

When designing creative aging programs, social engagement opportunities are just as important to include as learning artistic skills. Older adults join artmaking classes because they want to learn something new, develop their creative capacities, and build social connections and new communities. Many people in the 55–100 year age range are in a period of major transition. They might be recently retired; their children and grandchildren may live at a distance; friends and siblings might have passed away; perhaps they have recently lost a spouse. These changes can bring a sense of loss and isolation. Building new social bonds in the context of an arts program can ease this isolation and the anxiety that commonly accompanies it.

## **What is Social Engagement?**

Beyond just a coffee break or unstructured time where people can chat, social engagement should be fully integrated into the program design of creative aging classes. The overarching goal is that the learners will make a connection to one another through the learning and artmaking process itself.

## **Setting up a Supportive Environment**

Keep in mind that most creative aging workshops serve a wide age range of people. Social engagement requires a supportive and inclusive environment to be successful. The teaching artist needs to take time to make sure the environment of the class is positive and feels safe, and offers learners the opportunity to hear, be heard, express themselves, bond with others, grow as artists, and potentially develop a new community. Social engagement should always be tied to the work at hand and be connected to the skills the students are learning.

## Social Engagement Tips

- Always connect social engagement authentically to the skill being developed.
- Work in a circle when possible—especially at the beginning and end of a session.
- Use opening discussions and warm-ups as opportunities for students to connect.
- Share artistic resources and have students discuss.
- Open and close sessions with a ritual that is repeated each class.
- For the artistic practice portion of the class, have students work in pairs and small groups.
- Mix up the pairs and small groups to ensure that everyone works with new people.
- Set timers for sharing so that all people get an opportunity to speak.
- Encourage peer-to-peer learning and instruction.
- Establish safe and positive feedback and reflection protocols.