Bringing the community into the classroom:
An exploration of intergenerational learning within the University classroom

President’s Teaching and Learning Scholar Final Report
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Introduction

THRC/KIN 240: Therapeutic Recreation: Aging/Physical Activity and Aging is a second year class focused on leisure and physical activity in later life. The course prepares students to work with older adults in our aging society in a variety of settings, including community programs, day programs, and long-term care. The aim of the course content is to encourage students to consider and discuss a wide variety of topics relating to recreation in later life, including demography, ageism, diversity, theories of aging, physical, cognitive, and psychological well-being, and models of long-term care. This aim is met, in part, by intergenerational student-led seminars. Several volunteers from the community participate in weekly seminars, giving students the opportunity to interact with and learn from older adults who are currently experiencing the aging process. Volunteers share their life experiences with the students and teach them about later life in ways that traditional methods are unable to do.

Purpose

After implementing intergenerational learning seminars in THRC/KIN 240, I wanted to investigate the experiences of the students and the volunteers in learning from each other about the aging process. Secondly, it was my hope to use the information gathered from students and volunteers to improve the structure of the seminars that both students and volunteers find the seminars to be valuable.

An overview of intergenerational learning

Intergenerational learning programs are designed to bring together generations to learn from each other (Cabanillas, 2011; Manheimer, 1997; Newman & Smith, 1997), through mutually beneficial interactions and planned activities (Ayala, Hewson, Bray, Jones, & Hartley, 2007; Newman & Smith, 1997). Students in a variety of health care disciplines are rarely interested in working with older adults, which may result in shortages of professionals to do so (Horowitz, Wong, & Dechello, 2010). However, programs that provide opportunities for students to regularly interact with older adults may be beneficial for preparation for such work, particularly by reducing ageist attitudes among students and increasing understanding of the opportunities and challenges of later life (Gonzales, Morrow-Howell, & Gilbert, 2010; Wangmo, Ewen, Webb, Teaster, & Hatch, 2009).
Overview of the intergenerational learning seminars

THRC/KIN 240 students participate in ten weekly, 50-minute intergenerational seminars. The purpose of the seminars is three-fold: 1) to provide students with the opportunity to develop leadership and facilitation skills that will be required of them as professionals in the field; 2) to encourage increased engagement in learning outside of the traditional classroom through in-depth discussion about aging; 3) to provide students with opportunities to interact with and learn from seniors living in their community.

The seminar groups are composed of students, two seminar volunteers, and a teaching assistant (TA). As seminar leaders, students develop discussion questions and activities based on the assigned readings to engage their peers in in-depth conversation. As seminar participants, students participate in group discussion and activities, arrive on time, complete assigned readings, and evaluate student leaders. Seminar volunteers, who were retired community members aged 60 and over, were vital to the success of the seminars. Volunteers complete and share their opinions about the readings, share their relevant life experiences with students, and grade seminar leadership.

Study Methods

In order to gather information about the experiences of students and volunteers, data were collected through face to face interviews that were digitally recorded and transcribed. Questions included to both groups included: Tell me about your experiences with the intergenerational seminars? What did you like about the seminars? How could the seminars be improved? How prepared did you feel to be a seminar participant? Students were asked: How did seminar volunteers impact your learning in the seminars? Volunteers were asked: What are the benefits and challenges of being a volunteer with the intergenerational seminars? What did you learn from the students in the seminars?

Six seminar volunteers and six students participated in the interviews. Among the seniors, there were two men and four women. Among the students, there were five women and one man. All students were in their second or third year of study.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, an exploratory approach in which data are coded according to emerging themes (Schwandt, 2007). Interviews were read multiple times, allowing for reflection on the interviews as a whole. Then, codes were developed and patterns identified to organize the data into themes and subthemes (Aronson, 1994). Comparisons were made within and across interviews, and emerging themes were pieced together to create a picture of the students’ and seniors’ experiences. The research team met throughout the process to discuss emerging codes and their connections.

Findings

Three main themes emerged from the data analysis. These included meanings of intergenerational interactions, strengths and limitations of the intergenerational seminars, and suggestions for improvement.
Meanings of intergenerational interactions

Both students and seniors identified several meanings of their interactions with each other. The seminars were perceived as an opportunity to get to learn about each other. Both students and seniors reported learning more about the other generation. One volunteer said:

I enjoyed the experience of interacting with younger people…and I think the exchange was really two-way. We’re sensitized to some of the issues that young people have out there, and I think they in turn were a little bit more sensitized or made aware of the other side of the coin if I could put it, the great divide.

Students similarly described learning about the seniors:

They asked a lot of questions, they gave their point of view on things which was often quite different from what our point of view was. And we got to basically see the difference of what their generation thought from what our generation thought. It was really interesting and we had a lot of discussion and we had a lot of fun.

Shared interactions led to changing perspectives about the other generation. Volunteers challenged ageist stereotypes and demonstrated through their experiences and stories that such stereotypes are inaccurate. For example, one volunteer highlighted the effects of ageism and appreciated having the opportunity to address it with younger people:

…I see on so many different levels, ageism, the effect of ageism, how people perceive growing older and so on and I think it is important to share with folks generally about how it feels, what are some the major worries, but what are some of the benefits of aging and how can we work in a slightly different way in society to support people at different points in their life.

In turn, students began to see later life in a more positive light: “…they definitely took the so-called negative side of aging and they, um, expanded it and um, they…showed me the benefits of aging – and it is not just wrinkles and moles or whatever!”

Seminar volunteers found meaning in connecting and contributing. Volunteers appreciated having the opportunity to connect to the university community and young people:

Well for us the benefits are getting out into...the university and working with students of this nature...it’s always good for seniors to have something like this to look forward to, so that was one of the benefits, it was, it got us out and involved, It was another opportunity volunteer for something and, you know we like to be as involved in the community as possible.

Students acknowledged and appreciated this contribution:

I was really impressed, because like lots of the time if it’s seniors around a bunch of 19, 20 year olds, they’re not usually too impressed (laughs) so I was like really impressed with them just for coming and wanting to participate with us and hang
out with us every week basically. They took an hour of their time …so I think at least, we should at least show them like, enough respect, and like be happy that they’re there, like I was glad that they were there.

Students spoke about being engaged in learning, which had relevance for their futures. They compared the seminars to lectures and felt comfortable speaking out in the smaller groups and the relaxed environment, which resulted in a more meaningful learning experience. One student stated:

Um, I liked how it engaged everyone, like everyone was encouraged to participate, like the [seminar] leaders would often ask you like a question like specifically kind of thing and you like…you couldn’t just sit there and not do anything, you had to participate and you had to engage.

A second student highlighted how this level of engagement led to better learning: “you actually learned things…they’re not just lectures, you’re not just talked to, you’re talked with…”. Engaging in learning in this way allowed students to see the relevance of the course for their own lives and professions. For example, one student spoke of a lack of interest in the topic of aging, but then acknowledged the importance of learning about the topic personally:

I think at first when you go through the syllabus and all learning about aging and who wants to learn about aging?...I just want to be young right now, I don’t want to think about being old, but I think it helps set you up for, you know, staying active now, becoming active now, um, will continue later on into your future. (S3)

It is evident from the interviews that the students and seniors had positive experiences with each other through the intergenerational learning seminars as they learned about each other and gained different perspectives on later life.

**Strengths and limitations of the intergenerational seminars**

In addition to identifying meanings of the intergenerational interactions, both volunteers and students highlighted several strengths and limitations of the seminar process. Below, I list several of these strengths and limitations.

**Strengths**

Volunteers identified several positive aspects of the seminars, including:

- Positive informal interactions with students
- Student behaviour, including preparation for the seminars and regular attendance
- Opportunities for students to engage with each other and course material
- Opportunities for different types of knowledge (e.g. experiential knowledge, book knowledge)
- Assigned readings
- Accessibility of parking and the classroom
Students identified several strengths as well. These included:

- Making connections between classroom learning and practical situations through discussion
- Gaining a better understanding of course material through discussion
- Interacting with classmates and others outside of the traditional classroom
- The seminars as a safe space for open discussion
- Feelings of belonging within the seminar group and supporting each other
- Opportunities to learn from feedback about seminar facilitation
- Experiencing an alternative way of learning
- Having choice and control about how to engage students in discussion
- Increasing knowledge about aging
- Building leadership skills
- Feelings of empathy for peers in leading and participating in seminars
- Increased motivation to learn more about a particular topic
- Opportunities to apply seminar learning in other aspects of their lives

There were differences in the strengths as identified by both students and volunteers. Volunteers largely viewed the strengths of the seminars in terms of their interactions with the students and student behaviour. Students focused on the impact of the seminars on their own learning and the benefits for their education and other aspects of their lives.

**Limitations**

Although there were many positive aspects of the seminars, volunteers and students identified several areas for improvement.

Volunteers identified the following limitations and challenges:

- The physical space in which the seminars took place, which did not support conversation
- Finding parking and the classroom
- Lack of exposure to diversity of older adults
- Lack of acknowledgement of the more negative aspects of aging
- Feeling uncertain about the purpose of the seminars, their roles within the seminars and knowing how much to say without dominating the conversation
- Difficulty completing the readings due to time constraints
- Academic jargon included in the readings
- Lack of preparation of the students for seminar leadership and participation (e.g. completing the readings ahead of time)
- Difficulty hearing students
- Varying degrees of student engagement and difficulty encouraging active engagement
- Different student motivations (e.g. those who are there to learn vs. those who want to earn marks)
• Age and maturity level of the students  (second year may be too early for this type of learning activity)
• Lack of understanding of how to facilitate discussion among student leaders
• Using activities to fill time rather than promote meaningful discussion. This might include focusing on memory rather than debate or discussion
• Breaking into smaller groups which inhibited discussion
• Feeling unprepared to grade student seminars, requiring more direction for grading, and understanding why one’s grade matters

Students also identified several limitations, including:

• Physical space limited discussion
• Dissatisfaction when student leaders selected activities aimed at filling time rather than in-depth discussion. Some students perceived these activities as wasting time and stifling discussion
• Finding ways to engage other students
• Feeling nervous about presenting alone
• Feeling uncertain about what to do for one’s seminar
• Being original and avoiding activities that previous students implemented
• Difficulty keeping the discussion focused on the current topic
• Lack of engagement from other students
• Challenges in leading a seminar, such as being flexible with plans and staying on track
• Being unprepared to discuss the readings
• Uncertainty about how to involve volunteers in discussion
• Difficulty finding an opportunity to speak out when conversation was dominated by a small number of seminar participants
• Readings were considered too lengthy and not always relevant in Saskatchewan

Volunteers and students highlighted many similar limitations in their discussions of the seminars. In particular, both identified the classroom space as limiting, and were disappointed when other students selected activities aimed at filling time rather than meaningful discussion. Both groups saw the readings as a limitation, although some volunteers enjoyed the readings. Students highlighted challenges in leading seminars, and volunteers similarly noted that some students struggled to facilitate meaningful discussion.

Suggestions for seminar improvement

Students and volunteers offered suggestions for improvement for the seminars as well. Volunteers recommended:

• Clarifying the purpose of the seminars
• Clarifying the role of the volunteers
• Orientation for volunteers
• More preparation for students to learn how to facilitate and participate in seminars, including public speaking skills and seminar leadership skills
• Providing an example for students to observe a successful seminar before planning their own
• Finding a more appropriate space for the seminars
• Selecting shorter readings
• Requiring engagement on the part of the students to increase participation for seminar discussion
• Increasing diversity of volunteers
• Obtaining student feedback regarding volunteers
• Having students select the readings
• Planning for inclement weather
• Feedback on grading

Students provided several suggestions as well. These included:

• Getting out of the classroom and making better use of the University
• Removing student leaders from the seminars
• Pairing up to lead seminars to reduce nervousness
• Journaling about seminar participation to encourage more engagement and completion of the readings
• Better training to facilitate discussion
• Assigning a research question for consideration
• Taking a case study approach, where students work through a relevant case study to discuss the topic
• Clarification of expectations of students
• Increased feedback from the teaching assistant

Some of these suggestions have been implemented within the seminars, including an orientation for volunteers, a new grading form to make grading more clear, completion of quizzes prior to the seminar to indicate preparation for participation, pairing up of seminar leaders, increased preparation to lead and participate in seminars for students in class, and an example of a seminar led by the TA.

Conclusion

This study provided insight into the meaning and experience of intergenerational seminars for both students and volunteers. The findings of this study support the consensus in the literature that intergenerational learning is positive for both students and older adults. Like other research, the participants of this study reported more positive perspectives of the other generation and began to develop connections with each other (Doll, 2006; Dupuis, 2002). Students highlighted the benefits of the interactions with regards to their own learning, and seniors appreciated being able to “give back” to the younger generation (See Dupuis, 2002; Newman & Smith, 1997)

Although both students and seniors had positive experiences within the seminars, they also highlighted limitations of the seminars and offered several suggestions for improvement. While some of these suggestions are more difficult to implement (e.g. finding a different room when space on campus is at a premium), some steps have been made to better prepare both
students and volunteers for participation in the seminars. Several suggestions still warrant consideration, such as providing feedback to volunteers, removing student leaders all together, and inclusion of a journaling assignment for students to further consider the topic of discussion each week.

References


