

1 Photography as a Transformative Aesthetic Experience for Rural 2 Seniors

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6 **Abstract**

7 This paper discusses a transformative aesthetic experience project that was carried out as one
8 potential way to approach some of the new issues that arise with an aging population. It
9 explores how contemporary community-based art practices may help seniors living in rural
10 areas adopt a positive and active approach toward life. Such activities may serve an important
11 role in the curriculum of senior centers in the future.

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14 **Index terms**— adult education, rural senior activity, art education, transformative learning, aesthetic
15 experience.

16 **1 Introduction**

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

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

31 This paper discusses a transformative aesthetic experience project that was carried out as one potential way
32 to approach some of the new issues that arise with an aging population. It explores how contemporary toward
33 life. Such activities may serve an important role in the curriculum of senior centers in the future.

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

38 The power of transformative learning may be even greater if it occurs through direct aesthetic experiences like
39 seniors taking photographs. ??ewey (1945) argues in favor of the importance of experiential learning, and suggests
40 that, unlike the traditional philosophy of the past that there is a strict distinction between everyday experiences
41 and aesthetic experiences, one should seek to live life at the intersection of everyday experiences and aesthetic
42 experiences. His ideas for the unity of life and art education present an opportunity to expand the horizons of post-
43 modernism contemporary education in a variety of directions. In particular, suggests that aesthetic experiences
44 are some of the most important experiences, which are comprised of intellectual, emotional, and practical

45 experiences. These are arguably the most important elements of any educational experience. Furthermore,
46 several scholars of art education and philosophy also highlight the importance of aesthetic experiences in terms
47 of both cognitive development and affective and imaginative development (Broudy, 1987; ??fland, 2002;Eisner,
48 2002;Gardner, 1983Gardner, , 1990;;Kokkos, 2011;Perkins, 1994).

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

53 2 II.

54 3 Statement of Purpose & Research Questions

55 The goal of this study was to investigate and critically observe the views of the elders on the transformative
56 learning process, and to explore the effects of contemporary community-based art practices A on seniors of
57 the age 65 or above. In addition, it sought to examine the process through which seniors engage in aesthetic
58 experiences and transformative learning, and how this affects their self-esteem and attitude toward life in general.

59 The following questions guided this study:

60 4 Research Methodology

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

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

70 Data were collected continuously over the period of two years, while seniors participated in different types
71 of activities. I incorporated data on the seniors' discussions while they were taking photos and participating in
72 exhibits. I also gathered data over the course of a month during which I asked seniors a variety of structured
73 and unstructured questions, to which they were free to respond in an open-ended way. The seniors' works and
74 the documentation of their experiences vis-à-vis the integrated project, the aesthetics of the projects, and their
75 reactions to social issues became rich data sources for this research. Feedback from the senior center employees,
76 neighbors, town hall employees, and family members on the seniors' artworks and photography were also valuable
77 sources of data.

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

81 IV.

82 5 Selection of Participants

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

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

97 V.

98 6 Photography as a Tool for Transformative Learning

99 Gene D. Cohen (2005) explains that there is a need for more research into the psychological growth and
100 development that takes place during the second half of one's life. Furthermore, he argues that there is a need
101 to better understand how positive changes may occur during the second half of one's life, and how it may be

102 possible to improve one's creative expression during this time. With this in mind, this project seeks to examine
103 how seniors may acquire new skills and new Volume XIV Issue VIII Version I Because most of the participating
104 seniors, all of whom lived in a village setting, did not own a camera, the first class was conducted using borrowed
105 cameras. Most seniors reported having never laid hands on a digital camera before this occasion. Without a
106 question, they were not familiar with how to turn the camera on or off, and they had no sense of where to locate
107 the viewfinder or how to take a photograph. We began with a lesson on how to turn the camera on or off. Next,
108 the seniors learned how to contain the target object within the viewfinder. As the youngest participant was 72
109 years old, many lessons had to be repeated, and the environment was quite chaotic. Although there were only
110 thirteen students with one instructor and two associate instructors, the classroom environment was cluttered and
111 there was genuine concern regarding whether it would even be a fruitful exercise to continue teaching photography
112 to these participating seniors. b) Weeks 2-8: Gradual progression from an attitude of impossibility to interest
113 During weeks 2 through 5, participants conveyed a feeling of frustration with regards to the learning. However,
114 during weeks 6 through 8, they began to demonstrate more interest and enthusiasm in learning photography.
115 When reflecting on the first 8 weeks of lessons altogether, it was apparent that even those who were struggling
116 the most at the beginning were gradually learning how to handle the camera. Each participant exhibited an
117 increasing level of interest in how to take photographs. Over the course of the 8 weeks, there were fewer instances
118 of participants asking irrelevant questions and taking the lesson off-topic. Several participants also acquired
119 their own cameras. Every week when we projected the participants' photographs on to the large screen in the
120 classroom, participants became more engaged in discussion and critique sessions. c) Instructor's departure to the
121 US At the end of the summer holidays when I (the primary instructor who was volunteering her time for free)
122 had to return to the US, we were faced with a problem of not being able to find an instructor who could take over
123 and continue the lessons. Because Goheung County is a rural environment that is situated far from any cities,
124 there was nobody in the vicinity who had studied photography. Furthermore, there was nobody willing to take
125 on this role in a volunteer capacity. The senior center stated that it could neither hire a photography teacher,
126 nor could it continue the photography class, citing budgetary limitations.

127 7 d) Demonstration of eagerness to learn and continue the 128 photography class

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

136 Even during the harvest when they are swamped with work, the participants made time to complete their
137 photography homework assignments. For example, one participant always carried his camera around with him on
138 the tractor and took photographs during the day. This kind of passion and dedication was not even imaginable
139 at the beginning of the project. e) Weeks 9-35: Distance learning Due to the seniors' passion and dedication,
140 I decided to continue teaching the course in any way possible. The only feasible idea was to use email and a
141 group blog to carry out an online education model. To begin, we created a group blog where participants could
142 upload their photos (<http://sajinteam.blogs.pot.kr>). While I was back in the US during the academic semester, I
143 continued assigning a weekly topic via email. The participants took topic-relevant photographs during the week
144 and uploaded the four best ones to the group blog, entitled the "Goheung Photography Group Blog." Afterwards,
145 I sent an email with my comments about each photo the entire group of participants. In this weekly email, I also
146 shared links of photographers' works from around the world. The participants were able to use the computers at
147 the senior center to view and learn from these professional works.

148 In addition, while I was in the US, Ms. Shin visited the participants at the senior center once a month and
149 conducted a discussion session. This helped keep the photography group together and active over an extended
150 period of time. When I returned to Korea during the winter vacation period and then again during the subsequent
151 summer vacation period, I continued conducting inperson classes with the participants at the Goheung senior
152 center. By the time 18 months had passed since the beginning of this project, these senior citizens became
153 quite advanced in their photography skills. At this point, it was possible for them to take meaningful photos in
154 ways that they intended. The seniors not only became active participants in the learning process, but they also
155 reflected upon themselves and their learning (Freire and Shor, 1987). Several participants voiced their feelings of
156 greater self-confidence and pride in their works. They also expressed their desires to continue to improve their
157 photography skills. In addition, they began to engage in reflection and critique to try to identify their weaknesses
158 and continue to learn. This was consistent with Mezirow's (2000) characterization of the path to transformative
159 learning.

160 8 g) Photo exhibit

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

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

176 This project was a vehicle for social change and helped the participating seniors gain new perceptions, engage
177 in critical thinking, and develop their creativity. Furthermore, its publicity in the local news incited new interest
178 in developing programs for the elderly and their continued learning. Several discussions were initiated about
179 the importance of long-term programs for senior citizens and various ways to engage scholars and artists as
180 volunteers as well. According to ??isner (1972), these types of arts activities may help seniors rediscover meaning
181 and develop their minds about the world. Expanding aesthetic experiences may help individuals overcome the
182 dehumanizing tendencies of modern society. Furthermore, it may help individuals develop the ability to solve
183 various problems that arise in a rapidly changing society.

184 9 VII.

185 10 Discussion

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

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

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

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

214 According to photography group member Lee Hyungjong:"Until now, I always just expected someone else to
215 take a photograph for me. I still can't believe that I am the one who can take photographs. It's amazing to
216 me that I can view a photograph that I took on a big TV monitor by connecting some cables. Whenever my
217 children and my grandchildren visit my home, we all sit around the TV in the livingroom and I show them the
218 photographs that I've been taking. We've become a closer family. I feel like I am more respected." This is an
219 example of seniors critically reflecting upon the transformation of their reality and life (Freire and Shor, 1987).
220 Photography group member Lee Yungdo said: "For the rest of my life, I won't stop taking photos. I'm starting

221 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
222 photographs. Every time I look into the viewfinder of the camera, it's like I am looking into my life." This suggests
223 that "transformative learning can be both cognitive and imaginative,?collaborative and individually based,?and
224 include?psychology alongside a more proactive reflective approach" ??Cranton, 2009, p.458).

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

230 Another member of the photography group, Lee Gyeha, shared: "Since I've been taking photographs, I've
231 started seeing the world around me differently. I feel like I myself have been changing too. Now I don't take
232 everything at face value-whether it's people, objects, or situations. I try harder to see what's behind the surface,
233 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
234 at the world through the camera's lens, I feel like I've become a more objective person." Efforts to see others'
235 cultures and perspectives more objectively are necessary elements for seniors to engage with society as a central
236 member rather than being isolated from society.

237 These participants' reflections are examples of transformative learning, as described by Cranton and Wright
238 (2008). They demonstrate the critical selfreflection in which the seniors have engaged in order to adopt a more
239 open perspective in viewing themselves and the world around them (Cranton and Wright, 2008). To examine
240 the change in participants' attitudes, I conducted a survey before the beginning of the project, at the end of
241 the project, and after the exhibit. The survey results illustrate that there was an improvement in participants'
242 emotional stability, confidence, and self-esteem (Figure 1). Moreover, they were more motivated to realize their
243 potential. Many were happy about having found something that they could continue to do as a hobby. They were
244 also less likely to think that seniors were a useless burden to society. Instead, they felt that their children and
245 the younger generation genuinely respected and recognized their contributions. It was evident that there were
246 significant changes in attitudes among the participants, and that the project contributed to a positive experience
247 for them. The aesthetic experiences gained from this project helped the senior citizen participants develop a new
248 repertoire of feelings and ideas that contributed to their transformative learning (Broudy, 1987).

249 11 VIII.

250 12 Conclusion

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

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

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

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

266 IX.



Figure 1:

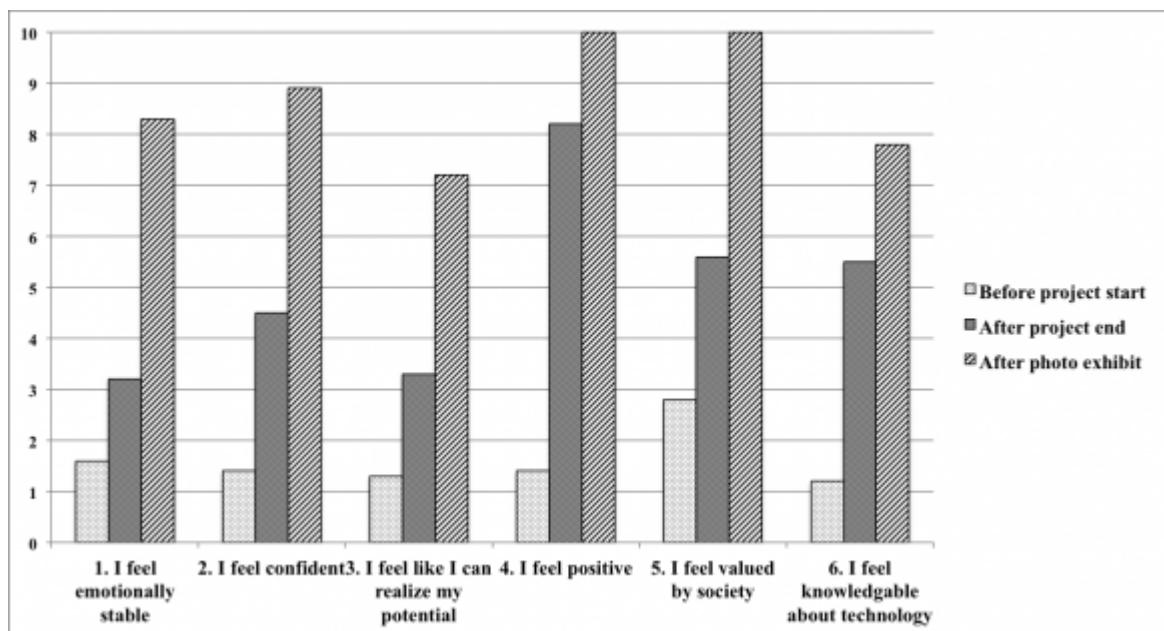


Figure 2:

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