to year.

Undergraduate Research

Another summative assignment is the final research presentation required of all students in the capstone course. Throughout the semester, assigned readings and classroom discussions introduced students to key components, processes, and procedures connected to undergraduate research. Students worked in small groups to brainstorm potential research topics related to Connections, and brought their ideas to life through a series of formative assignments, such as the composition of a research abstract, literature review, and methodologies proposal. The students used on-campus resources to prepare their research projects and learn more about proposal writing, research poster creation, and undergraduate publishing opportunities. Students were required to participate in the University's undergraduate research and arts colloquium, at which they made a poster presentation of their research findings. Like the mock tours, this provided students with an opportunity to take pride in the work they had accomplished, as well as connect with a broader community (in this case, primarily academic) to build awareness around the topics of art and mental health.

Although no research with patient groups has been conducted to date, the students who have participated in the course so far have formulated a range of meaningful research projects designed to improve the classroom experience and highlight directions for future study about VTS. Already in Connections, training practices have been adapted to respond to the findings of student research. In one project, for example, a group of six Connections researchers conducted a feasibility study investigating the benefits and possibility of bringing VTS to USF's campus, so that students struggling with stress or depression could have access

to this program as participants. Through a comprehensive literature review, these undergraduate researchers demonstrated that applicability of VTS for individuals coping with challenges to their mental health, with a particular focus on conditions that impact college-aged adults. These students compiled data from previous studies and presented it in a viewer-friendly format, demonstrating how VTS works and the ways in which it has been shown to improve participants' perceptions of stress and anxiety (Singh et al., 2017). The counseling center was persuaded of the value of VTS for the student population and, thanks to the important research of this team and the cooperation of the University's art institutions, we will begin training students to facilitate VTS sessions on campus in Fall 2017 through a separate section of the capstone course.

Course Outcomes

A metric is currently being developed to measure student achievement of the learning outcomes for the Connections capstone course. In the meantime, the Student Assessment of Instruction survey administered in every course at the university is the primary way in which the success of the course can be assessed. IRB exemption was granted to share results of this survey, which provide some quantitative and qualitative data indicating support for the potential impact of this class. For example, on a five-point Likert scale, 100% of students completing the survey indicated that there had been "excellent" (5.0) stimulation of interest in the course (University of South Florida, 2017). On average, students rated the facilitation of learning in Connections as a 4.9 on the same scale, compared to the College mean score of 4.4 (University of South Florida, 2017). Student comments on the survey included the following:

- "This class specifically was wonderful. A valuable learning experience especially in that VTS can be used for other ideas and can be transferred to other aspects of education and self improve-

ment and community engagement" (University of South Florida, 2017).

- "The class is one of the best classes ... It allows us to apply what we learned in class to our classmates and eventually, with patients" (University of South Florida, 2017).
- "This class was a unique opportunity that I really think benefited everyone involved" (University of South Florida, 2017).
- "I like the way these capstone classes are set up, they have a unique way of engaging students while still providing the opportunity to conduct and develop research. Specifically the Connections Program at the Tampa Museum of Art is a great course that can engage anyone while giving back to the community" (University of South Florida, 2017).
- "This class was so well thought out. The amount of work that was assigned was manageable and extremely relevant to what we did in class. I loved this class and recommend it to everyone" (University of South Florida, 2017).

Outcome data for patient groups is also somewhat limited at this time, given that no research with these subjects has been conducted to date. However, there are preliminary signs of the program's success in the community, primarily in terms of its growth. Since the start of 2017, students have facilitated 50 Connections sessions, for more than 400 individuals (Bevel, 2017). Fourteen organizations in the community, including the Alzheimer's Association, Wounded Warriors, and many assisted living facilities, have partnered with the museum to send patients and caregivers on a regular basis to participate in student-led programming (Bevel, 2017). Additional program growth is anticipated, as demand is present for more sessions, and students currently enrolled in the Connections course during the Fall 2017 semester will soon

complete their training and become available to serve as facilitators in the museum.

CONCLUSION

The initial success of the Connections program at inspiring meaningful outcomes for students and the community, as described above, prompted the composition of this article as a preview of a promising program. As the University-Museum partnership matures and institutional approval to conduct research with human subjects is sought, additional manuscripts will be composed to address future undergraduate research projects that are expected to become more sophisticated, and outcome data that should be more abundant and quantifiable. In the interim, these reflections aim to demonstrate the rich potential of a course that combines traditional classroom practices, off-site experiential learning, intergenerational service learning, and an undergraduate research requirement. This article strives to make a case for the value of collaborations between institutions of higher education and museums in order to address the needs of a growing population of people with Alzheimer's disease in a novel, interdisciplinary way. The sources, assignments, and methodologies of engagement suggested in this piece hopefully may assist in bringing similar partnerships to life elsewhere, in order to benefit individuals with Alzheimer's disease and students alike.

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