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Reflections from the Field

Intergenerational Service Learning: Bringing Together Undergraduate Students and Older Adult Learners to Engage in Collaborative Research

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BACKGROUND: THE PURSUIT OF EDUCATION AND INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING

The aging population is more educated now than ever before. Parallel to the increase in educational levels is a growth in demand for lifelong learning opportunities (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). A fitting complement to lifelong learning for older adults is the experience of cooperating with younger generations via intergenerational programs, especially those with service learning components. While intergenerational service learning frequently involves projects in which older adults are recipients of specific services, less common are collaborative learning activities in which younger and older individuals contribute and benefit equally (Roodin, Brown, & Shedlock, 2013). When carried out effectively, intergenerational service learning demonstrates clear benefits to both age groups. For younger people, such programs enable them to establish meaningful relationships with older adults and dispel cultural stereotypes about the aged (Jones, 2011). For older adults, these experiences provide a better understanding of younger people, increased companionship, and meaningful social interactions (Rooden et al., 2013).
THE PROJECT: CONNECTING YOUNGER STUDENTS WITH OLDER LEARNERS

The aim of this pilot project was to determine the ways in which a semester-long, intergenerational service learning project would benefit both undergraduate students at Indiana State University and older adult members of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI). The experience was to serve as a reciprocal service learning project whereby the younger students would provide unique, educational experiences to the older learners and older participants would offer younger students real-world understandings of course concepts along with meaningful social exchanges with individuals from a different generation.

The course in which this project was situated was an introduction to social gerontology, a logical learning environment in which to house a project involving collaboration between younger people and older adults. Twenty-five undergraduate students enrolled in the gerontology course worked alongside five older adult learners from OLLI, enrolled in a corresponding course, to complete a research project on a particular topic. The two groups of learners each fulfilled a particular role in the project. The undergraduate students completed academic research on a particular topic, while, for the older adult learners, the project served as an experiential learning exercise involving intergenerational and academic mentorship roles.

During the semester, the two groups of learners engaged in three joint activities to complete the project. The first meeting involved a brainstorming session early in the semester allowing the participants to generate topics for the project, based on the academic and personal interests of both groups of learners. Topics ultimately chosen included, but were not limited to, gender roles and the life course, aging and technology, aging stereotypes in the media, working past retirement, and coping with “sandwich generation” stress. The second meeting occurred mid-semester and was comprised of a feedback session in which each older adult was paired with a small group of undergraduate students to discuss and provide constructive feedback on the research progress made by the undergraduate students. The project culminated in the third and final activity, namely final oral presentations by the younger students, which were evaluated by the older adults.

PROGRAM OUTCOMES

While there were certainly challenges associated with the planning and execution of the project, the experience was largely viewed as a positive experience by both groups of learners.
Feedback from Older Participants

Older adults regularly taking part in the courses offered by OLLI tend not to be interested in intergenerational experiences in which their sole purpose is to discuss “what it feels like to be old.” As such, this project was intended to link older and younger learners in a collaborative capacity, rather than involving older adults as subjects from which to mine information about aging. At the conclusion of the project, the OLLI learners reported that they enjoyed working alongside the undergraduate students on this project, providing feedback based on real-world perspectives and serving in a mentorship role during the research process. In particular, the final oral presentations allowed the OLLI members to witness the students’ increased knowledge on their chosen topics throughout the semester and to provide constructive feedback on the presentation style and content.

Although the OLLI members learned from their interactions with the undergraduate students, both from their unique perspectives as younger people and from the information gleaned from their research, they had hoped to spend more time with the students. Specifically, the OLLI learners expressed that they wanted a chance to develop more meaningful relationships by providing individual or small-group mentorship to their younger counterparts.

Feedback from Younger Participants

On the whole, the feedback provided by the undergraduate students was overwhelmingly positive. The majority of the students considered the feedback from OLLI members on their papers and presentations to be valuable. Several students indicated that, after their initial apprehension about the prospect of working with older adults, they were ultimately inspired by the OLLI learners’ perspectives on their topics, appreciative of their advice about the research process, and impressed by the levels of knowledge demonstrated by their older counterparts. Many expressed that, while the OLLI learners are facing society’s stereotypes about aging, they are simultaneously defying them with their enthusiasm about continuing education, eagerness to travel, engagement in novel experiences and knowledge about technology. Students that received particularly high praise on their oral presentations tended to feel as if their work on the project was legitimized by receiving positive feedback from older people.

Some students stated that this project, along with the course content on aging, transformed their views on the aging process and challenged their assumptions about older people. Many developed an increased appreciation of older adults and, as one student articulated, “This experience impacted my views immensely. Many of the stereotypes are false, such as older adults being frail and brittle, senile, cranky and isolated. . . . My experience is one
I will take with me for future classes and life practices.” Echoing the sentiments of the OLLI learners, the vast majority of the undergraduate students expressed that they would have liked to have spent more time collaborating with the OLLI members to gain increased insights from them about their lives and on the research topic.

REFLECTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

In the end, this pilot project was considered successful in that it brought together individuals from two distinct age groups and allowed for meaningful intergenerational communication and collaborative learning to take place. While each group of learners regarded the experience as a valuable one, ultimately, the common theme was that members of each age group expressed a desire to spend more quality time with members of the other during the course of the semester. Unfortunately, when coordinating a course-based project involving undergraduate students and OLLI learners, the implementation of a high-contact intergenerational experience offering ample time for one-on-one mentorship between the age groups can often be derailed by practical challenges. For example, enrollment numbers for both undergraduate and OLLI courses are difficult to determine ahead of time and often fluctuate well into the semester; in an OLLI course involving multiple meetings (versus single-session presentations, workshops, or lectures), enrollment tends to be low, making the ratio of younger to older course participants quite high; Finally, OLLI members tend to have robust travel schedules during the year, while undergraduate students are busy with multiple classes, activities, and part-time jobs, making it difficult for younger and older students to meet regularly on a one-on-one or small-group basis.

In future semesters, it will be important to consider ways in which this kind of project can be designed to increase contact time between members of each age group in order to allow for more meaningful exchanges and learning. Considering that enrollment in this particular introductory gerontology course is only growing, it may be more logical to move the project into a lower-enrollment course that can focus primarily on intergenerational service learning, rather than including it as a credit-bearing project among many other assignments. Intergenerational service learning could also be offered in many shapes and sizes, whereby some courses could include a simple, valuable project in which one aspect of a community issue is addressed on a short-term basis (one or two sessions); other courses could be built around a semester-long project focused on cooperative service learning between generations, and still others could involve a collaborative project between two or more courses from different disciplines. In addition, the nature of the service learning projects can be tailored to fit the needs
and interests of the groups of older people involved as well as the learning objectives of the respective courses.

REFERENCES


