

Chapter 20. *Tenemos cita con el arte*: visiting art museums with people living with Alzheimer's disease and their caregivers

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Abstract

GIMUPAI is a research group constituted by teachers and researchers of the Faculty of Fine Arts (Complutense University of Madrid) and the Department of Social Psychology and Anthropology (Salamanca University). In answering to the growing necessity of developing museum programs for people living with Alzheimer's disease, we have designed, implemented and evaluated a set of museum visits and workshops under the name “Tenemos cita con el arte”. This initiative is part of the Spanish state-funded research project entitled “Art education un museums and other cultural institutions as a tool for increasing the wellbeing of people affected with Alzheimer” (Ministerio de Educación-EDU2013-43253-R). With this program we aim at making the museum accessible to people with Alzheimer and their caregivers. In doing so, we analyze the difficulties that a group of this characteristics encounters. This text offers an in-depth view of the museum itineraries carried out during the visits to the Museo del Prado and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid. It includes information on the specific aims, methodology, contents, challenges and difficulties encountered while accompanying a group of people suffering from Alzheimer's disease and their caregivers to a museum setting.

Key words: Alzheimer, museum, education, art, itinerary.

Theoretical background

This project is framed in the pedagogical philosophy of Social Reconstructionism that emphasizes the addressing of social questions in a quest to create a better society. In this case, this project addresses the situation of people living with Alzheimer's disease and their caregivers. We

analyse the potential for improving their wellbeing while visiting art museums. Social Reconstructionism as a philosophy has been applied to many fields of study. In the case of this project two fields are involved mainly: museum education and psychology.

In the field of museum education we find a reference from the beginnings of the profession that describes the work of the educator (formerly called “docent”) not “as guidance, but companionship “(Gilman, 1912, p.82). This early idea of being sensitive to the visitor’s interests and needs rather than the museum’s discourse has inspired this project. Developing a conducive atmosphere in which there is a free exchange of ideas based on the works of art guides the experience. In terms of the purposes of the interaction with the artwork, we find in art appreciation the approach that informs this project best. Art appreciation is the knowledge and understanding of the universal and timeless qualities that identify all great art. The more you appreciate and understand the art of different eras, movements, styles and techniques, the better you can develop, evaluate, and improve your own work. The creative potential of the participants in this project is enhanced by this approach to art education.

The aim of this project is improving the wellbeing of the participants: people living with dementia and their caregivers. To that end, this project studies the psychological needs of the participants that take part in the activities. So as to do that, Kitwood’s (1997) people-centered approach to dementia provides the key concepts to take into account when understanding people with dementia’s psychological needs: attachment, comfort, identity, occupation, inclusion, and love.

Attachment and connections are concepts applied in this project to make the participants feel part of the learning community constituted when visiting the museum together. Inclusion is manifested when making sure that the participant feels part of the group. Occupation when going to the museum and making a personal creative object produce a sentiment of personal value and purpose in life. Being in front of a work of art and analysing it also encourages a reflection on the identity of each participant. The idea of comfort is present in this project when designing the itineraries so as to answer to the need of freedom to move and have a bond with others. Finally, the core idea that boosts the activity carried out in this project is the sentiment of love throughout the whole design, implementation and evaluation of the project. In the following sections, we describe the experience, results and discussion in detail.

Method / Description of the experience

The two-month program “Tenemos cita con el arte” has been developed through the elaboration of two “protocols”. The first one has been focused on the design and execution of guided and commented visits at Prado and Reina Sofía Museums. The two itineraries in the Prado Museum were dedicated to Velázquez and Goya respectively, while the two itineraries in Reina Sofía Museum were oriented to explain a group of modern artists from the 20th Century such as Picasso, Miró, Dalí or Juan Gris (1). These visits were designed in order to offer the participants a complete and deep experience with the artworks. This allowed them to have a wide and satisfactory vision of the artists included in the visit, their culture and ideas, as well as a personal experience with art pieces. Also the accessibility of the

places where the works were exhibited was taken into account so as to ensure the comfort of the participants.

From 5 to 6 artworks were selected in each visit. Each was discussed for ten or 15 minutes, making the tour last for approximately one hour and a half. Two educators had the main role in leading the conversation around the artworks. Each party consisted of two groups of five or six participants. However, there were four to five educators (depending on the availability) that acted as support by walking with the participants, taking part in the talks and creating more personalized dialogues between all the participants. The idea that these visits had a warm and friendly nature has been essential to get an enjoyable experience for both the people affected with Alzheimer and their caregivers. That is why we have worked in creating a likable and relaxing atmosphere that invited every participant to engage in creative and unique dialogue while expressing their personal opinions and experiences.

The second protocol of the project has consisted in designing and developing four workshops based on their corresponding visits in the museums. The duration of the workshops was also approximately one hour and a half. Each session started with a presentation of the artworks we visited the previous week in the museum to remember all together, both the artworks we saw and the conversations we had, the impressions we shared and the common experience at the museum. Once the presentation was done, the educators explained the participants how the artistic proposal they were going to do was, having always the images of the museum's visit as a central element. The artistic techniques that have been used in the workshops were mainly cyanotype and collages. The reason behind this choice is the suitability for developing their own creative work, making it

easier for them to maintain the attention on it and also allowing them to explain the process to the fellow participants.

During the workshops, the educators acted again as companions whose main goal was to create a good atmosphere and integrate all of the participants in the activity. All the participants created their own work, being able to make personal decisions based on their own opinions and tastes, but also having the possibility of sharing their experiences with the rest, producing a common involvement that emphasizes the collaborative character of creation.

Results

The experience of approaching art is always connected to emotions, memories and reflections. Art represents the perfect vehicle for dialogue and interaction with other people. Observing, commenting, and creating, encourage both intellectual and emotional experiences in everybody.

This program has been quite successful for all: caregivers, people living with dementia and educators. Connecting people with art in a cultural activity at a museum setting has been engaging and interesting to the whole group. This has motivated opinions, aesthetic appreciations, memories and personal experiences. The fact alone of visiting a museum in a shared experience with a loved one or companion has meant a turning point in the daily routine in the immense majority of the cases. As it was pointed out to us by the participants, this activity's value lies in that it works beyond the person's limitations and understands individuals as creative beings. Carrying out this activity with a family member or trusted person means

enjoying a normalized and cultural activity in which all participants have enjoyed observing, commenting and creating.

A conducive atmosphere and an open and respectful environment has been favoured. Implementing the itinerary at the museum in small groups has enhanced communication and interaction amongst the participants.

Contemplating the authentic works of art has given the participant the chance to develop the emotions that that involves, both to those who had already seen the pieces and those that saw them for the first time at the museum. The meaning of this encounter became stronger considering that these pieces are part of our collective memory.

For the family members the fact that they could enjoy a shared cultural activity has been highly valued. We had the chance to observe the support and empathy developed amongst the caregivers. We created a safe space for sharing the emotions involved in living with the disease.

All participants were grateful and showed satisfaction when finishing the activity. In the case of the museum visits, some participants decided to go on with the visit once the tour was over. It was expressed that the feeling of seeing the art pieces over and over again gave them joy and excitement to go on seeing other works of art in the following sessions.

During the workshops in which art making inspired by what had been seen at the museum was the purpose. The easy-going environment helped in having a joyful mood, sharing personal experiences, jokes and different views on the works of art. Many family members shared the process of creating the artwork. This produced situations in which all parts were involved in collaboration towards a common goal: the artwork itself.

The last session was the most important in assessing the results of the experience. Each participant explained and showed their creations to rest of the group for the recognition of the collective work. Participants valued the experience in general considering it a success. With enthusiasm and emotion it was pointed out that the fact that all participants could spend time with their family members and caregivers in an activity that all of them could enjoy and in which all of them had learnt new things, established relationships and tighten bonds with their family members and people of their trust.

Most of the participants expressed their wish of returning to the program in a future edition given that the experience was considered valuable and important for their mood and well-being.

Discussion

Due to the increasing ageing of the global population, the illness of Alzheimer and other kinds of dementia will have more and more importance in the social and health issues we will face in the future. Creating programs that help people with this disease and their caregivers to be integrated in the cultural life of their societies is a key part to help solving the problems of isolation they cope with in most cases. The “Tenemos Cita con el Arte” program offers them the possibility to participate in activities that not only help them to develop their creativity, giving value to their ideas, opinions and tastes but also make them part of a cultural heritage that belongs to all citizens.

The principal aim of these programs is to prevent the isolation of people with this disease and fight against the situation in which their illness means that they don't feel invited to participate in the cultural life.

During the activities, these participants enjoy talking with other people such as the caregivers and the educators. This allowed them to feel in a natural situation, fading their role of "patients" and being just participants of cultural activities of their community. The time they spend socializing and making activities has been demonstrated as beneficial for their state of mind diminishes the feeling of being segregated from the society (Ullán, 2012). That is why we believe in the relevance of the application of this kind of programs. Given the flexibility these programs have been created with, they can be applied in different situations and contexts using the particular cultural heritage and adapting the itineraries, visits and workshops.

Finally, based on our results and on other pieces of research about the same theme (Rosenberg, 2009, Kinney and Rentz, 2005, McGuigan, Legget, and Horsburgh 2015), our conclusion is that these projects can improve considerably the life of the people living with Alzheimer disease and make easier their inclusion in society and their enjoyment of the public cultural heritage.

Notes

List of artworks visited in the itineraries:

Prado Museum, tour 1:

1. *Las Meninas*. Velázquez, 1656
2. *Baltasar Carlos*. Velázquez, 1635

3. *The Spinners*. Velázquez, 1655 – 1660
4. *Apollo in the Forge of Vulcan*. Velázquez, 1630
5. *The Drinkers*. Velázquez, 1628 – 1629

Prado Museum, tour 2:

1. *The family of Carlos IV*. Goya, 1800
2. *The Clothed Maja*. Goya, 1800 – 1808
3. *The Naked Maja*. Goya, before 1800
4. *The Grape Harvest*. Goya, 1786
5. *The Kite*. Goya, 1777 – 1778
6. *The Parasol*. Goya, 1777

Reina Sofía Museum, tour 1:

1. *Girl at the Window*. Salvador Dalí, 1925
2. *Sailor with Guitar* (sculpture). Jacques Lipchitz, 1917
3. *Portrait of Josette Gris*. Juan Gris, 1916
4. *La bouteille d'anis*. Juan Gris, 1927
5. *Le moulin à café*. Juan Gris, 1920
6. *La fenêtre ouverte*. Juan Gris, 1921

Reina Sofía Museum, tour 2:

1. *Triadic Ballet*. Oskar Schlemmer, 1922
2. *Girondelle*. Miró, 1937
3. *Escargot, femme, fleur, étoile*. Miró, 1934
4. *Portrait*. Miró, 1938
5. *Tête de Femme (I, II, III, IV)*. Picasso, 1937
6. *Guernica*. Picasso, 1937

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