



Universal Design & Accessibility in Creative Aging Programs

Universal Design (UD) is about creating environments and experiences that work for everyone—no matter their age, ability, or background. Use these tips to help make your creative aging programs more accessible and inclusive. Accessibility is not about perfection—it's about intention, flexibility, and inclusion. Small changes can make a big difference; start with what you know you can do, and make a plan to expand what you offer.

Most importantly, **be open about which accessibility features you offer** (like ASL interpreters or assistive listening devices). If you can't offer something due to budget or space, that's okay—just be honest and upfront. Let participants know how to request accommodations and who to contact (e.g., an accessibility coordinator), and include this information in your marketing materials and program registration.

Universal Design in Program Space

- **Use an accessible room**

Choose a dedicated space that meets ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) standards. Look for ground-level entry, ramps, or elevators. Ensure that bathrooms are accessible as well, and drinking water is available.

- **Arrange furniture with mobility in mind**

Set up chairs and tables so there's enough room for people using wheelchairs or walkers. Provide seating and tables that are comfortable, supportive, and

easy to use for all body types and sizes. (An example is chairs with backs vs. stools.) A variety of options may be necessary (chairs with arms can be supportive for some, and restrictive for others).

- **Think about sound and sight**

Pick a space with good acoustics (sound quality), adequate lighting, and clear sight lines so everyone can see the teaching artist.

- **Plan for the art form**

Make sure the space fits your program's needs—for example, a water source for painting or a non-concrete floor for dance.

- **Keep materials easy to reach**

Supplies and tools should be within easy reach for everyone.

- **Partner to serve accessibility needs**

If you do not have access to an accessible space, consider partnering with another organization that does.

Universal Design in Materials, Tools, and Resources

- **Use name tags**

To support social engagement, have students, program staff and facilitators use name tags, especially in first sessions.

- **Use accessible handouts**

Print materials whenever possible. Use high-contrast fonts (14–18 point size), clear images, and line spacing of 1.5 to make reading easier.

- **Think about adaptive art materials**

Consider the way art materials themselves – paintbrushes, scissors etc – can be made accessible. There are many adaptive versions of art materials available, and other simple ways to make tools easier to use for folks who may

have challenges with fine motor skills. Different types of materials have different considerations. This is a helpful resource: [Inclusive Art Vermont Adapting Art Materials](#)

- **Add captions to videos**

Always include captions so participants with hearing loss can fully engage.

- **Use microphones or sound support**

You may need to amplify your voice—and the voices of participants—so everyone can hear clearly.

Universal Design in Instruction

- **Use inclusive language**

Using people-first language is always the best choice. For example, say “person who uses a wheelchair” instead of “wheelchair-bound.” In a performing arts class, use words like “rise” instead of “stand,” and in a visual arts class, say “experience” instead of “watch” or “see.” This better includes all learners, regardless of mobility or visual challenges.

- **Consistent class structure**

Have a consistent class structure. For example, start each class with a warm-up or check-in and end with a closing ritual or another check-in. Be clear about the class structure by posting the agenda on the wall or sending it in an email before each class. This structure helps students feel more comfortable and prepared, giving them a clear idea of what to expect in every lesson.

- **Mix up your teaching methods**

People learn in different ways. Combine verbal instruction, written handouts, hands-on activities, videos, and visual aids to help everyone stay engaged.

Special Note: Dementia-Inclusive Considerations

While the sequential nature of creative aging arts education classes is not designed for individuals living with later stages of memory loss, classes are open to all members of the community, and individuals with early stage memory loss may attend. In addition to the Universal Design elements above, consider these specifics:

- **Keep instructions simple and step-by-step**

Build in structure and repetition to help participants feel confident and oriented.

- **Create smooth transitions between activities that feel simple and calming**

Minimize the number of different types of activities in one session and take time when moving from one to the next.

- **Encourage creativity, not recall**

Activities should stay grounded in the present moment. Compare items or ideas visible in the present—not past events. Ask open-ended questions based on what’s happening in the moment (e.g., “How does this sound make you feel?” instead of “Do you remember when...?”).

- **Apply “Yes, and...” strategies**

Build on contributions with encouragement and openness.

- **Provide individualized support, enlisting care partners when appropriate**

Some students may benefit from extra one-on-one time with the teaching artist. Support staff and care partners can serve as “artist assistants,” helping with art-making tasks when needed and reinforcing instructions, while ensuring the student remains the primary creator of the work.

- **Invite choice and autonomy in every activity**

Accept a range of responses—there is no “wrong way” to engage.