

Americans for the Arts presents  
The MetLife Foundation  
National Arts Forums Series



# National Arts Forum Series

A Program of **Americans for the Arts**

## *Think and Be Heard: Creativity, Aging, and Community Engagement*

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People are working longer and living longer, up to 20–30 years beyond what has been the traditional retirement age of 65. They are healthier and more active than in previous generations. Simply disengaging from society after a full-time job is no longer an option. The 77 million baby boomers in the United States are currently turning 60 at a rate of one every 7.7 seconds. What boomers choose to do as they age and reach retirement, and how they choose to do it matters, to everyone—no matter their age.

Creativity can help individuals think in new ways about aging and retirement by facilitating their questions about what comes next, helping them better manage transitions, and enhancing their well-being. Creativity can help people find meaning and purpose as they move toward and through the retirement and aging processes.

For more than 50 years, researchers have been studying how people can strengthen and use their creative abilities. There are many definitions of creativity and creative thinking. Psychologist J. P. Guilford describes creativity as thinking divergently and being free of “functional fixedness.” Broadly speaking, this definition captures the type of thinking required to apply creativity across many and diverse areas, implying the ability to think generatively, to think and see in new ways, and to overcome habitual ways of thinking. Psychologist Frank Barron’s review of multiple definitions of creativity and creative thinking describes certain points of agreement among creativity’s many definitions:

Creativity is an ability to respond adaptively to the needs for new approaches and new products. It is essentially the ability to bring something new into existence purposefully, though the process may have unconscious, or subliminally conscious, as well as fully conscious components. Novel adaptation is seen to be in the service of increased flexibility and increased power to grow and/

or to survive...The “something new” is usually a product resulting from a process initiated by a person.

The “conscious components” described by Barron suggest that people can learn how to intentionally harness and unleash their creativity. One of the key goals of teaching people the creative thinking process is that they understand they can take deliberate steps to become more creative, to think in new ways, to become more adaptable and flexible, and to produce more creative outcomes. Environment or culture can enhance or hinder creative thinking and behavior. “Teaching for creativity” also means creating the conditions for creative thinking to emerge—including creating an environment to foster creativity, helping people remove mental blocks, and teaching creative process skills that people can apply.

The idea that people can improve their cognitive skills and learn to think more creatively relates to the increasing research about the aging brain’s plasticity, or the brain’s lifelong ability to grow, change and create new connections. Several studies about arts and aging demonstrate positive results for older people who participate in artistic endeavors such as visual arts, dancing or singing. In one study run by the former Acting Director of the National Institute on Aging Gene Cohen, seniors in weekly arts workshops showed better scores on mental health measures, were in better physical health, scheduled fewer doctor visits, and used lower amounts of medication.

Arts and aging programs frequently focus on seniors who develop or discover creative skills or expression late in life and begin to produce tangible, artistic products—such as paintings, poems, performances or sculptures. When considering the role of creativity in aging, however, this emphasis on “arts and aging” is perhaps too limiting a context. Arts and aging is neither just about arts, nor just about aging. Rather, it is about creativity and posi-

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tive engagement—that is, creativity as both a goal and a process for shaping the self and society. Positive engagement focuses on how creativity can “help people live and flourish rather than merely exist,” as sociologist Corey Keyes and psychologist Jonathan Haidt describe. Putting “arts and aging” in this broader context opens up possibilities about how to use creativity to engage people of all ages in purposeful and meaningful activity. This might include using arts to engage seniors, as well as encouraging artistic expression of their talents. But it also includes creating one’s life as a continual work of art, in which one applies the creative thinking process to discovering and expressing one’s passions and purpose in the world.

People become blocked by the assumptions, judgments and habits that keep them from realizing their creative selves. Mental strategies—such as creative thinking techniques—can help remove these blocks and change the way one looks at the world, thus helping one to live in new and healthier ways as one ages. University of Cambridge psychologist Felicia Huppert advocates for and describes the benefits of this approach:

One of our key health objectives for the next century should be promoting positive well-being. This includes developing mental strategies to cope with the losses and disappointments that lead to depression, but goes further, encouraging a sense of fulfillment, capability and pleasure. And the health benefits of positive well-being are backed up by scientific evidence. We have shown in a national survey that happier people live longer, even when we control for their physical health. We have also shown that immune function is better in people who use humor to cope with stress. So feeling good is good for the individual and the community, and politicians should take note—improving the mental well-being of the population will also be good for healthcare budgets in the future.

Creative thinking includes mental strategies that one can develop and apply. J. P. Guilford conceived of “creativity in terms of the mental abilities in creative achievement,” in which creative thinking involves divergent production (generative thinking of problems, ideas and solutions), along with the factors of:

- fluency (quantity of production);
- flexibility (different types of production);
- originality (novel thinking); and
- elaboration (combinatory and expansive thinking).

Such strategies give people tools to explore what is purposeful to them, engage in meaningful activities that make their purpose “real” in the world, and continually negotiate new identities and later-life changes. For instance, learning to delay judgment of one’s own ideas and others’ ideas can help one create more options. This includes learning to generate broad possibilities by asking, “How might I?” rather than narrow, one-right-answer “should,” “could” and “is” questions. Practicing this on a daily basis—such as which new route to take to work, how to determine one’s next vacation, or what alternatives there might be to holiday gift-giving—can result in becoming more adaptable and flexible to larger challenges. Thinking creatively on a small scale can facilitate the larger scale—such as what to do in one’s third part of life, how to find meaning in the death of a loved one, and how to adjust to inevitable physical declines in later life. Creative expression in this context might also include older adults transforming their ideas into entrepreneurial businesses, running for political office, applying their professional skills in the nonprofit sector, setting up a cooperative-care group for aging family members, or helping improve the education of children in their neighborhood.

“Creative engagement” offers an expanded concept of arts and aging. This idea rests on German artist Joseph Beuys’s expanded concept of art in which “every human being is an artist.” Beuys, regarded by some as the 20th century’s most influential European artist, pushed the definitions of what is art—and creativity—and who can be creative. “Everyone is an artist” isn’t about taking up visual arts or writing (though this may be part of it). Rather, it’s about mobilizing everyone’s latent creative abilities—engaging one’s creative thoughts, words and actions and expressing this creativity in meaningful ways to shape and form society. Beuys called this process Social Sculpture.

Through Social Sculpture people can engage their creativity in many different ways. It pushes beyond the “civic engagement” conversations that primarily focus on how to get more baby boomers to volunteer. It pushes beyond

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arts and aging programs that may contribute to the view that creativity can only be expressed through painting, writing, drawing, dancing, and acting. Neither of these goals is bad. In fact, such programs have demonstrated positive results. Yet, they also narrow the definition of who can be creative, how that creativity can be expressed in the world, and what engagement can look like. The future of aging cannot afford such a limited perspective. Beuys said that “the individual wants to develop freely his own talents and his own personality, and to be able to use his abilities in conjunction with the abilities of his fellow human beings.” Older adults can use creative thinking to rediscover talents and passions that they may have pushed aside during their working lives. They can engage their imagination, make new connections, discover a sense of purpose and feeling of personal growth, and express their creativity in ways that contribute to society.

Most people never fully prepare for retirement. Organizations could help employees in this exploration by including retirement in work-life programs or considering it an extension of career development. Preparation for retirement should go beyond financial planning to include cognitive- and life-planning. Organizations that implement these programs are positioning their companies as a good employers and good corporate citizens. For employees, this is a chance to learn tools and skills for living an engaged, purposeful retirement. Creative engagement is ultimately about people’s “human right to think and be heard”—a concept advocated by educator Berenice Bleedorn. People have the right to access and develop their human thinking potential and create new ideas as well as the right to freely express their creative passions in their communities. It is through such creative thinking and self-expression that people connect with others and shape the world. Such a work of art is a lifelong project.

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## *About the MetLife Foundation National Arts Forum Series*

Since 2002, the MetLife Foundation National Arts Forum Series has brought together non-profit and private-sector professionals to examine pressing issues facing arts organizations across the country. The theme for the 2006–2007 series was Arts and Workforce Development. The theme is comprised of three topics designed to examine the diverse roles the arts play at various life-stages: developing the “workers of the future”; providing arts exposure and training for current workers; and influencing health, brain elasticity, and aging.

More than 2,300 participants from 21 cities participated in the 41 forums, which were directed by a wide cross-section of experts—from business leaders and elected officials to artists and arts-based training consultants, from human resource and education professionals to arts administrators.



## **MetLife Foundation**

## *About MetLife Foundation*

MetLife Foundation was established by MetLife to carry on its long-standing tradition of corporate contributions and community involvement. Grants are made to support health, educational, civic, and cultural organizations and programs. Recognizing the vital role the arts play in building communities and educating young people, MetLife Foundation provides grants to cultural organizations throughout the country.