

Capture the Moment: Art Therapy Practical Training with Older People who have Dementia

Raquel Chapin Stephenson and Eha Rüütel

This study was a component of the Creative Arts Therapy (CAT) Dementia Project of Estonia, which trained new creative arts therapists with the unique skills needed to work with older adults with various types of dementia. Through the students' experiential learning process, creative arts therapy was launched as a new and cost-effective mental health and social service for older adults with dementia in Tallinn, Estonia. This presentation describes the results of this participatory action research wherein the goal was to impart didactic knowledge needed to understand the theoretical aspects of working with those who have dementia, as well as to develop empathy and understanding of the client's unique experiences and apply it in practice, initiating change. Students engaged in a cyclical practice of trying, reflecting, reintegrating their learning, and ultimately developing an embodied experience of the theory and practice in working with older people with dementia. Overall, the CAT Dementia Project demonstrated the multifaceted benefits of co-creating knowledge through experiential learning. Students' difficult moments with their personal reactions and sensitivity to failure yielded opportunities for growth. The students developed new therapeutic skills, changed their perception and attitude toward aging, improved communication and pacing, increased cultural and situational sensitivity, and were supported as co-creators of knowledge. Additionally, the experiential training model of the CAT Dementia Project was effective in imparting practical skills in trainees and staff and promoting institutional change in program partners. These categories of learning were invaluable components in the well-rounded development of person-centered therapeutic skills.

Biography

Dr. Raquel Stephenson is Associate Professor and Program Coordinator of Lesley University's Art Therapy Program, and Faculty Fellow in Lesley's Institute for the Arts & Health. She was a Fulbright Scholar to Estonia, teaching at Tallinn University. Dr. Stephenson is a board certified, registered art therapist (ATR-BC) and a licensed creative arts therapist (LCAT). She serves on the National Advisory Council and Program Advisory Committee of Arts for the Aging, and the Advisory Council of the Art Therapy Outreach Center. She serves on the editorial board of the International Journal of Creativity and Human Development and has been an active member of AATA. Committed to improving the lives of older adults through the arts, Dr. Stephenson's clinical work and research focuses on the intersection of arts and aging.

Recent publications and conference presentations

Publications:

Stephenson, R.C. (Forthcoming, 2021). *Art and joy: Reclaiming elderhood*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Sajnani, N., Beardall, N., Stephenson, R.C., Estrella, K., Zarate, R., Socha, D., Butler, J. (2019). Navigating the transition to online education in the arts therapies. European Consortium of Arts Therapies Education 2017 Conference Proceedings.

Presentations:

2019: 'Assessment in expressive therapies: bridging clinical, creative, and cultural approaches' with Karen Estrella, Nancy Beardall and Rebecca Zarate, European Consortium for Art Therapies Education Conference, Alcalá de Henares, Spain.

2019: 'Assessment in expressive therapies: bridging clinical, creative, and cultural approaches' (invited presenter), with Mitchell Kossak, Karen Estrella, Nancy Beardall and

Rebecca Zarate, 2nd International Creative Arts Therapy and Education Summit. Beijing, China, March 2019.

2019: 'Empathic witnessing and dynamic interpretation of artwork' (invited presenter), 2nd International Creative Arts Therapy and Education Summit, Beijing, China, March 2019.