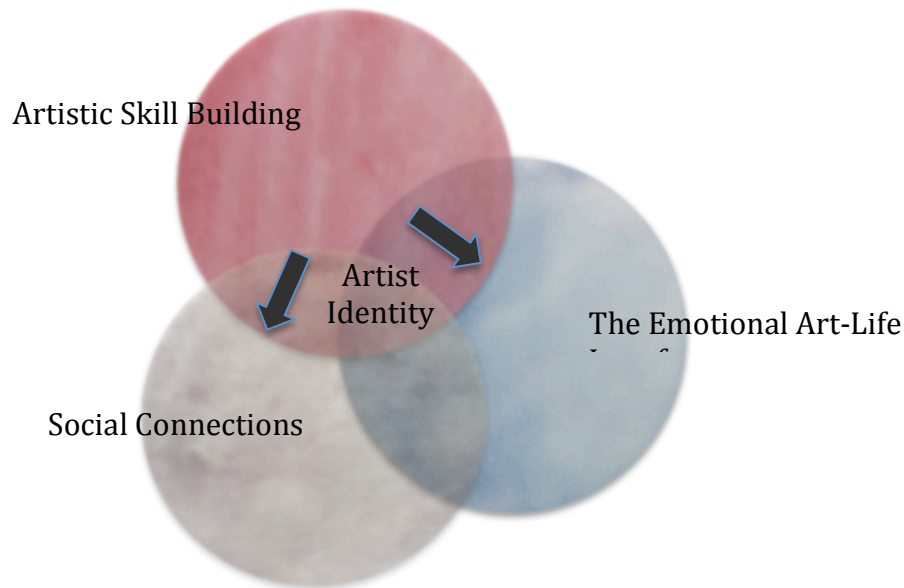


My project focused on understanding the experiences of older adult artists who participate in the Art with Elders (AWE) program. This is a non-profit organization in the San Francisco Bay Area. I observed art classes and talked with the artist-participants. I asked them about their experiences in the program generally, and also about the strengths and weaknesses of the program. I hoped my findings could help inform quality improvement at AWE.

I found that the artists' experiences were described by the following themes: Artistic Skill Building, Social Connection, and what I call the "Emotional Art-Life Interface," my term for how creativity and other themes mutually influence and are influenced by life and art in a synergistic way.

While all three themes are important in the experience, Artistic Skill Building is the core. Artistic Skill Building drives Social Connection by bringing people together to learn, practice and share their skills together. Artistic Skill Building drives the Emotional Art-Life Interface because skill mastery inspires patience, a sense of control, and a seeking for harmony, balance, creativity and other themes in an artist's day-to-day life. In this rich and multi-faceted environment, participants become artists, forging, perhaps, a new artist-identity.



Above figure: How the Art with Elders experience forges an artist identity in each participant

As part of normal human development in late life, older adults have an energy that tends to be creative in nature. Art with Elders offers an environment where this energy can be forged into an artist-identity. This is a life-affirming experience for older people. A similar model may be used to design or adapt other arts programs—perhaps even digital, distance programs, somehow! The primary strength of this model is the focus on skill building.