

主題論文

Life storytelling as a way to empower older adults in a rural area in Taiwan

(透過生命故事敘說促進鄉村高齡者增能之研究)

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Abstract

Personal stories were obtained from seven Taiwanese elders, living in the country, through narrative inquiry. Narrations from these elders were analyzed to investigate how to examine the purpose of life and recollect the value of their lives through telling stories of themselves. Through observation and interviews, the present study resulted in the findings below.

1. The collective experience of storytelling is a reconstruction of history;
2. Story telling is a process of self-confirmation and healing;
3. The elders changes through story-telling;
4. Art works and rhythmic body movements is an efficient way for elder education;
5. The elders find happiness through story-telling;
6. Through story-telling in the Living History Arts these elders refreshed

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the society with the image of being the vitality and reservoir of communities, schools, and social cultures.

Introduction

Since 1993 Taiwan has become an aged society. As of October, 2009, the population of elders has risen to 2,440,507 persons, accounting for 10.57% of the Taiwanese population. Although it is slower for Taiwan to become an aged society compared to other developed countries, the sudden drop of the birth rate makes the aging rate of Taiwan much more rapid than those countries. For example, it took France almost a century to double their percentage of elders from 7% to 14%. In Taiwan, however, it only took twenty five years(CEPD, 2006).

Aging issues had been considered by Taiwan's government twenty years ago, along with laws that responded to these issues. Living, health care, financial support, and annual payment have already been included in the Senior Citizen Welfare Act since 1980. The release of the White Paper on Elder Welfare in 2003 announced the emphasis on elders' education, recreation, and social participation of Taiwan government. A step was further taken in November, 2006 with the proposal of White Paper on Elder Educational Policy. It emphasized lifelong learning, happiness and health care, independence and dignity, and participation in the society. Along with the proposal, 11 plans focusing on the creativity and variety of learning were also proposed.

However, most of the courses offered by institutions of elder education are about crafts. Furthermore, the participants are highly

redundant and limited to those living in the city or with higher socio-economic status. Thus, how to expand the variety of course topics and the population of participants becomes a priority.

To make a contribution in this respect, the Elder Education Center of National Chung Cheng University, as both the trainer of elder educators and promoter of Active Aging Learning Program, cooperated with Shinkong Life Foundation to promote Living History Art Program. This program, having been promoted in the United States, was introduced to Taiwan by Shinkong Life Foundation from Elders Share the Arts(ESTA) in New York.

Since its founding in 1979, Elders Share the Arts has been dedicated to fostering an understanding of the vital relationship between creative expression and healthy aging, and to developing programs that build on this understanding. The program is called "Living History Arts"-a synthesis of oral history and the creative arts that engages older adults in a process of drawing on their memories and re-creating them into literary, visual, or dramatic presentations.

One of the plans in the program called for trained elders to be volunteers of story-telling through a story-telling training program. These elder volunteers were then invited to the elementary schools near their communities to share stories about their lives with students. The goal of this plan is to enrich the knowledge of history, society, and culture for our next generation who can inherit the wisdom and life experience of the elders.

As a Chinese saying goes, having an elder at home is like owning a

treasure. The wisdom is accessible through telling and listening to stories(Kenyon, 2003). The present study focused on how the elders are able to examine the meaning of life to them and recollect the value of their own.

The Importance of Storytelling

Maguire(1998) said, “We are all made of stories. They are as fundamental to our soul and intellect as flesh, bone and blood are to our bodies”(p.131). Reminiscence is an activity engaged in by people of all ages but in a heightened way by older adults-as an essential part of healthy aging(Butler, 1975). Telling stories, and repeating those that hold particular significance, is a part of the creative process of achieving psychological integration, a process rooted in the discovery and passing on of one’s legacy(Zablotny, 2006).

According to Neuhauser, “Stories are effective as educational tools because they are believable, rememberable and entertaining”(cited in Rossiter, 2002, p.1). By sharing their stories, they share a piece of themselves and find meaning in their lives. Kenyon(2003) also mentioned that storytelling and story listening constitute the process by which the people create and discover the personal identity as human beings. The process of viewing a life as a story does not only involve ideas or cognitive aspects of human nature. It also involves emotions and action or behavior (Kenyon, 2003).

Storytelling is also a way to successful aging, especially with the art-making process. The art-making process is creative, with the

potential to evoke a multitude of emotions and memories. It can serve as a visual link by which the individual may explore past and present experiences—a powerful tool that assists an older adult with reviewing his or her life.

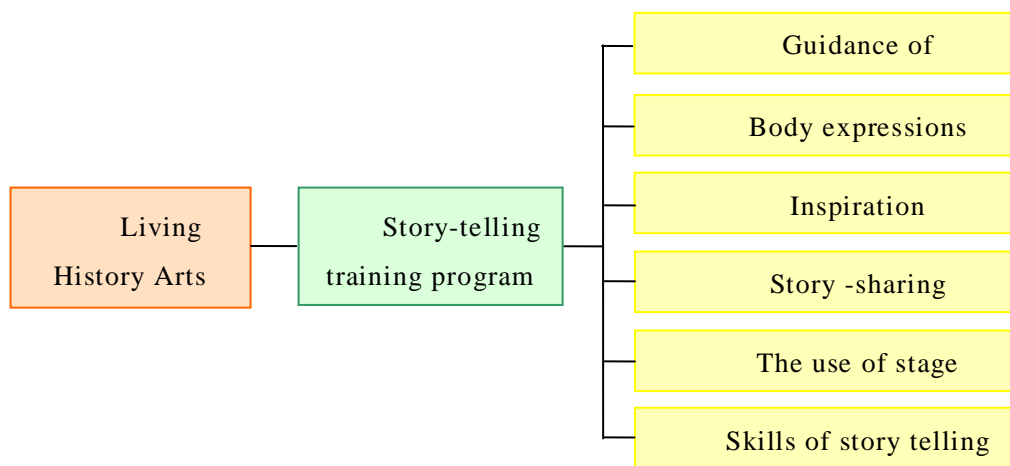
Moreover, the program is conducted in a community which is conducive to aging in place. Rowe and Kahn(1999) pointed out that successful aging includes a low risk of disease and disease-related disability, a light level of physical and mental functioning, and a continuing active engagement with life. Snyder(2005) said these characteristics should be experienced within a community of care; otherwise, it is a hollow victory devoid of the connection that is so life-giving. One way to establish community care is through the self-disclosing act of storytelling (Snyder, 2005).

The National Center for Creative Aging(NCCA) in the USA is dedicated to fostering an understanding of the vital relationship between creative expression and the quality of life of older people. NCCA surveyed elders who participated in the Living History Arts on body health, mental health and social functions. Elders were found to be healthier, go to hospital less often, use less medication, and show fewer senses of depression and loneliness(Cohen, 2005). Thus, the creative aspect of story-telling is like a tool for elders to face the aging of their physical functions in an innovative way (Perlstein, 1999).

The Features of the Program

The program facilitated storytelling based on elders’ memories and experiences and was conducted in a Community Care Center for Elders in Chia-Yi, the southern part of Taiwan. Workshops met once a week and lasted for 10 weeks from September to October in 2008. The programs aimed to transform memories and life experiences into plays, journals, poetry, photography, and visual art, including collage, painting, and mural projects. Twenty elders were recruited during the first two weeks, but only ten elders attended the workshops continuously. After the 10-week workshop, the 10 elders went to the elementary school to share their life stories with the second and third grade students. Students and elders engaged in a process of exploring each other's stories and cultural backgrounds and of discovering commonalities across age and culture.

The training program is as figure 1.



(Before the semester begins)

Figure 1

The content of the storytelling training program

Methods

This research utilized a narrative study method. Data were collected from elders while they were talking about their stories in the workshop. Also, seven participants were interviewed after they went to the elementary school to share their life stories.

Table 1

The Data of seven participants

	Age	Gender	Educational Level
Grandma Buffalo	73	F	Illiterate
Grandma Pineapple	70	F	Elementary school
Grandma Sandbags	72	F	Illiterate
Grandma Song-singing	70	F	Elementary school
Grandma Wisdom	81	F	Illiterate
Grandma Sugar Cane	75	F	Illiterate
Grandpa Japanese	81	M	Junior High School

Results

Preliminary results from the interviews are as follows:

1. The collective experience of storytelling is a reconstruction of history.

All of the elder participants experienced World War II and Japanese colonization. Thus their stories reflected their life experience at that period of time. For example, Grandma "Buffalo" mentioned the experience of watching buffalos and hiding from air attacks. "Air attacks were really noisy. My mom had us hide in a shelter, with six or seven other kids. She was brave that she had to leave the shelter to cook for us. She was really brave. Several places around Minghsiung were

completely blown up with numerous anonymous corpses. My mom knows exactly where these places are." Grandma "Sugar Cane" has six children and was in poverty then. She had no choice but leaving her family and accepting a job of paring sugar canes in Japan to make a living. She was thus labeled as "mean mother" and felt guilty about it.

Grandpa "Japanese" received Japanese education, thus is able to write and read Japanese. Because of poverty, he was not able to pursue further education after graduating from elementary school. Luckily, he grabbed a chance to attend Japanese Air Force Academy after working hard. He was responsible for checking and maintaining equipment in a Japanese air force base. He was amazed by the design and technology the aircrafts of Japan and Germany showed.

These elders all lived in the same village and were familiar with each other. However, they had no chance to share their life experience. Through story-telling, their stories were linked together and interacted with each other. Their stories also illustrated history to the elementary students. As Flood and Phillips(2007) pointed out, retrospection of life is a process bringing knowledge and sensitivity. It also creates brand new and meaningful linkages, properties or elements, thus producing new experiences that one may never have had.

Meanwhile, lives of different people were connected and became historical to one another through story-telling and retrospection. Although individual experiences seem to be idiosyncratic and independent, we may realize that what the stories say is not about lives of individuals but of many different generations, if we try to understand

these experiences from a different perspective (Manheimer, 1999).

2. Story telling is a process of self-confirmation and healing.

Life was difficult, poverty and illiteracy was a general phenomenon in the generation of these elders. They had no chance of attending school but had to work for living. Grandma “Sugar Cane” choked with sobs when talking about her experience of paring sugar canes in Japan.

She said: “I stayed there for four months, and I cried, and cried. My child was still little, but I had to leave him to Japan to make a living. I pared sugar canes and my hands became so swelled that I couldn’t even take a bowl or dry a towel with my hand. Oh, I really cried a lot.”

These elders worked from childhood to their elderhood. Grandma “Wisdom” said: “My family was poor and living in an outlying area. We were even poorer than general, so I never went to school. I worked as a buffalo-dragger since I was seven or eight. I learned how to weed, plant sweet potatoes and sugar canes in [my] teens. Life was really difficult then.”

Grandma “Buffalo” also said: “When I was a buffalo-watcher, I fell down from its back all the time. It always tried to attack me with its horns, so I fell down all the time. I always hid below the buffalos during air attacks. I was stupid that I hid close to its hoofs, so I burst into crying when kicked by a buffalo.”

These elders were actually retrospecting their life when talking about experiences in their childhood through painting or narration. Experiences that have been long forgotten or cannot be forgotten were

recalled when the elders talked about stories of their own. This is a way of healing(Perlstein, 1999). Once they are able to tell stories of their own, they are able to neutralize difficult moments through talking publicly and self-expressing.

3. The elders changes through story-telling.

It is easier to tell stories to only one person or to acquaintances than tell stories to kids in a different generation. For these elders, this was a brand new and challenging experience. In the beginning, elders made responses like “I don’t really know how to tell stories; I think I’m not smart enough.”(by Grandma “Buffalo”), “I’m stupid”(By Grandma “Song-Singing”), “You always taught us how to dance and paint, but I can’t even master painting. I can’t paint. This won’t get anywhere.”, or “I felt awkward to hold a pen. I’d rather get my hoe, it’s much more comfortable.”

A possible explanation is that most of them did not attend school in childhood, so they are low in self-efficacy and do not consider themselves as capable. Additionally, most of the events held by community-caring institutions focus on activities like singing and dancing instead of those with an emphasis on learning to express one’s self. Thus, it is really a challenge for them. Grandma “Sugar Cane” said: “I was quite scared in the beginning.”

However, there are also positive responses like the one from Grandma “Pineapple”: “I became familiarized after many times of practice. I learned how to express my points; this is the key.”

When telling stories in elementary schools, the elders’ general

concern was whether kids would be willing to cooperate. Fortunately several elders figured out their own way to keep the kids' focus. For example, when Grandma "Sandbags" told stories for the first time, the kids' focus was on the sandbags she brought, instead of the nursery rhymes she intended to teach, so she said: "Maybe we shouldn't play with sandbags first; we should read aloud the rhymes instead."

Grandma "Wisdom" brought candies during her second visit. She awarded the kids with candies if they listened carefully.

By observing how the elders told stories, it became clear that there were some changes happening. They were less skilled in the beginning and had lack of confidence, but they tried and thought about strategies. Finally, the strategies worked. It is evident that story-telling makes these elders think in different ways, express themselves, and consider their life experience as a possibility of expanding and discovering themselves.

4. Art works and rhythmic body movements is an efficient way for elder education.

NCCA pointed out that creative expression is important for older people of all cultures and ethnic backgrounds, regardless of economic status, age, or level of physical, emotional, or cognitive functioning. Similar findings were found in the present study. Learning experiences of these elders were limited to learning to read. Grandma "Sandbags" said: "Although pens are not heavy, I trembled when writing and felt more awkward to hold a pen than hold a hoe." In the beginning, these elders usually claimed that there is not much to say about them. But through acting, painting, writing poems, gatherings, and presentations,

the program provided the elders a chance to initiate, develop their ability to share things that happened in their life or they experienced. Furthermore, the story-telling of elders also brought the kids plenty of stories about lives. As Flood and Phillips(2007) point out, the potential of the elders can be inspired through a retrospective review of life, activities of problem-solving, team exercises, creation of art works, and writing poems or diary. These activities are influential at physical, psychological, and social levels of elderhood.

5. The elders find happiness through story-telling.

Although the elders may not be able to describe their changes in words, all of them learned the skills of expressing themselves with sensation and body after several sessions of training. They also learned how to express and discover themselves in creative ways. Also, after participating in the training and story-telling events, all the elders considered story-telling as a joyful experience and felt less likely that they would have Alzheimer's disease.

Grandma "Pineapple" said: "It's interesting to tell stories to students. It makes me think with my brain in order to exchange knowledge with others. I feel that I will hardly get Alzheimer's disease." Grandma "Sandbags" said: "My original purpose is precisely to exchange knowledge with other elders and you youngsters. It's fun to have all these people together to exchange knowledge."

Meanwhile, story-telling makes these elders gather together in an open art creation program to see, discuss, share, think, and appreciate

each other. As Perlstein(1999) suggests, these kinds of programs encourage more elders who are living alone or staying at home. They not only become less isolated but prove to society that they are actually healthy.

6. Through story-telling in the Living History Arts these elders refreshed the society with the image of being the vitality and reservoir of communities, schools, and social cultures.

By overcoming stage fright, these elders adopted whatever ways and actions were possible to prove that they are not dependent and useless. They were energetic and willing to learn. During the training process, they seemed to have endless creativity and brilliant ideas. For example, during story-telling training, they needed to learn how to control their facial and linguistic expressions, including how to tell an attractive story or how to express their idea confidently in public. They kept absorbing, learning, and finally went to school to tell stories of their own. Without such activities, the history and culture of the society in the past cannot be preserved. The elders thus not only contributed to manpower, but also previous knowledge, culture, and history, allowing us to find anchor points between the present and past of Taiwanese society. Consequently, being creative, brave, diligent became the image they projected and makes the roleless and dependent image inapplicable to them. Instead, they are the vitality and reservoir of the community, school, and shaping of social culture.

Conclusions

The project director, Marsha Gildin, of Living history Art once visited Taiwan and said: “Each elder is a library, so every time an elder leaves us, it’s like burning down a library.”(18 October 2008) This utterance explains the importance of Living history art. Holding activities like this is harder than expected, but it also brings a great sense of accomplishment. The first meeting with the elders was in September. That day, sun shined as if it were still in summer, but the wind sent messages of autumn. The same season now calls to mind the activities during the last year. Different activities brought different feelings, but the most touching part is to see the elders become positive to themselves. A lot of times they said: “It’s heavier to hold a pen than a hoe.” For those who had no chance to attend school but devoted themselves to planting or left their family to go abroad, to have a stage and share their own life experience with kids in campus is not something expected. Shy and hesitant they were in the beginning, but confident and positive they became at the end. From seeing each other tell stories vividly and vitally, they were empowered themselves. More and more stories will be definitely coming up.

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