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Photography as a Transformative Aesthetic Experience for Rural Seniors

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Photography as a Transformative Aesthetic Experience for Rural Seniors

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I. INTRODUCTION

Al around the world, the population of seniors is increasing. According to the statistics on aging as reported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the population of seniors (i.e., 65 years or older) was 39.6 million in 2009, which constituted nearly 13 percent of the total U.S. population (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). In addition, the U.S. is projected to have 72.1 million seniors by 2030, which is more than twice the number of American seniors in 2000.

An aging population is an issue that pertains to many countries around the world, and is not limited to the United States. According to Donna Butts(2012), Executive Director of Generations United, this is a particularly salient issue in several Asian countries, as a result of the fast rise in life expectancy and the sharp fall in the overall fertility rate. Though there are differences in trends among the various Asian countries, three countries in particular—South Korea, Singapore, and China—are facing a rapid rate of aging accompanied by an extremely low birth rate. When examining the South Korean case in particular, we see that seniors constituted 11 percent of the South Korean population in 2000, and the fast pace of aging suggests that 14.3 percent of the population will be over 65 years old by 2018 (Statistics Korea, 2010). As such, as the country continues to age, a variety of new issues are being brought to the surface.

This paper discusses a transformative aesthetic experience project that was carried out as one potential way to approach some of the new issues that arise with an aging population. It explores how contemporary

toward life. Such activities may serve an important role in the curriculum of senior centers in the future.

Adult learning is a complex process during which a person's beliefs and actions transform based on new personal experiences. The process occurs over a prolonged time period and is not a brief one. According to Mezirow (1991, 1996), this is referred to as a process of transformative learning, the goal of which is to arrive at "a more inclusive, discriminatory, and integrative perspective" (1996, p. 167).

The power of transformative learning may be even greater if it occurs through direct aesthetic experiences like seniors taking photographs. Dewey (1945) argues in favor of the importance of experiential learning, and suggests that, unlike the traditional philosophy of the past that there is a strict distinction between everyday experiences and aesthetic experiences, one should seek to live life at the intersection of everyday experiences and aesthetic experiences. His ideas for the unity of life and art education present an opportunity to expand the horizons of post-modernism contemporary education in a variety of directions. In particular, Dewey (1934) suggests that aesthetic experiences are some of the most important experiences, which are comprised of intellectual, emotional, and practical experiences. These are arguably the most important elements of any educational experience. Furthermore, several scholars of art education and philosophy also highlight the importance of aesthetic experiences in terms of both cognitive development and affective and imaginative development (Broudy, 1987; Efland, 2002; Eisner, 2002; Gardner, 1983, 1990; Kokkos, 2011; Perkins, 1994).

As such, aesthetic experiences are not merely simple artistic activities. Instead, they are capable of making an active and vibrant human being by cultivating creativity. This may enable humans to better contribute to public life and society. For these reasons, the author conducted a transformative aesthetic experience project rooted in contemporary community-based art practices.

II. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE & RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The goal of this study was to investigate and critically observe the views of the elders on the transformative learning process, and to explore the effects of contemporary community-based art practices

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on seniors of the age 65 or above. In addition, it sought to examine the process through which seniors engage in aesthetic experiences and transformative learning, and how this affects their self-esteem and attitude toward life in general.

The following questions guided this study:

- As a contemporary community-based art practice, what role does the arts activity of group photography have on seniors' attitude toward life? Does this extend as an opportunity for transformative learning?
- Over the course of the two years during which this project was conducted, has there been a measurable change in the emotional stability, confidence, self-esteem, self-actualization, and general experiences among the participating seniors?
- Can the program that was developed through this project be utilized as an educational tool at the local senior center?
- Does the program that was developed through this project have a positive or negative impact on the way younger adults or families think of seniors?
- What kinds of learning opportunities did the participants have through this project?

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research draws upon a variety of data collected through combining two research methods called qualitative examination and quantitative investigation. The data were collected using double reflexivity methods, unstructured and formal and informal interviews, and three survey administrations.

To examine how transformative aesthetic learning can be delivered through an arts activity, I conducted a series of case studies based on the theoretical frameworks of Stake's case study (1995) and Moustakas's case study in phenomenology (1994). I used this series of phenomenological case studies to gain a deeper understanding of the issues that relate to this research topic. This methodology also allowed me to effectively investigate and explain the issues concerning senior citizens, societal phenomena, transformative learning process, seniors' psychological changes about themselves, and more.

Data were collected continuously over the period of two years, while seniors participated in different types of activities. I incorporated data on the seniors' discussions while they were taking photos and participating in exhibits. I also gathered data over the course of a month during which I asked seniors a variety of structured and unstructured questions, to which they were free to respond in an open-ended way. The seniors' works and the documentation of their experiences vis-à-vis the integrated project, the aesthetics of the projects, and their reactions to social

issues became rich data sources for this research. Feedback from the senior center employees, neighbors, town hall employees, and family members on the seniors' artworks and photography were also valuable sources of data.

For the qualitative data analysis, I used NUD-IST (non-numerical unstructured data indexing, searching, and theorizing) as described in Richards & Richards (1994). Also, following Delament's (2002) structure, I coded and indexed the data by hand. In addition, I utilized SPSS to conduct the quantitative analysis.

IV. SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

In selecting participants for phase 1 of the project, I prioritized areas within South Korea with a high proportion of senior citizens. According to the figures reported by the Korean Statistical Information Service, Goheung County in Jeollanam-do Province had a high percentage of senior citizens in 2011, and as of 2013, it has the highest percentage of senior citizens at 33.8 percent (Statistics Korea, 2013). For this reason, I selected Goheung County of Jeollanam-do Province as my research site, which is located in the southernmost area of the South Korean peninsula and is surrounded by ocean on three sides. Thirteen senior citizens from the Goheung senior center who were interested in studying photography formed the Goheung photography group. These participants ranged in age from 72 years old to 83 years old. Twelve participants were male and one participant was female.

The author served as the instructor of the photography group. For the past two years, every summer and winter vacation, I conducted weekly lessons at the Goheung senior center. While I was in the US during the academic year, I utilized a distance learning system using online technologies, such as blogs, YouTube, and email. In addition, Shin Myungsoon, vice principal of Songwon Elementary School, served as a research associate for the project. Doctoral student Cho Younghee also conducted the lessons during the last few months of the project. In-person lessons were conducted mostly at the Goheung senior center, and a few were conducted off-site.

V. PHOTOGRAPHY AS A TOOL FOR TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Gene D. Cohen (2005) explains that there is a need for more research into the psychological growth and development that takes place during the second half of one's life. Furthermore, he argues that there is a need to better understand how positive changes may occur during the second half of one's life, and how it may be possible to improve one's creative expression during this time. With this in mind, this project seeks to examine how seniors may acquire new skills and new

opportunity through an artistic genre such as photography. What kind of an impact may this have on the rest of their lives? In what follows, I describe how the project was conducted over the course of two years.

VI. PROJECT PROCESS

a) *Week 1: No knowledge of how to turn on or off the camera*

Because most of the participating seniors, all of whom lived in a village setting, did not own a camera, the first class was conducted using borrowed cameras. Most seniors reported having never laid hands on a digital camera before this occasion. Without a question, they were not familiar with how to turn the camera on or off, and they had no sense of where to locate the viewfinder or how to take a photograph. We began with a lesson on how to turn the camera on or off. Next, the seniors learned how to contain the target object within the viewfinder. As the youngest participant was 72 years old, many lessons had to be repeated, and the environment was quite chaotic. Although there were only thirteen students with one instructor and two associate instructors, the classroom environment was cluttered and there was genuine concern regarding whether it would even be a fruitful exercise to continue teaching photography to these participating seniors.

b) *Weeks 2-8: Gradual progression from an attitude of impossibility to interest*

During weeks 2 through 5, participants conveyed a feeling of frustration with regards to the learning. However, during weeks 6 through 8, they began to demonstrate more interest and enthusiasm in learning photography. When reflecting on the first 8 weeks of lessons altogether, it was apparent that even those who were struggling the most at the beginning were gradually learning how to handle the camera. Each participant exhibited an increasing level of interest in how to take photographs. Over the course of the 8 weeks, there were fewer instances of participants asking irrelevant questions and taking the lesson off-topic. Several participants also acquired their own cameras. Every week when we projected the participants' photographs on to the large screen in the classroom, participants became more engaged in discussion and critique sessions.

c) *Instructor's departure to the US*

At the end of the summer holidays when I (the primary instructor who was volunteering her time for free) had to return to the US, we were faced with a problem of not being able to find an instructor who could take over and continue the lessons. Because Goheung County is a rural environment that is situated far from any cities, there was nobody in the vicinity who had studied photography. Furthermore, there was nobody willing to take on this role in a volunteer

capacity. The senior center stated that it could neither hire a photography teacher, nor could it continue the photography class, citing budgetary limitations.

d) *Demonstration of eagerness to learn and continue the photography class*

At this point, many of the seniors who had acquired a taste for photography stated their strong desires to continue the photography group lessons. Their dedication to the photography course was so strong that they would find their way to the senior center, despite their advanced age, even in the middle of a tropical storm. Not a single participant skipped the weekly homework assignments, further demonstrating their sincere interest and commitment. One participant in particular went to great lengths to attend the course. From his home, which is located on a small island, he took a boat to the nearest port, transferred to a city bus to reach the bus terminal, and then transferred again to a shuttle bus connecting the bus terminal to the senior center.

Even during the harvest when they are swamped with work, the participants made time to complete their photography homework assignments. For example, one participant always carried his camera around with him on the tractor and took photographs during the day. This kind of passion and dedication was not even imaginable at the beginning of the project.

e) *Weeks 9-35: Distance learning*

Due to the seniors' passion and dedication, I decided to continue teaching the course in any way possible. The only feasible idea was to use email and a group blog to carry out an online education model. To begin, we created a group blog where participants could upload their photos (<http://sajinteam.blogspot.kr>). While I was back in the US during the academic semester, I continued assigning a weekly topic via email. The participants took topic-relevant photographs during the week and uploaded the four best ones to the group blog, entitled the "Goheung Photography Group Blog." Afterwards, I sent an email with my comments about each photo the entire group of participants. In this weekly email, I also shared links of photographers' works from around the world. The participants were able to use the computers at the senior center to view and learn from these professional works.

In addition, while I was in the US, Ms. Shin visited the participants at the senior center once a month and conducted a discussion session. This helped keep the photography group together and active over an extended period of time.

f) *Weeks 36-40: In-person classes during the winter vacation period*

Weeks 41-81: Online sessions and in-person sessions in iterations

When I returned to Korea during the winter vacation period and then again during the subsequent summer vacation period, I continued conducting in-person classes with the participants at the Goheung senior center. By the time 18 months had passed since the beginning of this project, these senior citizens became quite advanced in their photography skills. At this point, it was possible for them to take meaningful photos in ways that they intended. The seniors not only became active participants in the learning process, but they also reflected upon themselves and their learning (Freire and Shor, 1987). Several participants voiced their feelings of greater self-confidence and pride in their works. They also expressed their desires to continue to improve their photography skills. In addition, they began to engage in reflection and critique to try to identify their weaknesses and continue to learn. This was consistent with Mezirow's (2000) characterization of the path to transformative learning.

g) *Photo exhibit*

As a reward for everyone's hard work and great effort, we collectively decided to hold a photo exhibit. As an unfunded project, the challenge was to find a way to host a simple and inexpensive yet meaningful exhibit. I personally designed the invitations, which were printed at no cost at the Goheung Culture & Arts Center. We used frames that were being discarded from the school to showcase the photographs. Kim Joongil from the Goheung Cultural Arts Center designed the banner for the exhibit. The Goheung Photography Team Exhibit was held at the Goheung Culture & Arts Center in South Korea from August 20 through September 3, 2012. It showcased 50 photographs.

The opening reception was an intergenerational occasion. The event brought together not only the senior citizens who participated in the project but also their children, grandchildren, and relatives—many of whom lived far away—and their friends and neighbors from Goheung. It was truly a special occasion. More than anything, the proud sentiments of the seniors were palpable and it was evident from their families' remarks that their self esteem had improved over the course of the project. Rather than thinking of themselves as old and useless senior citizens, they now identified as the cool grandparent who knows how to take photographs and upload them to a blog. Many grandchildren stated that they could not express in words how excited they were to have a grandparent whose works were being featured in an exhibit.

This project was a vehicle for social change and helped the participating seniors gain new perceptions, engage in critical thinking, and develop their creativity. Furthermore, its publicity in the local news incited new interest in developing programs for the elderly and their continued learning. Several discussions were initiated about the importance of long-term programs for senior

citizens and various ways to engage scholars and artists as volunteers as well. According to Eisner (1972), these types of arts activities may help seniors rediscover meaning and develop their minds about the world. Expanding aesthetic experiences may help individuals overcome the dehumanizing tendencies of modern society. Furthermore, it may help individuals develop the ability to solve various problems that arise in a rapidly changing society.

VII. DISCUSSION

Freire (1970) argues that it is important to have a strong foundation about how to leverage aesthetic experiences to inform the transformative learning process. The seniors who participated in this project were able to gain aesthetic experiences by viewing, experiencing, and reflecting upon their surroundings through the medium of photography. For them, this became and enriched their transformative learning process. As Mezirow (1990, 2007) emphasized, for the seniors to participate in the project more effectively, it is important for them to engage in critical discourse about self-awareness, understanding emotions, and self-control.

It is evident from the interviews with the participants and their survey responses that the project brought about a transformative change in the way they thought of themselves vis-à-vis the broader society. Chu Chungno, a member of the photography group, said the following: "I now view everything in my surrounding with a new perspective. Whenever I go out, I bring my camera with me. Even though I am 83 years old, since all my neighborhood friends congratulate me and encourage me after seeing my works at the photo exhibit, I feel like I have even more energy than a young man. I now have the courage to try new things again. I realized that age is not a problem." Chu's reflection suggests that photography has the power to change the way one sees objects and scenarios, both literally and metaphorically replacing one lens with another (Cranton, 2009).

As a result of the project, the participants now see different aspects of the world with greater interest and curiosity using an artistic tool. Through this different lens, it is one's hope that they will be able to realize a greater richness of life. Another member, Kim Oksun, said: "Now, I no longer worry about living the rest of my life without anything to do, much less anything useful to do. From now on, I can take photographs. Every day I think about all the nice activities I can do for the rest of my life. Every morning I wonder what kinds of photographs I will take today, and it gives me energy to start the day." This illustrates that aesthetic experiences can help develop a greater imagination for those engaged in the process of learning (Dewey, 1958).

According to another member of the photography group, Kim Jungsuk: "If it weren't for this photography group, how would I know what a blog is, or what it means to save a file on a USB? Learning about technological things makes me happy because it's like I'm young again. These days, my grandchildren are actually willing to include me in their conversations." Especially at a time when segregation by age is becoming a social issue, and furthers negative stereotypes about each other, finding a way to become integrated into the conversations of a younger generation is a significant accomplishment. This may help mitigate the weakening of social support networks within the family, which is a concerning phenomenon of the present day (Thang, 2011).

According to photography group member Lee Hyungjong: "Until now, I always just expected someone else to take a photograph for me. I still can't believe that I am the one who can take photographs. It's amazing to me that I can view a photograph that I took on a big TV monitor by connecting some cables. Whenever my children and my grandchildren visit my home, we all sit around the TV in the livingroom and I show them the photographs that I've been taking. We've become a closer family. I feel like I am more respected." This is an example of seniors critically reflecting upon the transformation of their reality and life (Freire and Shor, 1987). Photography group member Lee Yungdoo said: "For the rest of my life, I won't stop taking photos. I'm starting a better life, the second part of my life. Now I don't feel old. I want to live a nice life, part 2, while I take nice photographs. Every time I look into the viewfinder of the camera, it's like I am looking into my life." This suggests that "transformative learning can be both

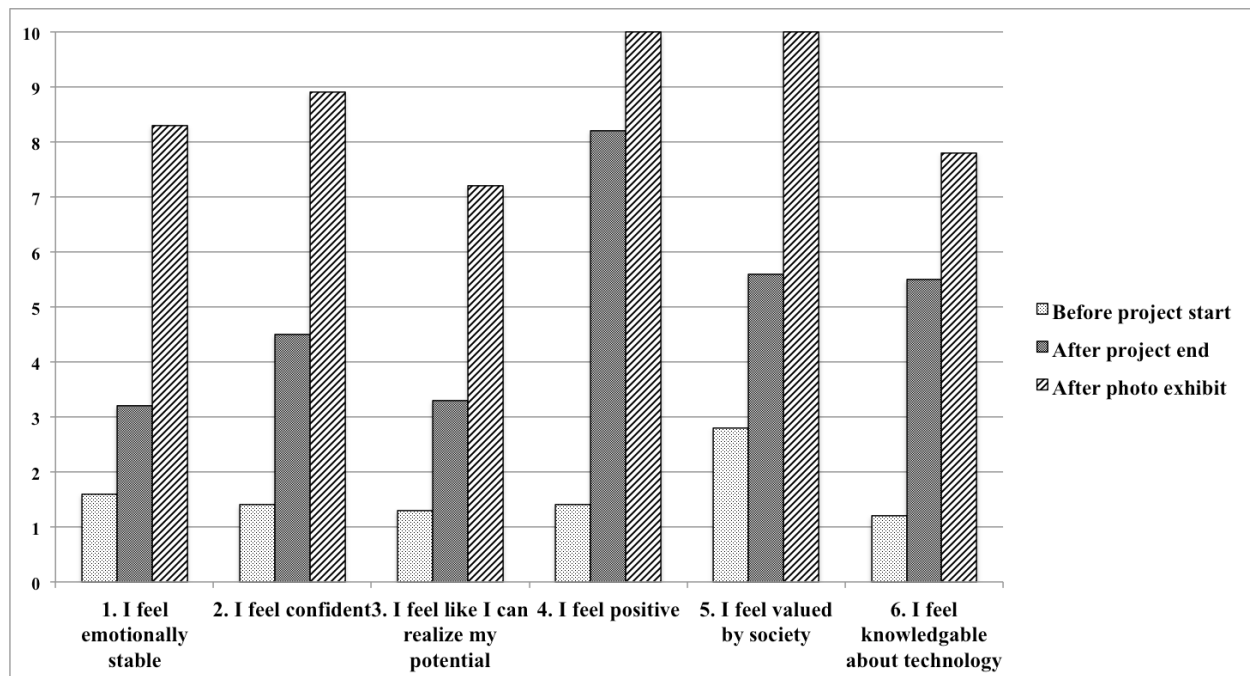
cognitive and imaginative,...collaborative and individually based,...and include...psychology alongside a more proactive reflective approach" (Cranton, 2009, p.458).

According to Dewey (1958), aesthetic elements are present in people's everyday lives in subtle ways, and these influence the psychology of humans at a deeper level. This typically goes unnoticed because it occurs at a subconscious level; even when one is conscious about it, it typically does not receive much attention. Through this project, the participating senior citizens had the opportunity to have an aesthetic experience in a thoughtful way.

Another member of the photography group, Lee Gyeha, shared: "Since I've been taking photographs, I've started seeing the world around me differently. I feel like I myself have been changing too. Now I don't take everything at face value—whether it's people, objects, or situations. I try harder to see what's behind the surface, and I realize I need to put in effort to get there. I've changed in the way I view things. Since I've been looking at the world through the camera's lens, I feel like I've become a more objective person." Efforts to see others' cultures and perspectives more objectively are necessary elements for seniors to engage with society as a central member rather than being isolated from society.

These participants' reflections are examples of transformative learning, as described by Cranton and Wright (2008). They demonstrate the critical self-reflection in which the seniors have engaged in order to adopt a more open perspective in viewing themselves and the world around them (Cranton and Wright, 2008).

Figure 1: Change in Participants' Attitudes



Note: N = 13. Responses were on a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 being Strong Disagree and 10 being Strong Agree. Reported values represent means across all respondents.

To examine the change in participants' attitudes, I conducted a survey before the beginning of the project, at the end of the project, and after the exhibit. The survey results illustrate that there was an improvement in participants' emotional stability, confidence, and self-esteem (Figure 1). Moreover, they were more motivated to realize their potential. Many were happy about having found something that they could continue to do as a hobby. They were also less likely to think that seniors were a useless burden to society. Instead, they felt that their children and the younger generation genuinely respected and recognized their contributions. It was evident that there were significant changes in attitudes among the participants, and that the project contributed to a positive experience for them. The aesthetic experiences gained from this project helped the senior citizen participants develop a new repertoire of feelings and ideas that contributed to their transformative learning (Broudy, 1987).

VIII. CONCLUSION

This project helped the participating seniors adopt a more positive attitude toward life. It also encouraged them to be more active participants in society. Furthermore, it was a transformative learning experience that provided them a variety of learning opportunities. As a result, it helped the participating seniors improve their emotional stability, confidence, and self-esteem, and it helped them realize their full potential.

Through this two-year project, the seniors interacted with their families, friends, and neighbors with photography as a novel medium. This helped the participants move away from the view that seniors are useless people with nothing productive to do. Instead, they gradually adopted a more positive outlook on life.

To provide opportunities for transformative learning, senior centers and other social institutions should plan and execute longer-term projects rather than focusing only on short-term programming. It is likely that this project would not have had the impact it had on seniors' confidence and self-esteem had it been conducted over a short period of time.

This contemporary community-based art practice was able to offer a transformative aesthetic experience to senior citizens of a rural community. As such, it may be possible for projects with a focus on transformative aesthetic experiences to contribute not only to individual growth and development but also to the growth and development of society. The hope is that this may help bring about a more abundant life for all.

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