

Supervision of Senior Citizen Craft Teachers: Goals and Practice

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Paraprofessional senior citizen volunteers can be used to teach certain crafts to other senior citizens . . . It is important that social group work in Senior Centers provide not only increased opportunities for socialization, but also increased opportunities for real learning.

Should the primary aim of a senior citizen crafts class at a group work agency be socialization or should it be handicraft skill development? Can a senior citizen center run a skill oriented crafts program using as teachers retired housewives and blue collar workers with a lot of ability in handicrafts but possessing limited orientation and experience for helping and teaching others? What are the difficulties and limitations encountered in such a program and what is the type of supervision required? This article will answer these questions in the light of the experience of the Kings Bay YM-YWHA.

Most crafts programs for senior citizens at group work agencies see socialization as their primary goal, and the actual giving and receiving of instruction as a secondary purpose and goal. As long as the member can take home an article once a month to show his children and grandchildren, the student, teacher and social worker are usually satisfied. Craft classes are seen as a place where seniors can "stay busy" and also meet and make friends. Examples of such crafts programs are a painting class where students copy pretty post cards or calendar pictures, a basketry class where basket making kits are used, a basic crafts class making gifts or personal articles such as a tile pot rack and stuffed animals, or a knitting class where a knitter makes the same article over and over again. Any crafts program in which the student is not encouraged or challenged to progress to a new skill does not really see learning as its primary goal. This author attended a conference where an experienced group worker described in detail how a crafts class can be a means for

developing group identity through mutual aid, can stimulate further educational efforts such as field trips, can be a means of rediscovering one's ethnic past or a method of providing important physical therapy for the hands. Nowhere did he state that crafts could be a significant ongoing learning experience.

The use of crafts programming for the purposes of aiding social interaction, group identity or physical therapy is entirely legitimate. However, all such uses of crafts programming may neglect to see the senior citizen as a learner and refuse to recognize his need for real, tangible accomplishment. To learn means to struggle; it means to proceed from ignorance, through frustration, hopes and defeats, to an ultimate sense of accomplishment. To use a crafts class *primarily* for the purposes of socialization, group identity, or physical therapy is to deny the older adult the opportunity to struggle, learn, and accomplish.

Involvement in a real learning experience is one of the most important needs of the older person. An older person usually suffers a progressive number of losses: job, income, health, friends or spouse, and so on. Loss of work role or parenting role leads to boredom and often a subtle depression, because these roles are not replaced with alternative sources of accomplishment and ego satisfaction. Dr. Shura Saul writes in *Aging, an Album of People Growing Old*, "The loss of work role, therefore, also affects the status and social self image of the retiree and exacerbates his identity problems . . . all representing losses in sources of life satisfaction." The role of learner, and with it the opportunity for

achievement, can provide a substitute source of critically needed ego satisfaction to the retired older adult.

For these reasons, we decided to make a concerted effort to have learning, with all its concomitant struggles and frustration, be the primary focus of our crafts program. We did this in two ways: First we changed the nature of our craft programming and replaced a general crafts class emphasizing gift articles with individual classes in specific skill areas, such as crocheting, pottery, macrame, etc. Second, in order to provide instruction in these areas, we used as instructors senior citizens, recently trained at Elder Craftsman, who returned to the Center to teach other seniors the skills that they acquired there. This paper now describes our efforts and their results, with concentration on the second area of supervision of volunteer senior citizen teachers.

Development of Skill Oriented Craft Classes

The Kings Bay "Y" Senior Citizen Center is a Title XX Center; that is, it is sponsored by Associated YM-YWHAs of Greater New York but publicly funded through the New York City Human Resources Administration. It has contracted to provide hot lunches, social and recreational opportunities, educational and cultural activities, volunteer and leadership opportunities, information and referral and counseling. We are situated in a large public housing project and thus a high proportion of our membership consists of needy older adults—the segment of the aged population that is often termed "moderately impaired." Although our membership range also includes recently retired, more socially independent members, we also service many frail elderly.

Much of the social atmosphere of the Center is thus set by people who, due to lack of health, wealth, or previous positive social experiences, are slowly losing ground in the struggle of growing older. Many members no longer have the desire, let alone real expectation, for change, i.e. learning, in their lives. Both teachers and students in our classes have found it difficult to focus on real learning.

Before we decided to focus the Center's craft program more on student learning of specific skills, the program consisted of a weekly general crafts class that produced ornaments and gift type articles, a knitting class making sweaters and scarfs, and an oil painting class in which students painted by copying. A budgetary cut forced us to retrench the paid instructors of both the weekly crafts class and oil painting class. We replaced the one craft class making ornaments and gifts with several classes, each devoted to a specific skill area. We started classes in crocheting, artificial flower construction, macrame, pottery, leather working and patchwork quilt-making. Senior citizen volunteers trained at Elder Craftsman served as teachers. By offering ongoing classes in specific skills the students now had the opportunity to stay with a craft and progress from simpler to more complex projects. Projects were chosen which were "do-able," but which also allowed for students to work creatively with different colors, designs and models. In an additional effort to impart standards of creativity and skill development, the social worker closely supervised the teachers, and made a persistent effort to show an individual interest in as many students as was possible. Such constant supervision in order to raise the artistic level of the class was required because of inexperience of the volunteer senior citizen instructors. Also, sales to the public served to supply not only extra satisfaction and reward, but also to encourage more careful, skilled work.

After a year of classes in specific skill areas, progress was noted. Certain students did develop skills and progressively exhibited creativity on their own. But for many other students, the adjustment to a class with an expectation of skill development was difficult. They still found it necessary to do repetitive work and depended on the teacher unnecessarily. Such students had a tremendous need for immediate gratification and could not bear the inevitable frustration and uncertainty inherent in the learning process. It was difficult for them to start a new project that

might take several weeks to complete. In the new oil painting class, for example, copying was prohibited and the basic rules of color, design and perspective were taught. Only subsequently were some of the pupils from the former painting class who were "addicted" to the easier, quicker gratification of copying, allowed to enter this new class.

Most students in the crafts program could have responded positively to a more demanding, skill-oriented program. Our limitations lay in the inability of our senior citizen volunteer teachers to partialize the project into steps whereby the students could realistically learn, to discourage dependency, and to offer realistic encouragement while being patient with student errors.

Proper teaching methods thus turned out to be the critical factor in facilitating skill development in crafts by senior citizens.

Areas of Supervision

The Center decided to use senior citizen volunteers as teachers for two reasons. First, our budget did not allow for hiring professional session workers, and we were not able to engage any skilled adult volunteers. Second, we believed that Center members whom we trained served as very significant role models for learning and cooperation at the Center. Ideally, they would further extend the social infrastructure of communal self help that should be the goal of senior citizen group work.

Our teachers attended six-week courses in artificial flower making, crocheting, patchwork quilt making, basketry, leather working, ceramics, etc. at Elder Craftsman. For some of our teachers this was their first exposure to a craft they were soon to begin teaching. Elder Craftsman classes concentrate on teaching the craft and motivating the student. They bring forth a great deal of enthusiasm, and spark ongoing learning. However, Elder Craftsman classes do not specifically prepare seniors for the role of teaching. This had to be done at the Center.

The two areas of teaching techniques and

classroom organization can be termed the "objective" areas of supervision. However, in reality, most attention had to be given to the recurring subjective feeling of "I can't" and "They won't" which indicated fear and resistance to learning on the part of the teacher. Their most recurrent complaints fall into two broad areas: one, those concerning students, and two, those concerning classroom organization.

Areas of Supervision— Teachers' Attitudes to Students

1) *Negativism concerning other senior citizens' interest and ability to learn a craft*

During group supervision teachers constantly threw at the social workers complaints such as, "They won't learn a new stitch," "Older people can't learn," or "They don't listen to correction." The teachers were not able to look at the strengths and weaknesses of each student. Instead, they quickly generalized from certain negative experiences and in the process evaded the demand of real teaching.

2) *Doing it for the student, rather than with the student*

When students came to the teacher asking, "How do I do this knitting stitch?", "How can I get my pot to stand straight?", or when their work required correction, the teacher made the improvement *for* the student, rather than verbally providing guidance and letting the student make the attempt with his own hands. The teachers too often lacked the patience and trust to stand by and watch the students struggle with real failure and success.

3) *Avoidance of realistic praise and criticism*

"Oh, how nice," "That's pretty," or "Very good" were the most frequent terms of praise employed in the classroom by the senior teachers. Also, for all their negative attitudes concerning their students' abilities, they often failed to provide effective criticism. Both praise and criticism should be specific and realistic in order to be helpful. "Your use of color shows a lot of originality, but try next time to be more careful with the seam

stitching" is both more supportive and more helpful than, "That's pretty" or "Oh, how sloppy." But again, realistic praise and criticism require a confidence and flexibility in one's attitude to oneself and one's students that the senior craft teachers found difficult to attain.

4) *Reluctance to encourage students aiding each other*

Particularly at the beginning, the teachers complained of being beset and besieged by students demanding assistance. The social worker suggested that they encourage the more capable students in their class to assist those asking for help. They replied, "Oh, they don't want to help each other," "They can't help each other," or "They are just concerned about themselves." The teachers' lack of self confidence made them perceive student mutual assistance as a threat to their hard won authority. Also they did not have a perspective on teaching that permitted them to see the class as a whole.

To summarize, the craft teachers began with a severe lack of confidence both in themselves as teachers and in their students' ability to learn. They expressed this in their negative attitude to the students and in their rigidity as regards learning.

Attitudes to Classroom Organization

These insecurities of the senior craft teachers also affected other aspects of their teaching experience.

1) *Competition among teachers.* The teachers competed with each other for closet space and concerning project ideas. They brought to the social worker concerns that another teacher was seizing closets or stealing ideas.

2) *Classroom management.* Teachers needed guidance in the importance of preparing materials ahead of time and in properly storing students' unfinished work. Disorganization in the classroom unnecessarily added to the already existing anxieties of the teachers.

3) *Fear of shopping.* The teachers had the responsibility of ordering and purchasing the

necessary materials for their classes. They were, however, inexperienced in knowing what to buy and where to shop in the craft field, and were very reluctant to spend money. It took more prodding than a simply stated invitation, "We have the money, go out and buy what you need," to get the teachers to shop for themselves.

4) *Abuse of the goal of selling students' craft articles.* The goal of marketing the class's finished products served two important purposes. It helped motivate students who hoped to see their articles "sell" and also served to provide standards of quality for this work. However, teachers often failed to understand, and thus distorted this goal. They let it come between themselves and their students' learning. They often hastily dismissed students who could not produce saleable articles instead of providing careful, patient beginning instruction. Similarly, they often rejected project ideas that might have been a rewarding learning experience, but would not produce a readily saleable product.

5) *Resistance to new project ideas.* It took a long time and much encouragement for the teachers to introduce a new project into the class. "Oh, they won't like it," or "It won't go over," was usually their initial response. The teachers themselves had no problem mastering the new craft, but were apprehensive about the task of instructing others.

6) *Reluctance to continue learning their craft.* Certain teachers did not continue to experiment and grow on their own in their craft. Thus they did not possess the personal excitement and interest in the craft which is the first necessary ingredient for motivating others. One legitimate reason for this was that they had no opportunity during the class hour to work on their own. They were constantly busy helping other students. On the other hand, some of the craft teachers did not want to learn about their craft and did communicate enthusiasm to their students.

These situations thus all coalesced to impede the creation of a real learning situation in the senior craft classes. They reflected resistance

on the part of the senior craft teachers to teaching, for ultimately they lacked confidence in the ability of older adults to learn. It was hard for them to recognize their students' feelings, a necessary prerequisite for effective teaching. They also found it very difficult to see themselves in the role of teacher, with the job of organizing a classroom and with the understanding that learning is a step-by-step process.

There was thus a tendency for both the senior craft teachers and students to erect a conspiracy against learning based on mutual dependency. The students depended on the teachers to allow them to do repetitive, unchallenging work, and the teachers depended on the student not to demand too much real teaching from them.

Techniques of Supervision

Supervision concentrated on enabling the teachers to do more real teaching, and the students to do more real learning. The following techniques proved helpful:

Joint Social Worker-Art Consultant Supervision

This social worker found it necessary to work very closely with a professional artist on the staff of the parent agency, the Associated YM-YWHAs of Greater New York as a consultant. First, the consultant proved necessary for setting standards for the classes. Only with her advice were we able to distinguish between what was *schlock* (keep 'em busy projects) and what were projects that allowed for creativity and growth in the craft. Secondly, she provided access to new project ideas, suggestions on which ideas were appropriate and feasible and which were not, and knowledge of how to obtain the necessary materials. In short, an artist was critical for *infusing* a sense of artistry into our senior citizen craft program. The social worker was critical for *enabling* this process to develop on a day-to-day basis in the Center's classrooms. On a weekly basis, the assistance of the professional art consultant proved to be absolutely essential not only to the students and teachers, but also

to the social worker.

Unremitting supportive attention to the concerns of each teacher

The whole experience of beginning to organize and teach a class in a new craft was very anxiety-ridden for an already anxiety-prone older adult teacher. They came to the social worker with a seemingly endless flow of worries and complaints. As described above, examples were, "This student won't learn," "This student stole materials," "This teacher stole ideas," "That idea won't work," "There is no closet space," "The students don't give me a chance to breathe," etc. Some concerns could in no way be allayed, and those that were, were soon replaced by new ones. The social worker frequently had to visit each class and consistently and patiently listen to each concern or complaint, however repetitive they were. He did not necessarily accept the full objective reality of each concern. If objective and concrete aid was possible, such as buying new closets, or providing money and transportation for buying materials, it was offered. But the basic thrust of the social worker's intervention was to listen attentively and emphatically, and to then try to refocus the teacher's attention on more positive, learning-oriented concerns. For example, a complaint about disappearing materials was responded to with an assurance that any program had to allow for and be prepared to take some losses, and then a discussion ensued on how to help each student store his own unfinished products.

Group Supervision

Semi-monthly meetings of all craft teachers were initiated. They allowed the teachers to have an increased sense of importance and recognition. They and their classes were now an important entity at the center. In the group meetings they were able to "show and tell" their latest projects and also plan sales and displays. They were able to join together and unburden themselves of their gripes and gain sympathy from each other. They realized that they were not alone with their problems. Finally, together, they were able to place important demands on the Center's staff for

more materials, on-going instruction in their craft, new project ideas, etc.

The social worker attempted to use these group sessions to air the teachers' negative attitudes concerning their students' work, and to then work on building more positive beliefs that older adults really want to, and can, learn. Typical comments were, "Rose has been in the class three years and she always makes the same mistakes, she never listens," "Lila always does sloppy work." The social worker would then try to suggest more specific steps to improve such student's learning; for example, supplying more attention and praise, and criticism of only one small step at a time. Again, the constant message was, "Our adults can learn." However, our teachers found it difficult to use these suggestions, because they found it hard to partialize the learning process, to praise and make critical comments at the same time, and to have real interest and trust in the student's ability to progress.

After a half year of classes it became obvious that although it was not possible to increase greatly the teacher's ability to trust their students, we could help them become less anxious and more capable as teachers if we gave them some specific techniques with which to work. The social worker then proceeded to draw up a curriculum and composed a booklet on "Craft Teacher Training." The titles of sessions in the curriculum were: "The purpose of a crafts program at a Senior Center," "All older people can learn," "Difficulties preventing learning," "How to offer praise and criticism," and "How to have students help each other." Exercise (homework) sheets guided the teachers in applying these topics to their specific classes. These training sessions proved effective. But again, teachers found it easier to see themselves as single crafts persons "tutoring" a group of individuals, than to see themselves in the role of a *teacher* responsible for the learning of a whole class.

Field Trips and Workshops

Finally there was a need in supervision to encourage the teachers to continue their own skills in the craft that they were teaching. It

was our belief that only if they continued to be excited about their craft could they effectively motivate seniors. To encourage more on-going learning by the teachers themselves our art consultant organized field trips and supervised informal bi-monthly workshops where the teachers were given the necessary privacy, equipment, and instruction to allow them to pursue more easily their own craft. These workshops were also seen as being a form of reward and recognition for the many hours of volunteer work that the teachers donated to the Center.

Accomplishments and Limitations

With such supervision by the social worker and art consultant, our volunteer senior craft teachers were able to teach 75 students (different individuals) in eight classes for what is now a year and a half. The teachers have proven consistent in their attendance and effort.

Progress has been made particularly in the area of classroom organization. Supervision plus experience have allowed the teachers to feel confident and less anxious with the craft and with the classroom. They now feel less besieged by the frequent demands of their students. Materials, unfinished work, and closets are better organized, and the teachers are more readily shopping on their own for new material. They are more receptive to new project ideas, less preoccupied with the goal of selling, and, in general, they have shown more understanding of what differentiates learning a craft from keeping busy.

Participation in the crafts program also greatly aided the self growth of most teachers. First, the status and satisfaction of being a teacher increased their self-respect and self-image. Second, working as a craftsman stimulated more creative and meaningful use of free time as they pursued their crafts outside the Center. Third, the involvement in Center activities that was demanded of them increased the socialization and social integration of several teachers.

However, in the area of relating to students

there was much less progress. The majority still had difficulty seeing the student as an older adult with a real potential for change and learning, and needing the right amount of correction and praise to accomplish this. Most of our teachers, while possessing great ability to create with their hands, possessed less ability to transcend their own anxieties and irritations in order to extend help in a supportive way.

Finally, two teachers resigned after a year and a half, saying that they wanted to be paid, and others also complained of lack of appreciation. Some of these feelings were the natural desire for change and promotion after considerable time on the job. Also, although the jobs had become very important to them, and to the Center, there was no way the Center could objectively reciprocate through financial payment.

Implications

Paraprofessional senior citizen volunteers can be used to teach certain crafts to other senior citizens. They can learn to organize and run classes, and provide assistance and instruction in simple, but creative crafts. Crocheting and ceramics are here considered "simple" in the sense that a student can learn quite independently of the teacher. Once a few basic skills are mastered, he can learn on a trial and error basis, going from simpler to more

complicated projects, if provided with a model and some assistance. More complex arts, such as oil painting, require large measures both of artistic knowledge and teaching skill. For this a trained qualified professional art teacher is necessary.

As has been frequently noted in the literature, older adults usually suffer an increased sense of loss, for example, loss of spouse, friends, income, health, etc. In working with older adults, social group work has emphasized socialization in order to help older adults deal with increased feelings of isolation and vulnerability. In doing so, however, social group work has undervalued the importance of learning to older adults. An older adult's ego strength becomes depleted when lack of work and decreased self-confidence and social contacts keep the older adult from maintaining his former sense of achievement. Acquisition of craft skills can provide a renewed sense of accomplishment. Thus it is important that social group work in Senior Centers provide not only increased opportunities for socialization, but also increased opportunities for real learning.

With proper supervision, and in selected craft areas, older, non-professional volunteers can be trained to lead classes in handicrafts, and thus crucially expand a Center's capacity to provide real learning opportunities to its members.