

# OLDER ARTISTS AND ACKNOWLEDGING AGEISM

*“...discovering a personal connection to someone else’s life experience may create empathy, which can impact both participants and reverberate beyond the initial shared experience. In this way, each participant, younger and older, is given the opportunity to share in an uncommon experience of intergenerational learning.”*

Liz Langdon

*University of Kansas Lawrence, Kansas*

## **ABSTRACT**

*Intergenerational (IG) learning has the potential to reinforce ageist ideas, through the culturally produced binary of old and young which often describes IG learning. This research with older artists revealed implicit age bias associated with a modernist tradition in art education which minimized the value of art production viewed as feminine. Language associated with ageism shares the descriptors of the feminine and seep into our perceptions. Cooperative action research with multi-age participants facilitated personal growth and through critical reflection, implicit ageism revealed in the researcher’s prior perspective is revealed.*

## **KEYWORDS**

*Intergenerational learning, ageism, older artists*

*To correspond with the author regarding this article:  
lizlangdon@ku.edu*

Intergenerational (IG) learning has the potential to reinforce ageist ideas. The culturally produced binary of old and young which defines IG learning can exacerbate ageism when the tropes of old age are not questioned or challenged. In my research with older artists, I discovered that my age-based perspective clouded how I perceived and valued older artists and their work. My perspective is that of an older White art educator, formed within a modernist tradition that minimized the value of art production of female artists (Collins & Sandell, 1984; Nochlin, 1988; Lippard, 1976). Language associated with ageism shares the descriptors of the feminine and seeps into our perceptions. Through cooperative action research, I learned with and through my multi-age participants to question my bias. This account of personal growth in which I learned to see the implicit ageism in my own views and reflect on its broader implications compares two experiences with the same older artist, differentiated by time and place. I theorize that IG pairs of action research participants may share experiences of place, allowing for exchanges from a common discursive space that leads to a co-equal relationship.

The concept of ageism has not been dealt with until recently (Iversen, Larsen, & Solem, 2009). Iversen, Larsen, and Solem (2009) explain the ageism most people are aware of involves negative stereotypes they may experience, or discrimination against other people because of age, or the perception of their being old. I was 59 when I began my doctoral research into place-based education and IG learning. I organized an art educator action research group to write curriculum with older artists, residing in the local area, which we titled *Pride in Place: Investigating the Cultural Roots of Texoma Artists*. Studying older artists and their memories from the local place is valuable in art curriculum development (Lawton, 2004; Manifold, 2000). Teacher participants selected artists who were at least one generation or 20 years their senior. I was the same age as one of the selected artists, yet I viewed older artists as distinctly different from myself.

Through interacting with these participants in action research, I gained a better understanding of aging, ageism, and art education's role in examining positive and negative implications. In the following, I discuss how the cooperative efforts of action research participants caused a shift in my thinking. I reflect on the IG relationship which led me to critique my own perspective, problematize the young/old binary inherent in IG learning, and question how I participate in the subtle practice of ageism, which stereotypes and minimizes older peoples' worth. By confronting my own ageist attitudes, I developed concepts helpful for future research. I analyze this problem using the data provided by the action research of teacher Claire Walker and artist Wanda Ewalt, and by comparing the data from my own previous research and presentations about Ewalt and her art. The contrast in our interpretations brings to light my ageist views and an older artist's accomplishments.

### **Researching, Connecting and Celebrating a Local Artist**

I began my research into place-based art curriculum in Wichita Falls TX, a place unfamiliar to me at the time. Place-based education focuses on a local sense of place, with the culture, climate, community, and the stories told about it, used as the framework for curriculum development (Kemp, 2006). I researched *early* Texas artists from Wichita Falls, TX. Early is defined as working at least 40 years prior to the date. Many artists were older, White females. I selected Ewalt and two other older artists as part of this defined group who continued to make significant contributions to the local art scene. After interviewing each

artist and documenting some of their work, I created a presentation meant to honor them at the Kemp Art Center in Wichita Falls. I titled it “Three Elder Artists of Wichita Falls: Blessing, Gift, and Gem”. In retrospect, I did not critically consider how gender and age manifested in my reading of their art. The contrast in our interpretations bring to light my ageist views and an older artist’s accomplishments, *and shows the benefits of place-based learning.*



Figure 1. Wanda Ewalt

I came to know Ewalt through a visit at her home studio where I videotaped a life story interview (Figure 1). I noted that she dressed specially for the occasion. Her hair was beautifully coiffed, and she sat regally in her studio but seemed a little nervous about the formality of the interview. My interview loosely followed a set of questions from the Fieldwork Data Sheet from a Library of Congress publication (2002), asking about her childhood and how things had changed. As she recounted her life story, she told me how she came to be a practicing artist. Ewalt’s telling of her life story intrigued me in the detail, although the basics were not uncommon for women her age in the area. She came from Oklahoma, was born at the height of the Depression, worked hard before and after school, met her future husband in high school, married, moved to Wichita Falls and raised three children. The art supplies she bought for her children inspired her lifelong pursuit of art. I appreciated Ewalt’s artwork and her story because both were rooted in the particulars of place. She was able to study art at the local university which became a major influence on her development.

Several years later I organized the cooperative action research group to study the relationship of perceptions of place through art and older artists. Walker was a teacher member of the action research group, tasked with developing place-based art curriculum by identifying and researching a local older artist. I facilitated the group’s research for six months, which culminated in the presentation of the artists and curriculum to community educators in a summer seminar. Initially, Walker sought an artist who reflected a segment of her diverse student population, yet when the artist she contacted did not respond, I shared my research about Ewalt with her. Walker developed a personal relationship with Ewalt when she could have simply used my interview, notes, and images to write a curriculum guide. She made different kinds of connections with Ewalt and her story. Ewalt proved to be inspiring to Walker by telling her rich story and showing off her studio. Together they co-created a life story narrative, sharing common experiences and local cultural understandings.

In Walker's presentation of Ewalt to the community at the summer seminar, she articulated elements of Ewalt's story that elevated her status in the community, creating an event of IG learning for the participants. Walker's presentation empowered Ewalt to share her wisdom with community members, and she articulated her passion for art in her life with the audience. In comparison, my earlier presentation at the Kemp Art Center meant to honor her, missed the mark and objectified Ewalt by limiting her with benevolent ageist language. I compare Walker's straightforward approach which follows, with my use of saccharine language described in detail later, to illustrate ageist language.

### **Walker's Action Research**

I convened the action research group monthly to introduce the theory and allow participant teachers to share their practice and research about the artists they discovered. When Walker initially shared Ewalt's story with the group, I was struck by her skillful storytelling. Walker took a serious approach to share information with her students and treated Ewalt's life story and artwork with the same respect she gave to the world-renowned, Texas-born artist, Robert Rauschenberg. She had researched Rauschenberg's life work and understood its significance in the canon of art history. She pointed to similarities in their work, as both artists experimented with collage. Walker even adopted a collage style in her reflective journal, noting a difference between these artists' approach and the popular craft of scrapbooking, stating: "Everything I used was repurposed and recycled kind of like Rauschenberg and Wanda Ewalt" (C. Walker, personal communication, June 3, 2013). Walker clearly related to and respected Ewalt on a professional level.

Ewalt credits her husband for encouraging her to study art seriously which she did by attending Midwestern State University (MSU) art classes for 40 years. Walker described Ewalt's persistence as fueled by passion. Walker said, "I was just amazed that she went there forever and never got a degree; she just went" (C. Walker, personal communication, June 3, 2013). I interjected, "She went because that's what she needed," but Walker held firm, "That is her passion." In Walker's summer seminar presentation, she set parameters for understanding Ewalt in relation to this distinction—that art is her passion. Walker's telling builds to this point:

Ms. Ewalt is a child of the Depression. She was born on the family farm between Cement, Oklahoma, and Chickasha. Her father was off hitchhiking to California to find work, so he left the family at the farm and her mother, being pregnant, was trying to call the doctor. And the doctor in Cement was just a little bit closer than Chickasha. So, on her birth certificate, it says 'Cement' even though she's a Chickasha girl. (C. Walker, personal communication, June 10, 2013)

Walker is co-creating a story with Ewalt, which associates Wichita Falls with Oklahoma, due to its proximity. Because of multiple years of dust bowl conditions, the Depression in Oklahoma split farming families apart and the conditions also placed material goods at a premium. Ewalt's resulting frugality with materials becomes a recurring theme in Walker's presentation. She continued Ewalt's story in a folksy manner, noting how Ewalt's children's art materials marked her beginning interest in art, "So that's when her passion began. She really did not find art until she became an adult" (Figure 2).



Figure 2. *The Blue Wave*. 1966. Ewalt describes this as her first artwork.

Walker's interpretation of Ewalt's story subtly weaves the themes of place and time, passion and training. Walker focused on what made Ewalt's venture noble, in light of women's changing status in the 1960s and '70s.

She didn't let go of it. She just kept going. If they offered something new, she would try it. If she saw some professor working with a group of students in the back corner, she wasn't afraid to go see what they were doing. That's how she found out about copper enameling. There were some men working in the back, eating lunch, and she went back and asked about it and she took up that skill. (C. Walker, personal communication, June 10, 2013)

It was bold for a female student to invite herself into an all-male backroom gathering in the context of the late 1960s. I recall the inadequacy I felt when I entered a college art program in the 1970s, within a field where men dominated (Park, 1996). Walker's inclusion of this fact added valorization to Ewalt's story and empowered Ewalt to speak out, alluding to this point when she spoke to the community a few minutes later. It was these small differences in our interpretation of facts that added to my growing unease with how I previously presented Ewalt.

Walker continued, "Regarding the use of materials she put down. You have to have a trained eye or that creative eye just to make it look that way. And she does." (C. Walker, personal communication, June 10, 2013). Walker described Ewalt's collage technique so that the audience did not take it lightly. The questions and comments for Ewalt allowed her to speak for herself and consequently receive praise from the community (Figure 3). Ewalt answered an audience member's question about whether or not she did all the metal work herself on the welded copper in her sculpture in the gallery:

Yes, I took metalsmithing at MSU and enameling and I've taken every class they have. I was just fortunate to be able to do that. And I studied years and years and years out there. I was just curious about every aspect of art. I just love art. So, if any of you are interested, don't let anything stop you. If you are interested in painting or drawing or sculpture or whatever. I have three children, five grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren. They all know that *this* is the most important part and they are just kind of standing in. (Loud laughter). I've been doing this for many years and I just can't think of a day that goes by that I don't have something to do with art. Notice it is a messy

studio. I decided a long time ago I could either have a nice, pristine and clean studio, or I could do artwork. (W. Ewalt, personal communication, June 10, 2013)



Figure 3. Ewalt responding to questions at the summer seminar.

Ewalt answered a simple question with a broad response, which became her entry into sharing the wisdom of her experience. Ewalt was challenging the myth of the doting grandmother and opened my eyes to the seriousness of her commitment, which I missed earlier. It gave me pause to reconsider how art operated in Ewalt's life. Tommy Evans, a high school art teacher in the audience, demonstrated that he was similarly affected:

I had the privilege of having conversations with her at an art show a couple years ago. She literally inspired me to create. For no other reason than to just go to a studio and make things. And she does it every day. (T. Evans, personal communication, June 10, 2013)

The IG event of Ewalt and Walker and the community coming together demonstrates a conundrum that age presents: younger people puzzle over what and how they will do things, while older people question what they have done in life (Williams, 2008). Ewalt's words offer inspiration for those younger and Walker's words validated Ewalt's life choices, while the community gained alternatives to misunderstandings and age-based biases. Ewalt shared her personal motivation and her passion and gave us a different perspective about being an older artist, challenging ageist myths of weakness and incompetence (Iversen, Larsen, & Solem, 2009). As a co-participant in this research, Ewalt confirmed her distinction as an artist and set forth a declaration disrupting the stereotypical grandparent role, by valuing her creative time over time spent with grandchildren or tidying a messy studio. This IG learning event was impactful because it brought together the ideal artist and the grandmother in the same person, upsetting geriatric stereotypes and responding to the puzzles of age.

Walker and Ewalt demonstrated the power of cooperative research, which enabled Ewalt to speak to the group. Cooperative action research is research with, rather than "on people" where "co-researchers also become the co-subject" (Heron & Reason, 2006, p.145). Ewalt was a valued member of the action research project and a source of expanded learning about place and local history (Figure 4). In challenging stereotypes, Walker and Ewalt

expanded this community's awareness of the long-term commitment of an artist to her work. In retrospect, my lecture about Ewalt was a pastiche of honor and ageism.



Figure 4. Claire Walker, Wanda Ewalt, and the author with Ewalt's copper tube sculpture.

### On Art and Ageism and Older Artists

In writing the narrative of this action research, I returned to original notes from my research to understand my earlier perspective. By looking at the two presentations as parallel series, the paradox that separates them becomes apparent. In the following, I analyze the two presentations about Ewalt by comparing my language, that is, my word choice and context, alongside Walker's language. By discussing the disparity, the two series create and identifying an element that brings understanding to the differences, I reveal how concepts of ageism and of older artists intersect with notions of modernist art education and suggest a concept important to planning future IG learning events.

Recall when I first interviewed Ewalt, I maintained the role of what I thought a researcher should be, using Library of Congress fieldwork questions and photographs of her artwork in my presentation at the Kemp Art Center. I created a pastiche revealing my own biases regarding art and age. To begin with, I grouped the three women together by an age demographic, marking them with the distinguishing and ageist title of *elder*, without asking how they would like to be described. In my lecture notes I wrote, "Wanda is a jewel for Wichita Falls to cherish." In the presentation title, Ewalt was a *gem*. I recognized the women artists by writing, "Their art is their grandest achievement. The magic of paint on a canvas intrigued each in a unique way." I had not asked them what they felt was their grandest achievement. I might have gotten three different answers. My use of the term "magic of paint" was coded language, which mystifies artists' work and creativity. There is no magic in Ewalt's work; there are an artist's skill and hard work, which Walker recognizes in her description of Ewalt as having "a trained eye."

I associated Ewalt with a gem and a jewel because her artwork has rich texture and color (Figure 5). In my lecture notes, I wrote,

Wanda's rich use of color and texture and jewel-like surfaces may reflect her enchantment with her Aunt Juanita who was a glamorous trapeze artist who visited every time the Barnum and Bailey Circus came to town, 'They visited many times. They had beautiful costumes. . . They were a big part of the circus. They were like movie stars whenever they came.' (W. Ewalt, personal conversation, October 2011)



Figure 5 Fish and Pearls. Collage by Wanda Ewalt

Walker heard an additional part of the story from Ewalt and interpreted it differently:

She was in awe of her aunt Juanita Dieschler for whom she was named. . . Ewalt enjoyed watching her aunt from the front row of the big top. . . She also has a fond memory of recognizing her in a News Reel at the movie theater and declaring to the audience that it was her Aunt Juanita. The dramatic richness of Juanita's stage life seems to drift back into Ewalt's imagination as she creates her colorful images. (NTIEVA, 2013, p. 64)

Walker focused on how Ewalt's aunt contributed to a sense of pride and cultural capital in her youth. Walker was writing elementary school curriculum, and she presented Ewalt as an artist. I imagined Aunt Juanita's costume as a visual influence on Ewalt's artwork, so I described it as having "jewel-like surfaces" and "magic" and then I transposed the description of a gem and a jewel onto Ewalt herself. Walker instead sees Ewalt as an active creator, drawing inspiration from the "dramatic richness of Aunt Juanita's stage life" (NTIEVA, 2013, p. 64).

Looking critically at the two parallel descriptions of Ewalt and her work, one uses language with intent to teach, leaving openings for interpretations whereas my intent was to honor Ewalt and interpret her artwork. My language is patronizing, which marks a benevolent form of ageism. Ageism affects older persons' functioning in real ways, including self-perception and self-confidence (Chasteen, Pichora-Fuller, Dupuis, Smith, & Singh, 2015). *Benevolent ageism* is social discourse that portrays the older person as "other" and past the usual age of doing something yet deserving of respect and care, which in turn discounts the older person as being capable or fully competent (Orpin, Walker, & Boyer, 2016). It is a paradoxical and disempowering term. I selected Ewalt and two other older artists to honor because of the distinction that they seemed to be past the usual age of producing and exhibiting art. For this alone, I assumed they deserved respect, despite the assumption that male artists, like Rauschenberg and Picasso, remained productive until infirmity or death. My speech sidestepped any part of Ewalt's story I might examine from a critical perspective. In doing this I discounted Ewalt's seriousness as an artist.

I noticed another example of a display of benevolent ageism as I reviewed Walker's video presentation of Ewalt's artwork, shown at the seminar. In the video, Walker's copper tube sculpture of three highly stylized faces with headdresses is photographed as it was displayed in her home (Figure 6).

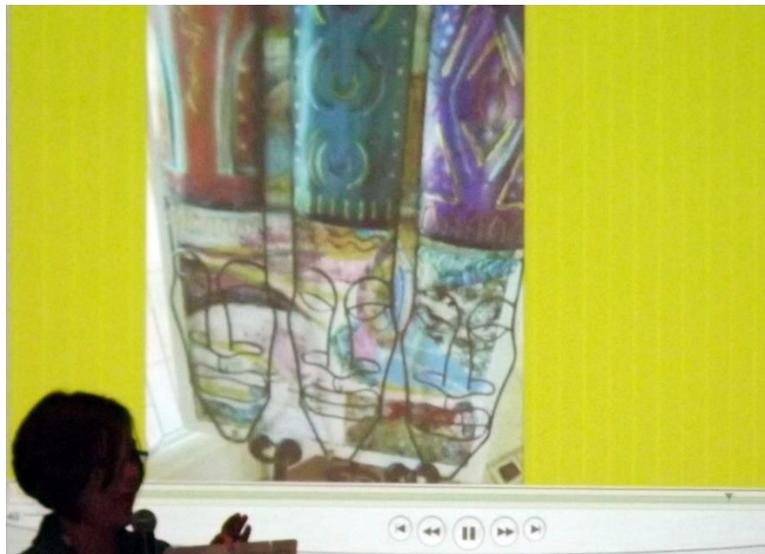


Figure 6. Walker presenting video capture of Ewalt's copper sculpture photographed at home.

It appears that the sculpture hung in the museum gallery upside down (Figure 4). The curator did not question the placement and I wondered if the curator's choice was one of expediency or a lack of serious care for Ewalt's ideas, perhaps undervaluing her work because of a benevolent ageism.

### Ageism and Modernism

Ageism Hurts (2016) asserted that ageism, “the idea that old people are supposed to be frail, incompetent, less than and laughable, permeates culture so thoroughly that it takes real attention to catch the small messages as they slip by” (para 1). As I review my presentation, I notice my weak praise for Ewalt’s artwork, another example of benevolent ageism. I characterized Ewalt as a sweet lady whose art-making efforts were part-time. I used her constant student status to explain her multiple experiments and presented her work as experimenting with paint for fun. I viewed this as a deficit, rather than an asset which was what Walker saw. In doing so, I minimized the importance of her work again. I exhibited ageism here because rather than talking about the quality of the artwork, I used the sexist ploy of “patronizing encouragement,” historically faint praise for female artists (Nochlin, 1971:1988, p.176).

I was dismissive of the feminine qualities of art associated with age and needed to examine my own story through a feminist lens. The contradictory system that informed my values in art education and monitored my interior dialogue consisted of the divisive hierarchy of modernist art education, dismissive of feminine values (Collins, 1979; Collins & Sandell, 1984; Dalton, 2001). I received my art training in the 70s and the second-wave feminism of the decade had not yet reached the field of art education (Sandell, 1991). Historically, art has been associated with feminine characteristics, such as beauty and leisure time (Collins, 1979). My modernist, male art professors of the 70s reacted rebelliously against the association of art with feminine qualities. Feminine associations to weakness are easily conflated with age, and in the following section, I show how the intersection of ageism, feminine tendencies, and modernist art education serve to disempower through disabling language.



Figure #7 *Abstract Flower*. Mixed media by Wanda Ewing

### Modernism and the Hierarchy of Art Practice

In describing Ewalt's style I wrote "Her work shows a diversity and adventurousness in trying different techniques. . . . Although her works have such different styles; they are all similarly rich and tend toward abstraction." I used the nouns *diversity* and *adventurousness* to indicate that she switched techniques often (Figure 7). At the time of my interview in her studio, as I surveyed 40 years of experimentation, hung salon style on bright yellow walls, the term "Sunday painter" kept bubbling up inside me (Figure 8). I had to bury words like *dabble* and *dilettante*, reflective of comments oft-used dismissively by the modernist art academy of the 1970s (Clark, 1996; Collins, 1979) because dilettante interests in art connoted the feminine (Collins & Sandell, 1984). I espoused the values of second-generation feminist scholars in art education, by promoting the recognition of women to the profession and suggesting multi-cultural representations (Clark, 1996), yet I laced my interpretation of Ewalt's work with the negative associations implicit in the gender discrimination of modernist art education. My earliest attitudes, tastes, and ideas of art held sway and reflected "masculine and feminine divisions and hierarchies which in turn produce gendered identities as hierarchical" (Dalton, 2001 p. 8).



Figure 8. Wanda Ewalt in her studio

One of these concepts is the Sunday painter, which differentiates between a professional artist and someone who is "a non-professional painter, usually unschooled and generally painting during spare time" (Dictionary.com). The phrase was used in my college days to distinguish between the career-minded artist and the dilettante, often female, "stay-at-home mom" or the retiree. My male college art professors countered a feminized idea of art by favoring a masculinized environment (Collins, 1979). Social practices of female artists, such as working within a domestic environment, communally, or with craft or found objects,

as defined by critic Lucy Lippard (1976) and modernist art educators (Collins, 1979) were credited with creating benevolent biases regarding art's feminine attributes and subsequently placing it lower in the hierarchy (Collins, 1984; Dalton, 2001). I associated age with gender, which created disempowering ageist behaviors. In my imaginary past, Ewalt would have been one of the "Sunday painters" in my college class. To honor Ewalt, I used inflated and disempowering language to hide my suspicion of dilettantism. In contrast, Walker offered a straightforward approach in the curriculum guide that respected Ewalt's choices, "Wanda creates acrylic collages in the style of Abstraction . . . She uses both re-purposed and bought items to integrate into her art, basing her decisions on what she thinks looks right. Wanda is not afraid of trying new techniques" (NTIEVA, 2013, pp. 64-65).

Walker considered the particulars of Ewalt's association with the university, her history, and the social climate to weave a story that presented a fully-developed person who chose to study and practice art. Walker elevated Ewalt's status as an artist in the community and showed how the asset of a university art program benefited Ewalt and in turn, the community. She pointed to a distinction between what Ewalt did and how other older, local artists practiced, saying "Wichita Falls has a lot of little old ladies doing their art . . . Junior Leaguers or have-been Junior Leaguers" who meet in someone's garage to paint (C. Walker, personal communication June 3, 2013). Walker's use of common ageist phraseology to distinguish what Ewalt does, speaks to the insidious nature of ageist language.

### **Implicit Ageism and Modernist Art Education**

As I reflect on my own earlier inquiry and presentation of Ewalt, I learn more about my preconceived notions of age and people. I unwittingly harbored ageist thinking because it was easy for this bias to lie beneath the surface and remain unobserved. It is only recently that implicit ageism has been recognized as (Levy & Banaji; Palmore, Branch & Harris, in Iversen, Larsen, & Solem, 2009, p. 16). I considered myself younger, and Ewalt older, not considering how that bias might affect my research, another contradiction produced by the old/young binary. The binary is an accepted commonsense ideology and has only recently been challenged as a social construction in relation to ageism (Iversen, Larsen, & Solem, 2009). I also conflated implicit ageist notions with aspects of artistic practice that I uncritically considered feminine or weak. This notion was supported by modernist understandings of art I held, which left Ewalt's work outside my definition of serious art. In looking back at my initial presentation, my implicitly ageist perspective weakened my review of Ewalt's art and did not empower her as an artist. I was prejudiced by age difference, when in reality we had a lot to share.

Implicit ageism is considered part of common sense, just as sexism was 50 years ago. Through the co-created IG learning event with Walker, Ewalt, and the community, facts and experiences were shared which challenged stereotypes. Walker emphasized aspects of Ewalt's experience that she shared through local knowledge, including the art program at MSU, where she also attended. Their shared experiences of local place connected them, and the intimacy afforded in the cooperative action research relationship gave Ewalt the encouragement to tell her story. Walker experienced a familiar place differently through Ewalt's art and stories and enriched her art curriculum. Walker's students benefitted through place-based art curriculum combined with IG learning, expanding students' social identity. This developmental benefit of IG learning encourages students to recognize people for

individual qualities and discourages grouping people by difference (Kuehne, 2003). Walker's curriculum and presentation upset stereotypical perceptions.

### **Recommendations for IG Learning and Postmodern Art Education**

To keep age-based biases in check and avoid stereotyping by age distinction, facilitators and participants of IG learning should be aware of patronizing and ageist language. I suggest that facilitators put relationship building in the fore, with shared experiences as a primary goal. Cooperative action research ensures reciprocal learning for participants, which should be a key component to IG learning. I recommend that participants look to discover at least three commonalities of experience within IG learning. I have shown that a shared relationship to local place or common culture is significant and that discovering a personal connection to someone else's life experience may create empathy, which can impact both participants and reverberate beyond the initial shared experience. In this way, each participant, younger and older, is given the opportunity to share in an uncommon experience of intergenerational learning.

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### **Endnotes**

Parts of this work are excerpted from my 2017 Dissertation: Place-based and Intergenerational Art Education, University North Texas.

*Pride in Place: Investigating the Cultural Roots of Texoma Artists* is available online at <http://www.wfmamsu.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Pride-in-Place-curriculum.pdf>.

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