Art & Alzheimer’s: A Study on The Museum of Modern Art’s Innovative Programming

Molly Noyed

Michigan State University

Abstract

The Museum of Modern Art, located in New York City, is a leader in innovative programming for an otherwise untapped audience: adults with dementia. MoMA’s unique offerings for adults with early-stage Alzheimer’s disease provides a safe space for this demographic to continue their learning, during a time when what was learned before may be slipping away. Meet Me at MoMA, established in 2007, is the museum’s flagship offering for such adults. Meet Me provides opportunities for participants to partake in monthly interactive gallery explorations with their caretakers (often significant others) and/or their families. Research suggests that this unique collection of adult learners experience emotional improvements through participating in this monthly program. *Meet Me: Making Art Accessible to People with Dementia*, the source from which a bulk of my information derives, provides an incredible wealth of information on this programming. Through my research and learnings from this course, I will acknowledge the most apropos theories, models, and perspectives for the innovative offerings that the Museum of Modern Art provides for this population of adult learners.

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The Museum of Modern Art’s innovative program Meet Me at MoMA taps into a largely excluded audience of adult learners: those with early-stage Alzheimer’s disease. Alzheimer’s, named after the German physician Alois Alzheimer (who first described the disease), received its name after its original description in 1906. Alzheimer’s disease is one of many forms of dementia, an overarching term for a group of brain disorders. Alzheimer’s disease is the most common form of dementia, accounting for between 50 to 70% of all dementia diagnoses. (Humble, McGee, Parsa, & Rosenberg, 2009, p.12). The disease has numerous adverse affects on normal cognitive functions. Some of those hindrances are as follows: trouble learning and recalling new information; issues with abilities to write, speak, or understand words (written or spoken); challenges with visuospatial (sic) function; and executive function i.e. ability to plan, reason, focus on a task, problem solve, etc. (Humble et al., 2009, p.12).

The Meet Me at MoMA program gives a safe space to adults with early-stage Alzheimer’s disease and their caretakers, in which they may interact with artworks in meaningful ways. One Tuesday a month, the museum is open especially for this group. The groups themselves can total up to about sixteen: eight adults with Alzheimer’s and their respective caretakers; up to six groups circulate through the galleries simultaneously (Epstein & Mittelman, 2008, p.88). The educators lead tours that last about an hour and a half, allowing for fifteen to twenty minutes at five different artworks. As Epstein & Mittleman (2008) state in their research, “Several discussion questions are posed to engage participants in observing, describing, interpreting, and connecting to the works and to each other.”

Intellectually, it is likely that most of those who participate in this program visited museums prior to their diagnosis. In research performed by New York University’s (NYU) Center of Excellence for Brain Aging and Dementia, a 2008 survey showed that out of 74 participants (adults with dementia and their caregivers), 86.5% had college degrees and 51.4% had graduate degrees. That being said, as dementia can cause an inability to recall memories, it is possible that intellect that can be expressed verbally may be limited in comparison to earlier years. Yet—that intellect is likely still intact, just more challenging to remember and recite. Richard Taylor, Ph.D., the author of *Alzheimer’s from the Inside Out*, has an apropos insight on this matter. Taylor says:

Frankly, I think there’s a very paternalistic attitude with a lot of institutions; you know, “Isn’t it amazing that somebody with Alzheimer’s can paint? Oh, there’s still something left, isn’t that amazing,” as opposed to it was always there and has never left. (Humble et al., 2009, p.67)

Taylor’s point here (always there, never left) holds truth: because he (as one might surmise from the title of his book) has Alzheimer’s himself. His firsthand experience with this disease makes his interview with the MoMA an asset to my understanding of this perspective. Taylor also states, on the point of intelligence:

It’s a myth that people in an IQ sense get dumber as they get Alzheimer’s. It [is] a myth that they can’t understand, but it’s a reality that they forget quickly [and] recall things in different ways than they […] learned them [and] they may not recall them accurately. (Humble et al., 2009, p.66)

The reprocessing that Taylor is alluding to makes recalling information a complex process, since what was learned before may not be as accessible as it once was.

Although Alzheimer’s disease does not directly affect the outward physicality of individuals, it can hinder the memory of steps needed to complete an action or series of motions. Dementia can be early-onset, starting as early as 35 years; yet, it is more common for those with dementia to be above the age of 65 (Humble et al., 2009, p.15). That being said, it is possible for program participants to have other changes in their physical wellness, outside of Alzheimer’s disease. It is of note that, if a Meet Me at MoMA participant is facing any array of physical difficulties, staff provide items such as portable stools, wheelchairs, and personal listening devices for sound amplification, all of which are available for participants on an as-needed basis (Epstein & Mittelman, 2008, p.88).

In regards to emotions, this program is an outlet for participants with Alzheimer’s and their caretakers alike. An excerpt from *Meet Me: Making Art Accessible for People with Dementia* highlights this beautifully. The following is an exchange that occurred after a Meet Me session came to a close, while participants bade farewell.

We start to head toward the elevators and back down to the lobby. Downstairs, a participant unexpectedly takes me aside. She keeps coming to the program even though her husband passed away not so long ago. They used to come together all the time and always participated and truly enjoyed it. Now, she still comes when she can, a part of the group, a part of the family. ‘This is so great,’ she says now, during our private moment together. ‘You know, for two years, this was our happy hour.’” (Humble et al., 2009, p.45)

This is excerpt from a day at Meet Me at MoMA is not only touching, but also alludes to the strong positive affect that its social nature has on the program. The emotional outlet of being able to connect with others with dementia and their caregivers provides a safe space for all (Humble et al., 2009). As Peter Reed, former Senior Director of Programs at the Alzheimer’s Association National Office, said, “There’s […] resistance on the part of everyone else to allow them to continue to maintain their relationships, […] friendships, and connections […]. They are looking for new opportunities and different things they can do that are specific to them as people with Alzheimer’s disease” (Humble et al., 2009, p.56). Meet Me at MoMA provides a way for this group of people to experience warmth of emotion and connections that might otherwise be devoid from their lives. Jed Levine, the Executive Vice President and Director of Programs and Services at the New York City Chapter of the Alzheimer’s Association so aptly puts:

I believe that there is an emotional carry-over from a museum program. It’s an enormous gift to give people, especially for lifelong patrons of the arts: an important part of who they are and an opportunity to normalize their lives again, to share the museum’s wonderful richness, to regain that relationship when there’s no Alzheimer’s in the room. (Humble et al., 2009, p.57)

In *Enhancing Adult Motivation To Learn*, Raymond Wlodkowski states: “Emotion, art, and spirituality are essential to the human experience and have incontestable meaning that is often inaccessible in words” (Wlodkowski, 1999, p.75). Spirituality, in the case of the Meet Me at MoMA, may lend itself to participants’ meaning making when other connections are disappearing (both cognitively and socially). Gay Hannah, Ph.D. & M.F.A., is the executive Director of the National Center for Creative Aging in Washington, D.C. On the matter of the spiritual properties of art, he says: “The power of art to engage is clinically so very strong, in terms of serving people with Alzheimer’s and memory loss. The energy coming from the visual art itself engages in ways that are so unexpected, and actually they’re quite mystical” (Humble et al., 2009, p.69). Hannah, in this statement, suggests that art has the ability to go beyond the spirit, and even enter into the realm of mysticism. This deep connection with art, therefore, has the ability to be very beneficial for adults with dementia who are seeking meaningful experiences.

In terms of understanding this population, it is important to first consider the social and cultural factors playing into its mere existence. As the Meet Me at MoMA program occurs at the Museum of Modern Art, located in Manhattan’s Midtown area, one could assume that the participants (those who consistently attend, at least) live in one of the five boroughs of New York City, or somewhere in the tri-state area. Regardless of where participants live, those who attend this program have access to the necessary transportation to visit the Museum of Modern Art (a renowned cultural institution in an of itself). Then, we have the aforementioned knowledge that most attendees have at least a college degree, if not a Masters or higher. Based off of this information, one might surmise that the participants in this program have the access, ability, and wherewithal to attend and engage. Not only that, but many of the participants were lively art patrons prior to being diagnosed with dementia (Humble et al., 2009). This suggests that the population who attends this program has prior knowledge, or at least interest, in museums and the fine arts.

A key aspect of the Meet Me at MoMA program participants is the sheer fact that they qualify for participation: the adults who are in attendance either have early-stage Alzheimer’s disease themselves, or are a caretaker, significant other, or family member of someone who does. To emphasize—participants are in the *early stage* of Alzheimer’s disease, and have not yet suffered from the disease long enough to eliminate the ability to attend. As stated in *Meet Me: Making Art Accessible to People with Dementia*, “Individuals in the early stage typically need minimal assistance with simple daily routines” (Humble et al., 2009, p.14). Alzheimer’s negative affects on ability to conjure up memories, think, and concentrate are minor in early-stage. For Meet Me at MoMA participants, the disease has not yet had deeply prohibitory negative affects.

Alzheimer’s Disease has negative connotations attached to it, and The Museum of Modern Art both acknowledges this and works with it. The MoMA has created a safe space for those with the disease to experience community and meaning making. A quote on this matter from a Meet Me at MoMA participant is as follows:

Even on the telephone the staff are different. They are not at all, ‘Oh, what are you bothering me for?’ It is quite different here. The whole program from the beginning, from the first telephone call, has been extraordinary. You feel totally welcome. (Humble et al., 2009, p.20)

The Museum of Modern Art staff have awareness of their positive power, and make certain to stay in tune with this audience of cognitively delicate adults. Not only does the Meet Me program stay in tune with their audience’s needs, it also empowers them. Laurel Humble, the Assistant for The MoMa’s Alzheimer’s Project, articulates a key aspect of this program: that the experience provides an opportunity for learning “precisely at the time when you’re hearing that you won’t be able to learn anything new” (Humble et al., 2009, p.79). Meet Me at MoMA welcomes this population in a way that allows for a genuinely enjoyable, intellect-filled experience.

An inhibitor that may impact participants’ ability to fully engage in learning is the exact thing brings them to this program: Alzheimer’s disease. As the Alzheimer’s Association states on their website, symptoms of early-stage Alzheimer’s are as follows: problems coming up with the right word or name; trouble remembering names of new people; greater difficulty completing tasks in social or work settings; forgetting information that one just read; misplacing objects; trouble planning and organizing (Anonymous, 2014). Participants are independent in their progression through the disease: one participant may not be at the same cognitive place as a fellow participant. That being said, it is hard to say whether or not the disease prohibits these adults from “fully” participating in the program—as the programming is created specifically for this audience, it is meant to give participants an optimal experience no matter their level of cognitive decline (Humble et al., 2009).

A key motivator for this unique group of adult learners is that of socialization—Meet Me at MoMA provides a safe space for participants, caretakers, and family members to observe objects of beauty with a community of their own. A view into the beginning of a Meet Me at MoMA session is below.

It’s 2:00 and already there are couples seated in the lobby area exchanging greetings, hugs, and stories. The program officially begins at 2:30, but it’s not unusual for people to come early. For them the visit is never just about the art or the group discussion. It’s also about the ritual: going to MoMA, seeing the staff, chatting with the other participants. It’s about what has happened over the past few weeks, what their children are doing, where they went on vacation. But of course, it’s also about the art. (Humble et al., 2009, p.20)

This glimpse into this program suggests that the social connections forged during each session are just as important as experiencing and discussing the artworks. This idea correlates with the *social or human motivation theory* as described in *Adult Learning: Linking Theory and Practice*, and also corresponds with the “Social Contact” aspect on Boshier’s scale of adult learning motivational factors(Bierema & Merrimam, 2014, pp.149-152)*.* The Meet Me at MoMA program capitalize on the incredible learning motivator of *belonging*, as well as the social motivators of meeting people and making real connections. As stated in the Second Edition of *Making Sense of Adult Learning*, “The learner [needs] to establish a sense of belonging within the learning environment by developing connections to other learners and to the facilitator” (Mackeracher, 2004, p.151).

Another motivator for this audience is that of positive emotions. As discovered through the aforementioned research performed by NYU, both participants with dementia and their caregivers alike experienced mood elevations directly after, and in days following, the program. Is it stated that caregivers reported fewer emotional issues, and all but one individual with dementia reported experiencing an elevated mood (Humble et al., 2009, p.107). As Raymond Wlodkowski states, “Attitudes powerfully affect human behavior and learning because they help people make sense of their world and give cues as to what behavior will be most helpful in dealing with that world” (Wlodkowski, 1999, p.72). The positive emotions elicited through this inclusive and innovative program have the power, therefore, to solidify these adult learners’ desire to learn through programming such as this. The safe space that MoMA effectively creates allows participants to feel at ease while making sense of artworks alongside family and caretakers—all while feeling notably positive emotions. The emotional warmth felt through this program is paramount—positive emotions have common capacity to strengthen interest and nurture involvement (Wlodkowski, 1999, p.76).

The Museum of Modern Art is doing a wonderful job of capitalizing on both this audience’s motivators and inhibitors. First, this institution is embracing those with the disease, and encouraging lifelong learning in the early stages. The mere existence of the Meet Me at MoMA program is somewhat revolutionary, as it is directed towards an audience that is otherwise forgotten, excluded, or glanced over (Humble et al., 2009). By encouraging those adults with dementia who are still accessible (in comparison to those who are experiencing later stages of Alzheimer’s), the MoMA is creating an incredible intellectual and emotional outlet for its Meet Me participants.

As for the motivators, a suggestion might be to further emphasize the social aspect of the Meet Me at MoMA program. As aforementioned, some participants come early to catch up before the program begins. In NYU’s research, they discovered that participants have a desire for more socializing (Epstein & Mittelman, 2008, p.105). This desire to socialize is in coordination with the program’s existence as a space that makes those with dementia feel like people of value. Being able to hone in on the program’s ability to raise self-esteem for these individuals would be an incredible asset. Through amplifying the social aspect of Meet Me at MoMA, it is possible that those who participate (namely, those suffering from Alzheimer’s), could become more empowered through their social interactions and potentially elevated sense of self-worth (Mattocks, Thornton, & Thornton, 2000/2001, p.1).

The approach to learning with this population of adults is tricky, because at the essence of Alzheimer’s is the swift force of forgetting. In choosing one “approach,” though, I find experiential learning to be the most suited for this audience. In contrast to what John Dewey, author of *Experience and Education*, suggests in his idea that learning is lifelong—and that past experiences can be applicable and adaptable—Alzheimer’s disease biologically disallows that as an option (Bierma & Merrimam, 2014, pp.105). To elaborate: Alzheimer’s *does* allow for lifelong learning, but forms cognitive blocks that prohibit one from accessing past experiences and learnings with ease.

With this population of adult learners, the present is what creates the learning experience, what makes the meaning, and what forms the responses and synapse firings (Humble et al., 2009). Carrie McGee, MoMA’s Assistant Educator for Community and Access Programs, illuminates the importance of the present in the following quote.

Most people in these individual’s lives “knew them when…” We didn’t. We never met them before they were diagnosed. We accept them and value them as they are. We know them now. During the program, we’re not thinking about Alzheimer’s, we’re just human beings, sharing an experience together in the present” (Humble et al., 2009, p.83).

McGee makes an excellent point here—that in each program, the educators and staff focus on creating a present experience, as opposed to creating a highly reminiscent one. Meet Me at MoMA is an exceptional way for participants to submerge themselves in adult learning and in the present.

The intelligence, based off Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences, that is most tuned into through this program is that of spatial: the capacity to perceive the visual-spatial world (Mackeracher, 2004, p.116). By the sheer essence of this program—observing and discussing impressions about various works of art housed in the Museum of Modern Art—visual cues are at the forefront. An apropos art project that builds upon meaning-making, spatial intelligence, and self-esteem could be creating self-portraits (with the assistance of caretakers, if need be). This idea, along with other art projects that provide self-reflection, expression, and visual communication, would allow participants to get creative while perhaps even synthesizing some of the information transmitted during gallery discussions.

Although I myself have not taught a self-portrait lesson to those who have dementia, I have taught it to very small children and have created numerous self-portraits myself. When teaching it to young children, it is fascinating to see what parts of themselves they perceive (and forget or completely ignore). I would imagine that the same might go for someone with Alzheimer’s disease—a sort of ebb and flow of awareness of past and present selves. In creating my own self-portraits, I found both my positives and negatives and, subsequently, was able to translate those findings onto my medium. If adults with Alzheimer’s were to do this project, it might allow for a cathartic, conclusive way to accept oneself in a visually expressive way.

My main concern regarding this population of adult learners is the dearth of programming like Meet Me at MoMA that is available nationwide. It is a relatively new program, currently experiencing its seventh year (2007-present). In its lifespan, this program has inspired more in museums across the country to create educational opportunities such as this. Although there are a handful of spinoff programs (like the one I first became aware of in Minnesota and Wisconsin entitled, “SPARK!”), this innovative programming remains relatively inaccessible. Beyond geographic access, the museum setting has both the potential to be captivating and intimidating. It was mentioned in *Meet Me: Making Art Accessible to People with Dementia* that some attendees are first time MoMA goers; I wonder if the cultural presence of such an institution might act as a deterrent to some, while elating others.

That being said, this is a truly incredible program. At the intersection of privilege and loss—that is, access to a world-renowned arts institution while also losing one’s memory—Meet Me at MoMA fills a intellectual, social, and emotional voids that adults with early-stage Alzheimer’s experience. With passion of museum educators and sufficient funding, I hope that Meet Me continues on—not only in its true and inspirational form, but also as a launch pad for similar programming nationwide.

Meet Me at MoMA provides a truly inspirational and supportive experience for all participants. As Florence, an elderly wife and caretaker of her husband Hal, puts it: “You feel refreshed, enriched, and alive.”

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