

Centering Anti-Ableism in Creative Aging Programs

By Ellen Hirzy

Hyde Park Art Center's Collage Chicago program, Chicago, IL.



Conversations about social justice often overlook two systemic issues: ageism and ableism. More than [one in seven Americans are older than age 65 and two in five of those have some form of disability](#), but we perpetuate biases and behaviors that stigmatize both aging and disability.

"We're being ageist anytime we judge someone based on how old we think they are, and ableist when we judge them based on how we assume their minds or bodies function," says anti-ageism activist and writer [Ashton Applewhite](#). And ageism and ableism frequently overlap. "We're being ageist and ableist when we attribute capacity—or incapacity—to someone based on their age. And an ageist and ableist

culture gives us cover. That has to change."

Ableism is embedded in typical models of "positive," "successful," or "healthy" aging, which reinforce stereotypes of older adults with disabilities. "The preferred way of being old is to not be old at all, but rather to maintain some image of middle-age functionality and appearance," say gerontologists [Clara W. Berridge and Marty Martinson](#). This is an ageist and ableist way of thinking. There's nothing unusual or abnormal about living with the physical and cognitive changes that are unique to each individual and part of the natural, lifelong aging process. When we don't acknowledge this reality and

design for inclusivity in our programs and approaches, we set older adults up to fail. Berridge and Martinson suggest a different approach: "By acknowledging and valuing disability as part of the diverse experience of aging, we are better able to reveal the human potential of old age."

Creative aging programs in community arts education have the opportunity to work at the intersection of anti-ageism and anti-ableism. They can be anti-ageist because they focus on arts learning and skill building for older people. They take place in engaging, supportive environments where older adults are valued as active, capable learners and creators with talent, drive, and commitment. They

also can be anti-ableist because their approach to teaching and learning is asset based, not deficit based. Organizations and practitioners identify physical, perceptual, and logistical barriers to engagement and work to remove them.

These programs are leading a cultural shift toward greater understanding of anti-ageist practice, says **Nathan Majoros**, deputy director of Lifetime Arts, which partners with the National Guild in its [Catalyzing Creative Aging](#) initiative. They're also becoming more intentional about anti-ableism, access, and inclusion, "but there's still work to be done." The "healthy aging" frameworks that Berridge and Martinson describe inform many creative aging models, especially

those that describe program audiences as "active" older adults, and this kind of language leverages ableism. But once practitioners

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ASHTON APPLEWHITE

begin to think about anti-ableism, they see the physical and perceptual barriers to participation and focus

on how to remove them. "There's a lot of experimenting, but the work is intersectional," Majoros says. "Organizations can tackle both ageism and ableism together." Using an anti-ageist and anti-ableist lens, there's great potential for moving from intention to action.

Cynthia Edmondson's experience tells us what works for older adult artists with disabilities. At 79, she lives with multiple sclerosis. Art has been part of her life since childhood, but her time for creating art was limited during her working years. She began to paint again for the first time in several decades when she joined Healing Art, a program at Art League Houston designed for adults with physical disabilities and illness. "Painting again was scary at first,"



Art League Houston's Healing Art program, Houston, TX. Photo by Alex Barber.



Newark School of the Arts, Newark, NJ.

she says, but the program was “very accepting. I’ve just loved it.”

Edmondson uses a rollator to get around, and even though the class space at Healing Art can be a bit crowded, the program staff has figured out how to meet her needs. And as the fine motor skills in her dominant right hand declined, teaching artists helped her learn to paint with her left hand. She says “it has worked out fine”—a modest understatement.

Edmondson’s work has been shown regularly in Healing Art’s student exhibitions. She explores abstraction with some figural aspects, weaving themes from her varied life experiences into her paintings, which also show her interest experimenting with texture. Edmondson says she

especially values the atmosphere of acceptance and the supportive community of peers at Healing Art. Teaching artists are flexible, adapting their approaches to suit varied individual needs and creative interests. Students range from beginners to artists with considerable training and experience, but they respect each other’s artistic practice. “I’ve found a group I can relate to and a connection to other life experiences. We know that we’re all dealing with long-term health issues, but we rarely talk about that.” Her advice: Select the right teaching artists, create a welcoming, nonjudgmental culture, and focus on learning and making art.

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL ANTI-ABLEIST

WORK IN A COMMUNITY ARTS EDUCATION ORGANIZATION?

Systemic commitment to inclusion

Disability justice, including inclusion of older adults with varying abilities, is central to the mission. It’s not just an education program, but an organizational value that’s based on a deep dive into why inclusion is essential. Evaluation shows that older adults see the transformative power of learning and the joy of acquiring new skills. But without the underlying philosophical drive, Majoros says, “organizations and teaching artists don’t see the value in continuing the work.”

An active voice for older adults

Older adults with disabilities have a strong sense of ownership because



Cerámica: Cuentos Para Las Generaciones/Ceramics: Stories for the Ages at Fleisher Art Memorial, Philadelphia, PA. Photo by Dominic Mercier.

they are consistently at the table when decisions are made. The staff regularly engages them in program design, planning, and implementation and consults them when developing inclusive, anti-ageist and anti-ableist practices. Assessment is built into program design so that program participants have opportunities to report what works, what doesn't work, and how the organization and teaching artists can better meet their needs.

Willingness to acknowledge and confront implicit bias

The starting point for anti-ageist and anti-ableist work—as with any social justice work—is to address our own prejudices as individuals. “From childhood on, we internalize messages about how awful it is to

grow old, and how awful it is to have a disability,” Applewhite says. We hold negative and limiting views even though we can see older people all around us who defy the myths and stereotypes. Older people are not all alike. Dismantling those views is necessary, and it's sometimes difficult. A good resource is Applewhite's [“Who Me. Ageist? How to Start a Consciousness-Raising Group.”](#)

The capacity to find and remove physical and perceptual barriers

Principles of universal design are incorporated into both the [physical environment](#) and instructional practices. Learners need an accessible space as well as methods and materials that meet individual needs, being mindful that disabilities

like hearing and vision impairment can be invisible. [The organization's website and registration materials](#) describe clearly what accommodations have already been made and explain where to go to make an individual request. “We notice that older adults don't always want to advocate for themselves,” Majoros says. Inviting them to have an active voice and a formal engagement in program design will help teaching artists identify barriers to learning and make adjustments.

Perceptual barriers are a more complex, ongoing issue, and the arts and cultural sector is justifiably being held accountable for its failure to address it. Barriers are based not just on age and disability, but on race, ethnicity, gender, education, class,

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income, distance and transportation, self-perception, and more. Older adults with disabilities may ask themselves, "Is this program for me? Will I feel welcome?" Using anti-ableist [language](#) and imagery is a good way to start. Though there's no one-size-fits-all approach, an organization that's committed to social justice work will invest in the work.

Teaching artists committed to older adult learners

"Teaching artists are part of the magic of community arts education, and this work in particular," Majoros says. "Great teaching artists are always flexible about adapting to who's in the room. They know how to address each person as an individual and honor what their learning looks like." Those with an interest in older adult learners are well prepared for a wide range of physical and cognitive abilities. If the teaching artist happens to be an older adult, "there's something especially potent about that interaction." Effective teaching always depends on clear communication up front between program staff and teaching artists about what they can accommodate and what is beyond their capacity.

Partnerships with organizations that serve older adults

The best of these organizations know how to serve older adults at all ability levels with respect and dignity. Partnering with the right provider can give a community arts education organization a head start on serving this constituency. An effective collaboration is based on sound research and careful decision making to confirm that the partner's values and practices are consistent with those of the organization.

Beyond our own organizations and creative aging programs, there's a broader purpose to anti-ageism and anti-ableism. Gerontologists Berridge and Martinson believe that if we don't acknowledge disability as a natural part of the aging experience, we set older adults up to fail. By extension, we also set the creative aging movement up to fail. And by expanding our view to work at the intersections of ageism, ableism, racism, and gender, we can challenge fundamental stigmas and biases as part of a wider collective activism. "It's wrong to equate aging with disability," Applewhite says. "All 'isms' depend on each other, and they're all rooted in ignorance. . . . As with all forms of oppression, we need to acknowledge and embrace differences."

A text-only version of this article is available in the Guild's online Resource Center at <https://nationalguild.org/resources>

Ellen Hirzy has written extensively for GuildNotes on creative aging, board engagement, creative youth development, and other topics. She relishes every opportunity to push back against ageist biases and stereotypes.

RESOURCES ON AGEISM AND ABLEISM

On the ableism embedded in "successful aging"

Still Kicking: Confronting Ageism and Ableism in the Wake of Covid, Ashton Applewhite (The Gifts of Your Third Act series, Third Act Quest, 2021)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1RbbadvHto>

Valuing Old Age Without Leveraging Ableism, Clara W. Berridge and Marty Martinson <https://depts.washington.edu/uwmedptn/wp-content/uploads/Valuing-Old-Age-Without-Leveraging-Ableism-Feb-2019.pdf>

Why It's Just Fine to Fail at "Successful Aging," Ashton Applewhite <https://thischairrocks.com/2018/02/01/why-its-just-fine-to-fail-at-successful-aging/>

Resource lists and clearinghouses

Accessibility Resources, National Arts and Disability Center, UCLA <https://www.semel.ucla.edu/nadc/accessibility-resources>

Creative Aging Resource, Lifetime Arts <https://creativeagingresource.org/>

Inclusive Arts Vermont, resources on engaging people of all abilities in the arts <https://www.inclusiveartsvermont.org/resources/>

Old School Anti-Ageism Clearinghouse <https://oldschool.info/>