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# MULTILINGUAL ACADEMIC JOURNAL OF EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



## Explore Creative Process in Adult Learners

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### Abstract

Research on the creative process of an individual who is involved in creative action is underestimated. As a result, the purpose of this study is to use a phenomenological approach to explore, describe, and discover the subjective experience of creative action and to seek the essence of this phenomenon. A total of 10 participants were recruited from a southwestern private university in the U.S. In order to explore participants' perceptions of their creativity experience, they were asked to create a collage with a creative goal, for which they were given 20 minutes. A follow-up questionnaire with five open-ended questions was sent to the participants by email. According to participants' returned questionnaires, four broad themes emerged from the questionnaires: (a) Creative Potential: the idea that participants think of creativity; (b) Creative Process: participants' experiences through making the collage; (c) The Utility of Collage Activity for Adult Learners: the idea that participants perceive collage for other uses; and (d) Creativity and Learning: participants' perceptions of the relationship between creativity and learning. Even though we did not receive enough substantial responses from participants, they did provide diverse and unique voices with regard to the exercise, from past experiences to future suggestions.

**Keywords:** Phenomenological Approach, Creative Process, Collage-Making, Adult Learning.

### Introduction

With the influence of Guilford's (1950, 1956, 1959) early research on creativity (divergent thinking), the majority of creativity study is focusing on a quantitative perspective (Amabile, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Sternberg & Lubart, 1995) rather than a qualitative paradigm (e.g., Newton & Newton, 2009; Petocz, Reid, & Taylor, 2009). Further, there is scarce research related to creativity and creative thinking in adult education literature (Edelson, 1999; Hoggan, Simpson, & Stuckey, 2009). The common theme of a quantitative approach to creativity is grounded in the notion of creative products with two criteria: novelty and goodness (Amabile, 1982; Lubart, 1990; Sternberg, 2006), whereas the common topic of a qualitative approach is to investigate the eminent creators such as artists or scientists.

Research, however, on the creative process of an individual who is involved in creative action is underestimated. As a result, the purpose of this study is to use a phenomenological approach (Merriam, 2002) to explore, describe, and discover the subjective experience of creative action

and to seek the essence of this phenomenon. In creativity literature, collage activity is a good approach to investigate the creativity phenomenon (Hennessey, 2003; Hennessey & Amabile, 1987; Simpson, 2009). Accordingly, this investigation of the creative process in adult learners employed a collage activity as a vehicle to explore participants' inner feelings and experience of expressing creativity. Through the opportunity of involving creativity, the discourse after a creativity activity by a group of adults helps to discover their pleasure or pitfall in the process. By doing so, it is hoped to provide some useful insights for adult educators who are willing to facilitate creativity in the classroom.

### **Creative Process**

The classic model of the creative process was proposed by Wallas (1926) with four stages: preparation, incubation,

illumination, and verification. These four phases are overlapping: (a) preparation, individuals taking initial actions (e.g., searching, collecting, and listening) to confront the challenge, (b) incubation, creative insight taking hold which in turn leads to an "Aha!" moment, (c) illumination, individuals experiencing various possibilities and having a creativity leap via clear insights and intuition, and (d) verification, a sense-making phase to finalize the decision based on validity of the information (Dineen & Collins, 2005; Parker, 2005). Later, this conceptual model was extended to the implementation of Creative Problem Solving Model in an education arena (Meadow & Parnes, 1959; Meadow, Parnes, & Reese, 1959; Treffinger, Isaksen, & Firestien, 1983).

In Piaget's view, the creative process stems from play. Creative thinking is assimilation, which is the interaction between imagination and environment. During the process of accommodation, the creative product is manifested by this mental experimentation. The relationship between assimilation and accommodation is not linear but intertwined (Ayman-Nolley, S. (1999). Taylor (1974) views creative process as a transformation of the inputs into a new configuration, and followed by a divergence phase where the new information is developed toward an implementation phase of production. Russ (1998) proposed that the creative process includes cognitive, affective, and personality processes within an individual that contribute to a creative act. Torrance defined the process as "one of becoming sensitive to or aware of problems . . . bringing together available information . . . searching for solutions . . . and communicating the results" (Torrance & Myers, 1970, p. 22).

### **The Benefits of Creativity Development in Adults**

The majority of creativity literature centers on children or young adults with less research on the elderly (Goff, 1993; Taylor, 1974). Golf (1992) argues that creativity literature on older adults is from the perspective of personal traits and products of famous artists and other elites, which is not suitable for generalization. It is believed that the peak of creativity in most people is around the 30's and 40's, with productivity declining after 50s (Lindauer, 1998; Marsiske & Willis, 1998).

According to Dewey (1934), the participation of creative articulation is for self-expression. Maslow (1968) views the purpose of creativity as self-actualizing. This creative expression can stimulate an active learning process (Hoggan et al., 2009). Based on self-reports of aging

contemporary artists, Lindauer, Orwoll, and Kelley (1997) found creativity was the manifestation of continual learning and lifelong activity. The research results of Golf (1992, 1993) also supported the notion of lifelong creativity. With regard to artistic expression, the impact of aging was illustrated as a positive term, thanks to maturity of craft and knowledge, high motivation and priority, and positive inter- and intra-relationships (Lindauer et al., 1997). The peculiarity of creativity in lifelong learning practices is manifested in two tenets: problem solving strategies (external development) and self-realization in the learner (internal development) (Goff, 1992; Maslow, 1968; Marsiske & Willis, 1998). One study verified the relationship between creativity and life satisfaction of older adults and suggested the need for proper programs for these rapidly growing segments of the population (Goff, 1993). Following this line, in adult and continuing education, the attempt to bridge creativity and curriculum is a clearly imperative issue (Edelson, 1999; Simmons & Thompson, 2008). Most important, creativity development of adults is attractive to social and economic well-being as a whole (Taylor & Sacks, 2004).

### **Method**

This study employed a phenomenological approach with a structured, open-ended questionnaire to collect data. This methodology is most appropriate for the purpose of this study to gain understanding of perceptions of participants who share their subjective creativity experiences (Efinger, Maldonado, & McArdle, 2004; Knoche & Zamboanga, 2006; Krauss, 2005).

The focus of this study is to describe the essence of a creativity activity from the perspectives of those who have experienced it. Accordingly, the interaction between an individual and a creativity activity was uncovered. The purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2007) was utilized since the target group is adult learners.

### **Participants**

After the researchers gained Institution Review Board (IRB) approval, potential participants were selected through an invitational letter to students in graduate programs at the School of Education. A purposeful sample was chosen for their ages and learning experience. A total of 10 participants were recruited from a southwestern private university. Participants volunteered to be a part of the study by completing the questionnaire sent to them.

### **Data Collection and Processing**

Before conducting the research, an informed consent form was presented to obtain their permission. In order to explore participants' perceptions of their creativity experience, they were asked to create a collage with a creative goal, for which they were given 20 minutes. They finished the collage either in the library or the classroom. The instruction was given as follows,

You are invited to create a collage. You will be given a set of pre-cut construction paper shapes of various colors, a bottle of glue, and a blank white A3 paper. You will not be given a pair of scissors. Rather, you will use your hands to tear the colored papers and use the glue to complete the collage. The reason is that we want you to play with the material and have fun. The topic of the collage is "As an adult, how do you perceive the learning?" Please use your "imagination and creativity" to finish this activity. You will have 20 minutes to create your unique collage. Before you start, please complete the background information. Hope you enjoy this activity!

The main reason of this activity was to create a fun experience, use their imagination to play with the material, and transfer their abstract ideas into concrete art products. The instructor also provided salient instruction that encouraged participants to use their imagination and creativity to manifest their art works.

A follow-up questionnaire with five open-ended questions was sent to the participants by email. The main reason was to allow sufficient time for self-reflection and introspection. After the critical reflection, participants were asked to respond to the questionnaire and return it to the instructor within one week. This served as a vehicle to obtain more inside feelings from participants while involved in this activity. This method also gave participants more time to reflect on and write about their experience. The description from the explication of conscious experience was taken through phenomenological reduction in order to find emergent themes. The instruction was given to participants as follows:

“It is a pleasure to have you respond to this questionnaire with regard to your collage activity in the class. There are five questions to be completed. The purpose of the questions is to explore your feelings and experience while creating a collage. Please elaborate on your thoughts and provide more detailed responses. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the researcher.”

The five open-ended questions included:

1. How did you feel when you created the collage?
2. What is the creative part of your collage work?
3. How do you think this collage activity is related to learning?
4. How did you feel that creating a collage will help you express yourself?
5. What lessons did you learn from the collage activity?

### **Data Analysis**

The primary means of data collection were descriptions from the questionnaire to five open-ended questions. Previous related studies were also examined and the observation notes were documented while participants created the collage. In so doing, multiple sources of data will function as triangulation to maintain internal validity (Bowen, 2005; Merriam, 2002).

In terms of reliability, the member check was employed. After finishing the analysis, the report was sent to three participants to double check the document. They were asked to verify the content in order to ensure that the researcher captured the authentic meanings from participants. The benefits of member check are not only to confirm the results from the original source but also minimize the researchers' biases (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002).

Content analysis (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007) and Nvivo 9 software (2010) were utilized in data analysis. The software textual analysis of the questionnaire helped to identify and organize relevant ideas and quotations to support to generate the suitable categories. The coding process followed the suggestion provided by Creswell (2007), including five phases: (1) initially read through the text data in order to obtain a whole picture of the description; (2) divide the text into segments (sentences or paragraphs); (3) label the segments of data with 30-40 codes; (4) carefully examine codes for overlap and redundancy and then reduce codes to 20; (5) finally, collapse codes into 5-7 themes from a major idea in the database.

## Findings

According to students' returned questionnaires, there were short answers (three to five sentences for each question), lacking detailed and lengthy elaborating their thoughts. However, participants still provided some unique insights and experiences. Four broad themes emerged from the questionnaires: (a) Creative Potential: the idea that participants think of creativity; (b) Creative Process: participants' experiences through making the collage; (c) The Utility of Collage Activity for Adult Learners: the idea that participants perceive collage for other uses; and (d) Creativity and Learning: participants' perceptions of the relationship between creativity and learning.

### Creative Potential

With regard to participants' perceptions of creativity, several adult learners support the idea that everyone has creative capacity. For example, one participant said: "there is no limit to your creativity" and "the sky is the limit when it comes to creativity and also everybody expresses themselves differently." Another noted, "Creativity has no limits." One participant remarked his idea of creativity, "the word creativity varied with different meanings for different people." Then he mentioned several attributes including in creativity:

There are some meaning such as passion, fun, joy, intangible, unknown, new, expression of self, ability to stand alone, open, growth, flow, journey, ever present, recognizing that we are collaborators, part of creation, transcendence, release, surprise, discovery, inspiration, freedom, risk taking, and insight.

### Creative Process

When asked their experience of creating the collage, most people had positive feelings and enjoyed this creative process. As an example, one participant commented:

"I had a good time creating the collage.... It was a little difficult without any tools to create something more presentable, but I liked my end result.... The collage let me feel free to go in any direction I wanted."

Another participant wrote, "very freeing," "I got a lot of inspiration," and "It was very positive energy." In a similar tone, one said, "I felt relaxed. It helped me overcome a recent loss." Interestingly, only this participant chatted with the researcher while doing the collage. Other participants were very focused on their collage-making activity. One participant described his creative experience:

"I wanted to explore things that I played with in the process.... It is more about process than finished product.... It is important to enjoy the process....The creative process is a lot like life itself; you can't be worried about making mistakes."

Several participants expressed the same feelings about creating the collage, such as "fun and enjoyed doing it" or "it is nice to just to be able to play." Taken together, the common feelings of doing this activity are freeing, enjoyable, and relaxed. In addition, several people mentioned their past experience which affected their collages. One participant discussed this experience:

"In elementary school, I was very heavy into art and anything dealing with art. I draw pictures all the time when I was younger and my imagination was limitless.... The collage reminded me of those days.... The memories that I had from my childhood.... I still have the dreaming capacity just as I had as a child."

Another said, it is like “going back to kindergarten without rules.” One participant mentioned this collage was related to the educational issue in his country: “There could only be one explanation for the collage; steps in education, at least in my country mean the journey to the top. I just expressed myself in a way that our country may be reflected. In other words, I was inspired by events in the education sector; e.g. students not being able to finish up school. “

### **The Utility of Collage Activity for Adult learners**

Several participants indicated the usefulness of the collage activity. It seems they supported the idea of using collage in the classroom. For example, one recognized that: “Expression of one’s feelings through collage was also creative.... Collage itself is something different way of doing.... It requires creative thinking.... It creates an inner satisfaction expressing oneself in abstract work.... This is a creative pedagogy of teaching-learning.”

Another commented on the possible benefits for older adults: “The collage-making can be one of useful training for older people. It can help them to express what life experience they value.... The aging group can enjoy the collaborative feeling and the freedom to play and explore together, encouraging each other along the way.... I think collage-making can play an important role for older people.”

One participant also stated: “A ‘collage’ or any form of art talks better than a million words. It sends a visual message.... Using art is a great therapy and an excellent form of communication. I should use it more often.”

Other people mentioned the collage activity “is not limiting people’s imagination” and “stimulates your thinking and creativity.”

### **Creativity and Learning**

As a response to questions about this creative activity related to learning, several participants perceived a positive relationship between the collage-making activity and the learning experience. One participant pointed out:

“Learning involves doing, visualizing, hearing and so on, this collage activity is related to learning because one has to think, decide, and do the activity.”

Another wrote, “Collage activity is related to learning, because we can see learning.” One participant shared her perspective of the learning experience of this activity:

“Challenge at first, but the different colors helped in self-expression.... Everybody can learn something from somebody. Independent learning is possible. Words are not the only way to convey meaning when teaching. Learning happens even outside the classroom. There is no age limit in learning new material.”

Another participant commented: “Learning is somewhat intangible so actually having an object to create, touch, feel and see was very beneficial.... I know how I learn, but it was interesting to see on paper how I learn. One of the best parts of this program and this activity is learning about yourself and improving.”

This participant felt some kind of repercussion of collage activity and noted that “today (the day after the activity) I am still reflecting on the activity and how I arrived at putting a puzzle together.”

## Discussion

Findings of this study indicated four possible themes: creative potential, creative process, the utility of collage activity for adult learners, and creativity and learning. According to participants' responses, it seems that they believe everyone has creativity and uses and perceives it in different ways. For example, Sternberg (1985) found people's implicit theory of creativity involved seven perspectives: (a) seeing things in novel ways, (b) integration and intellectuality, (c) aesthetic taste and imagination, (d) decisional skill and flexibility, (e) intuition and acuteness of perception, (f) drive for accomplishment, and (g) inquisitiveness (p. 622). In addition, students of creativity tend to believe creativity is a universal capacity and even older adults have the chance to develop this ability through proper training and stimulus (Butler, 1967; Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2006; Torrance, 1977).

Some participants have noticed this collage-making activity is related to creative expression and creative thinking. This creative process leads to some positive feelings such as, happy, related, and free. Several scholars have identified the benefits of creativity on mental health, increasing self-confidence, and having a meaningful life (Cohen, 2001; Cropley, 1990; Fisher & Specht, 1999). For example, Mirowsky and Ross (2007) noted that “creative work may decrease depression, increase the sense of personal control, and improve cognitive function, thereby indirectly improving psychological health” (pp. 398-399).

Maslow (1968) coined the term “self-actualizing (SA) creativeness” (p. 137). He stressed “character logical qualities like boldness, courage, freedom, spontaneity, perspicuity, integration, self-acceptance, all of which make possible the kind of generalized SA creativeness, which expresses itself in the creative life, or the creative attitude, or the creative person” (p. 145). It is possible that when participants do the collage, they felt some kind of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) in this creating process. Through collage they could express themselves in different ways and to some extent it might be in the category of self-actualizing (SA) creativeness (Maslow, 1968). A participant remarked, “I was in charge of whatever was created and it was a product directly from myself to the world.” As Haanstra (1999) suggested, “self-expression was defined as giving vent in constructive forms to one's feelings, emotions, and thoughts at one's own level of development” (p. 38). Taken as a whole, the collage-making activity seems to help participants to express their feelings which might also be connected to a past experience. It might serve as a channel for self-reflection.

Finally, some participants also recognized the usefulness of collage by serving as a potential tool for learning. Simpson (2009) argued that collage is an art-based research tool in understanding personal transformative learning. Based on her interview of participants, she found several themes: (1) creators of the resilient spirit; (2) constructive conceptualizing; (3) crystallized spirituality link; (4) validating survivorship; and (5) symbols and the power of critical reflection. Additionally, Hoggan, Simpson, and Stuckey (2009) encourage adult educators employing different learning approaches to not only fit individual's needs but also facilitate a learning experience:



The importance of creative expression emerges from the assumption that there are multiple ways we can come to know and learn other than cognitive rationality. Because we learn and know in different ways, creative expression opens up the opportunity for us to understand a thought, idea or circumstance from a new perspective, which may facilitate a transformative experience. (p.7)

Therefore, based on findings of this current study, it is suggested adult educators bring other approaches to learning such as making a collage or similar methods into their classrooms. By doing so, it not only could fit different learning styles but also broaden the learning channels in order to explore possible learning outcomes from different paradigms.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

Upon reflection, it was believed that in using this method we could employ efficient ways of collecting data and expect that participants could provide detailed and lengthy answers. Researchers assumed that this data collection method would allow participants more time to answer the questions when it was more comfortable and convenient for them. However, the majority provided short and inadequate responses. It is possible that face-to-face dialogue between participants and researchers is still the participants' preference. In addition, as researchers, we need to respect and understand participants' many responsibilities and time constraints. They have very busy lives, some of them working full time and taking two or three courses.

Even though we did not receive enough substantial responses from participants, they did provide diverse and unique voices with regard to the exercise, from past experiences to future suggestions. This method of collecting data still has its merits for future researchers. The themes provide important information for ways to understand adult learners' perceptions of doing a creative activity. The findings provide confirmation of the value of collage-making or similar activities for the purpose of adult learning and the suggestion for integration of similar creativity learning opportunities in the adult classroom. We might reasonably conclude, at least for those students, that the creative activity could enhance how they express their feelings and learn from different perspectives or medias. A logical next step would be an investigation of other aspects of creativity, such as creative thinking, creative problem solving, intuition, imagination, and so forth. For future researchers, it is suggested that some kind of interviews be used or more participants be recruited for the purpose of obtaining more indepth descriptions. Most important, the creativity community should put more weight on the exploration of the qualitative perspective of understanding creativity.

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