



Getting Started: Launching a Creative Aging Arts Education Program in Your Library

A Practical Guide for Launching and Sustaining Programs for Older Adults

(Adapted from Lifetime Arts' 2011 Creative Aging Toolkit for Public Libraries)

1. Introduction

Public libraries are uniquely positioned to expand their services for older adults through sequential, professionally led arts education programs. These programs spark creativity, foster meaningful social connections, and support lifelong learning and personal growth. For libraries, they deepen community engagement and position the library as a critical cultural hub.

This guide provides a concise, step-by-step framework for libraries to **plan, launch, and sustain** creative aging arts education programs. It draws on more than a decade of Lifetime Arts' work with libraries nationwide, as well as recent case studies.

2. What is Creative Aging?

Creative aging combines artistic expression and social engagement to improve older adults' well-being and quality of life. Backed by research, this practice is growing nationwide.

Benefits of Arts Learning

- Boosts cognitive function and emotional well-being
- Strengthens social connections, combating isolation.
- Encourages new skill mastery and personal expression

This guide focuses on the arts education approach to creative aging: sequential, skill-based learning led by professional teaching artists. Other formats (e.g., memory cafes, drop-in art clubs) offer benefits too, but structured programs yield especially strong outcomes for health and social connection.

What are the arts?

This may seem like a silly question, but it's important to clarify that when we talk about the arts in relation to creative aging, we are using the widest possible definition of art.

- **Visual Arts**, such as painting, photography, sculpture, street art, textiles, woodwork.
- **Performing Arts**, such as music, dance, film, singing, spoken word, and theatre.
- **Literary Arts**, such as creative writing, poetry, storytelling, and memoir writing.
- **Digital and Electronic Arts**, such as animations, podcasting, and computer graphics.
- **Craft, Folk and Traditional Arts**

We've seen creative aging classes that run from pottery to country line dancing to digital laser wood carving. What matters is that people are learning to *make something, together*.

3. Why Creative Aging in Libraries?

Libraries as Community Hubs

Libraries are accessible, trusted spaces in nearly every community. In many rural places, they serve as the only local community center in town. More than just houses for books, they are natural homes for creative, community-centered programming.

Meeting Demographic Shifts

Adults 50+ are the fastest-growing population segment. They are healthier, living longer, and actively seeking meaningful engagement. Creative aging programs help libraries meet these evolving needs.

Key Benefits for Libraries

1. **Builds Lasting Connections with Older Adults.** Creative aging programs bring in new patrons, re-engage familiar faces, and turn participants into library champions. Many go on to volunteer, lead peer programs, or support fundraising—deepening their investment in the library's role as a community hub.
2. **Shift the Story on Aging**
These programs don't just serve older adults—they spotlight their creativity, resilience, and capacity to grow. The result? Powerful, real-life stories that challenge stereotypes and affirm the library's role in fostering purpose and connection at every age.
3. **Spark Innovation in Library Practice**
Creative aging is a fresh, adaptable model for engaging older adults—and it works. Staff gain hands-on skills in community assessment and program design, while

libraries stay responsive to evolving needs. It's not just programming—it's professional growth and community transformation.

4. Core Program Elements

Creative aging arts education programs emphasize two outcomes:

1. Mastery

Participants gain skill in an art form through structured learning. Gerontologists note that developing mastery or control—basically, a sense of personal choice and decision-making—supports healthy aging by fostering agency and choice.

2. Social Engagement

Programs intentionally build peer relationships through group feedback, discussions, and collaborative projects. This engagement is more than a cup of coffee before class—Teaching Artists design the program to tie social connection to the artmaking process.

Program Hallmarks

- Sequential, skill-based learning, typically over 6-8 weekly sessions lead to mastery.
- Cohort model with consistent participants allows for relationship building
- 90+ minute sessions give enough time to learn and practice new skills
- Led by a practicing teaching artist, the program is designed for the best outcomes
- Culminates in a public sharing (performance, exhibit, etc.) so the community sees and celebrates the work
- Free or low-cost so and accessible for people of varied abilities, so all can participate.

Flexible Framework

This framework is flexible and adaptable, and the design and delivery should be responsive to the needs of your community and participants. Some adaptations have included:

- **Frequency:** Some libraries offer multiple sessions per week or per day to better meet participant needs in communities where participants have long travel times. *We do not recommend having MORE than one week between sessions for a sequential program.*
- **Length:** Fewer than 6 sessions is not ideal, but meaningful engagement is still possible across fewer sessions when budgetary or space recommendations don't allow for it.

- **Hybrid Models:** In communities with vast geographic distance, Some programs offer both in-person and virtual options to expand access. *It is more difficult to deliver a hybrid program than an all-in-person or all online program, allowing more time for planning, testing, and troubleshooting before your program launches.*

5. Planning Your Program

This guide offers the basic steps to planning and developing a creative aging program, and is based on years of experience and the implementation of over 1,000 successful programs. As a reminder, an important aspect of this program is in its responsiveness and adaptability - it requires some legwork and dedication, but results in powerful programming for older adults.

Here's how to get started:

Step 1: Community Assessment

Before you do anything else, evaluate space, community resources, and older adult interests- this is essential to creating a program that is responsive to community needs.

- **Evaluate Your Facility:**
Ensure the space is comfortable, accessible, and suited to the art form. Can you adapt the space for your use? Is storage available for materials and in-progress artwork?
 - For example:
 - A dance class will need a large, open room with a hardwood or vinyl floor.
 - A painting class will need easy access to a water source
 - A music class may need to be in a room that is far from where anyone will be doing quiet work.
 - If you don't have the right space in your library, consider off-site partners!
- **Identify Community Resources**
Connect with arts councils, arts and cultural organizations, senior service agencies, and educational institutions. They can provide:
 - Support with identifying funding sources, teaching artists, older adult interests, and places to promote your program
 - Volunteer networks for support roles
 - Space and equipment for specialized art forms (we've seen libraries partner with dance studios, university design departments, and even health centers.)
- **Survey Older Adults:**
Use surveys to identify interests, scheduling needs, and participation barriers. Be

sure to include existing patrons and outreach to new older adult audiences. Make sure to identify preferred art forms, schedule preferences, and participation barriers, such as accessibility needs.

Step 2: Identify a Teaching Artist

Teaching artists are practicing artists with the skills and experience engaging learners *in, through, and about the arts*. These artists make their living from teaching, so it is a paid position, not a volunteer one. Find them via:

- Local/state arts councils
- Calls for artists
- Local schools or colleges

Hiring Tips

Ideal candidates should have experience in teaching in the art form, designing sequential curriculum, and working with older adults. However, the best candidates you have might not fit the ideal. Creative aging may be a new concept, and some artists in your community may not self-identify as a 'teaching artist'. **The most important thing is that they are familiar with the art form and have the ability to create a curriculum that teaches those skills to people over time.** Here are some additional intangible qualities that you should look for:

- Collaborates well with others
- Exhibits enthusiasm for working with older adults and in a community-based setting
- Effectively demonstrates the artform
- Is flexible and willing to adapt

Lifetime Arts has resources for teaching artists new to creative aging.

Curriculum Development

Teaching artists should outline class content, skills taught, and engagement methods. The curriculum should:

- Align with participants' goals and abilities.
- Sequence skills logically for progressive learning.
- Integrate opportunities for peer interaction and feedback.
- Incorporate local themes or library collections when relevant.

Library Staff as Teaching Artists

We strongly recommend that a teaching artist is used for these programs, and that they are paid for their time and expertise. Sometimes, existing library staff have the skills and expertise to serve as teaching artists. If this is the case, it should be determined if that role and responsibility is in addition to their normal work, and how to compensate them for their time.

Step 3: Secure Funding

Creative aging sits at the intersection of arts, aging, and community health—opening doors to diverse funding sources:

- Library Friends groups
- Local/state arts councils
- Community foundations
- Corporate sponsors
- National funders (NEA, AARP Foundation)

Tips

- Joint applications with partners can strengthen grant proposals, demonstrating a commitment to the work and signals future sustainability.
- Align requests for funds with evaluation data and testimonials - demonstrating the impact on older adults and the community

Sample Budget (\$1,500 - \$3,000):

Program budgets for these programs vary widely due to teaching artists fees varying from region to region and the costs for different art forms (e.g. writing programs may only require pen and paper, while painting programs require paint, brushes, canvases, etc.) On average, for an 8 week program and a culminating event ranges from \$1,500 - \$3,000.

- Teaching artist fees
Fees for teaching artists vary depending on region and experience.
- Ask your local or state arts council for guidelines on teaching artist rates
- Visit <https://teachingartists.com/pay-rate-calculator/>
- Discuss with potential candidates
- Art materials
 - Material budgets will vary depending on different art forms.

- Quality supplies matter—it can be tempting to buy the cheapest materials but they do not work as well and will frustrate learners. Your teaching artist will have recommendations, but you can also ask art supply vendors for guidance.
- Other program expenses, such as printing costs, advertising, etc.

Step 4: Implement

Once you're ready to implement, you'll need to confirm logistics, recruit participants, monitor the program, and document and evaluate the impact.

Confirm Logistics:

- Schedule sessions at optimal times (often mid-morning or early afternoon) - refer to your surveying to help determine the best times.
- Confirm that the spaces for your program are secured. Ensure seating, lighting, and acoustics suit the art form.
- Ensure the needed equipment and materials are ready before the first class.
- Assign clear staff roles (registration, communications, technical support) - and be sure to communicate with the teaching artist who is doing what.

Recruiting Participants:

- Use multiple channels: flyers, local media, social media, word of mouth, and partner organizations.
- Utilize the teaching artist's class description to entice participants. The description should signal specific skills that are learned and hopeful outcomes.
- Emphasize that programs are free (if applicable), skill-based, and social.
- Maintain a waitlist to manage attrition.

Program Implementation Tips:

- Display related library resources
- Maintain regular check-ins with the teaching artist
- Document sessions with photos and feedback
 - Note: Try to get photos with participants smiling and looking up at the camera while making artwork, preferably with multiple people.

Step 5: Celebrate!

The culminating event is an opportunity for participants to celebrate their accomplishments, to raise the visibility of older adults in their community, to promote the library as a creative hub, and engage potential funders and partners. Culminating events should be a public sharing, that is appropriate to the art form and built in collaboration with the older adults. Examples include an exhibition of visual arts, a reading of written work, a performance of theater, dance, or music, etc.

Culminating Event Tips:

- Invite families, friends, and the broader community.
- Develop an agenda for the event, and create space for participants to share about their experiences.
 - Document the event with photos or video for future promotion and fundraising. Gather feedback from the audience about the impact of the experience.

Step 6: Evaluate and Sustain

It's important to plan for sustainability from the beginning – and to leverage programs while they are happening to capture impact. Success comes through collecting data that demonstrates the impact of programs on older adults and library engagement, inviting decisionmakers to workshops and events, and uplifting stories from older adults.

- Feedback from participants, artists, and audience
- Attendance and retention metrics
- Stories, quotes, and images

Sustainability Tips

- Keep participants engaged in future offerings
- Share successes with stakeholders and funders
- Pursue multi-year funding or incorporate into core programming
- Maintain partnerships with outside organizations
- Explore ongoing clubs or informal meetups for alumni.

6. Quick Start Checklist

1. **Learn and Assess** – Understand creative aging principles. Assess needs, partners, and space.
2. **Identify a Teaching Artist** – Select a skilled teaching artist.
3. **Secure Funding** – Budget and seek out opportunities.
4. **Implement** – Promote, prepare, and run the program.
5. **Celebrate** – Host a culminating event.
6. **Sustain** – Evaluate, document, and plan for continuity.

7. Resources

- **Lifetime Arts** – www.lifetimearts.org
- **Creative Aging Resource** – www.creativeagingresource.org
- **ALA Public Programs Office** – www.ala.org/ppo