

Dialogue with Time: An Intergenerational Experience

By Orna Cohen

Aging is an important issue on today's social agenda. In 2050, one-fifth of the world's population will be over the age of 60, and many of those people can anticipate reaching an advanced age (United Nations Population Fund, 2012). Paradoxically, aging is often feared as a topic of discussion with such issues as health problems, accidents, and tight finances. Only a few exhibitions reflect this fundamental shift in the world's population since a valid question arises: Who would be interested in a visiting an exhibition with such a dark outlook for one's own future?

This was the starting point for *Dialogue with Time* (www.dialogue-with-time.com), a traveling exhibition produced by Dialogue Social Enterprise, an organization in Hamburg, Germany, that promotes social inclusion through exhibitions and training programs (www.dialogue-se.com). We designed the exhibition to allow visitors to experience the world of older people and to present various aspects of aging in a creative and playful way. Seniors ages 70 and older are the exhibition's experts and invite the audience to engage in an intergenerational dialogue.

To create *Dialogue with Time*, we drew on experiences from our two previous exhibitions: *Dialogue in the Dark*, which is in complete darkness for visitors to explore the unseen with facilitators who are visually impaired (www.dialogue-in-the-dark.com), and *Dialogue in Silence*, which is in complete silence for visitors to experience nonverbal communication with facilitators who are hearing impaired (www.dialogue-in-silence.com).

THE EXHIBITION

Rather than provide visitors with encyclopedic knowledge of "old age," *Dialogue with Time* is designed for visitors to be part of the exhibition. Text displays and objects are secondary to situations aimed to arouse interest, curiosity, and the desire to know more.



A visitor's doodle of herself and a friend in 30 years in the *Dialogue with Time* guest book in Frankfurt, Germany. Photo by Orna Cohen



Before the tour starts, visitors ages 8 and older are assembled in a group no larger than 30 people. Every individual receives a necklace and is told it may buzz at any moment, indicating it's time to go to "retirement." With this information, visitors start the first of six stations:

1. Prologue: Aging is a natural process

Visitors begin by watching a video, *Danielle* by Anthony Cerniello, where a woman's face changes over the course of a long life within a time span of only four minutes (anthonycerniello.com/#/id/182/name/Danielle). This video gives a powerful demonstration of aging. Though not visible in our daily lives, aging is slowly happening, and at a certain moment, older age is present and cannot be ignored.

2. Dialogue room 1: Aging is a personal matter

Here, visitors meet their guide, a senior who will accompany them through the exhibition. The senior

guide gives an introduction and brief insights about his or her life before leading visitors in games that encourage a personal discussion. For example, each visitor receives a set of 18 large cards showing elderly people in different activities or situations and chooses the one that most represents what he or she wishes for in old age. The cards are then shared with the other participants, and the guide facilitates a discussion about visitors' selections.

3. Yellow room: The diversity of aging: Limitation

The color yellow symbolizes how an older person's visual perception may change. In this room, several exhibits give visitors the opportunity to experience, and find strategies to cope with, age-related limitations, such as climbing stairs in heavy shoes, trying to understand a voice message that fades in and out, operating a remote control with gloves, identifying small figures on a display, and opening a door with trembling hands.



The "pink room" in *Dialogue with Time* contains video installations of older people sharing stories from their lives that give a positive view of aging. Photo by Bert Bostelmann

4. Pink room: The diversity of aging: Opportunities

According to color psychology, pink represents love, compassion, nurturing, and hope. This room contains video installations in which older people tell true stories from their lives and share their wisdom, experiences, and passions to give a positive view of aging.

In the yellow and pink rooms, some of the necklaces start to buzz, taking visitors by surprise. The guide activates a sound of applause and sends the "retirees" to sit on a bench, while the remaining members of the group continue their activities. This role play forces people to move from an active to a passive position in the exhibition, mimicking what can happen in society, and it sets the stage for a discussion about self-determination and exclusion at the next station. After a few minutes, all visitors go to dialogue room 2.

5. Dialogue room 2: The future of aging

This room explores the question of how our environment must be shaped to respond to demographic changes and address the demands of an aging society. First, visitors work through a series of animated graphs to learn about demographic transitions; for example, they can venture a guess as to the number of centenarians worldwide in 2011/12 (316,600) and projected for 2050 (3.2 million; United Nations Population Fund, 2012).

Second, visitors watch a short newscast and must decide whether the stories are fact or fiction. For example, does a bank offer loans for people above age 70? Can elderly people control the duration of a traffic light through a special bracelet? These exhibits open a debate about personal living environments now and in the future.

6. Epilogue: It's never too late

Here visitors can take a quiz to learn interesting facts about age, aging, and the elderly before leaving the exhibition with a postcard of tips for happy aging.

ENGAGEMENT ON THREE LEVELS

People tend to think that old age means isolation, loss of attractiveness or autonomy, and a decline in both health and activities. Interestingly, this opinion is independent of age; even advanced age doesn't automatically lead to a better understanding of aging. In addition, every age group has a different relationship with aging. *Dialogue with Time* uses these differences to create dialogues about aging on three levels:

- Dialogue with myself: Visitors are invited to learn more about themselves and their notions about age and aging. The exhibits and games are designed for visitors to ask themselves: How old do I feel? Have I ever lied about my age? Am I afraid of growing old? Would I like to turn back time?
- Dialogue with peers (other visitors): *Dialogue with Time* is a shared experience. Visitors communicate with their peers on the tour, and by observing and listening to others, they gain a better understanding of their own positions.

- Dialogue with seniors: The key moment in *Dialogue with Time* is the encounter and exchange with the senior guide, because this experience fosters understanding and open-mindedness and eventually leads to a paradigm shift in the overall notion of age and aging. The senior guides are ambassadors of positive and healthy aging.

THE IMPACT

We assessed the impact of *Dialogue with Time* from 100 interviews and 150 questionnaires at the Israeli Children's Museum in Holon and 198 questionnaires from the Museum for Communication in Frankfurt, Germany. Visitors reported an unforgettable experience with 36% saying their predominant feelings during the exhibition were of excitement and joy, and 30% saying their feelings were of optimism and motivation. Nearly three-quarters (70%) of visitors thought they got a more nuanced image of old age, while more than half stated they now had a more optimistic view of life and age or were more aware of how engaging and fulfilling old age can be.

Forty percent of visitors commented about being willing to prepare for their own future, being interested in learning more about aging, or being more open to talking about aging with their family or friends. A quarter (24%) of visitors, mainly people under age 30, stated they became more aware of elderly people, and 11% could imagine spending time or working with older people.

The guides themselves also reported that interacting with visitors was a positive experience, and they appreciated the teamwork with other older people. Furthermore, 45% said working as a guide had given them more self-esteem and had increased their confidence in facing aging.

AUTHENTIC ENCOUNTERS

The interaction during the exhibition with the senior guide was a key experience, with 85% of visitors qualifying meeting their guide as excellent and 30% saying that dialogue room 1 was their favorite part of the exhibition. Visitors particularly appreciated their guide's presentation of him or herself, and they found the games allowed for an easy start to the conversation.

This authentic sharing sets a common ground,



bringing people together and creating an emotional link among the visitors and with the senior guide. Visitors wrote such comments in the guest book as “It is an interactive experience with ‘experts’ who know what they are talking about”; “Sometimes people are more convincing than things”; and “To have the senior guide at our side is a good idea. It makes sense that especially younger people understand what will change in the future regarding demographics.”

The personality of the senior guide is crucial to the experience in *Dialogue with Time* because the guide becomes a role model whose behavior or success can be emulated by others, especially by younger people. Therefore, the senior guides need to be chosen carefully. Old age is not enough. The guides need to have a positive attitude toward aging, be able to develop and keep up a conversation, have a story to share, be able to handle awkward moments, and be both open-minded and empathic.

Senior guides receive professional training in



Senior guides lead visitors through *Dialogue with Time* and engage them in conversation. Photo by Bert Bostelmann

communication and moderation skills, and they are paid as staff. For some, the benefits go beyond the exhibition. For example, the senior guides in Frankfurt have created their own social enterprise. *Dialogue with Time* has closed in Frankfurt, but they will continue as senior dialoguers to foster intergenerational exchanges, mainly in schools. The exhibition is now in Berlin, where it was inaugurated by Joachim Gauck, the president of the Federal Republic of Germany. It will remain on view there until August 23.

To date, *Dialogue with Time* has been mounted in Israel and Germany, where the exhibition has shown it can shift paradigms. Younger generations can learn about aging and gain a positive attitude,

while seniors can discover new qualities of their advanced age. The impact even goes beyond the experience in the exhibition. For example, as we analyzed the popular media's coverage of the exhibition, we found that headlines presented aging in a positive light and also promoted a debate on "the culture of aging," in contrast to previous, mostly negative press coverage of the topic. *Dialogue with Time* has made it evident that exhibitions can emphasize older people's life achievements and foster intergenerational dialogue. ■

REFERENCE

United Nations Population Fund. (2012). *Ageing in the Twenty-First Century: A Celebration and A Challenge*. United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and HelpAge International: New York. www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Ageing%20report.pdf

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