

Exposure to Dementia: Capturing Students' Attitudes and Perceptions Through Service-Learning

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Abstract

This study explores and examines the impact of intergenerational interaction between individuals with dementia and college students' attitudes toward aging and older adults with dementia. Students in an introductory gerontology course participated in a service-learning experience with cognitively impaired older adults for a period of ten weeks. All students in this introductory gerontology course completed reflective journals about their service-learning experience. In addition, a number of the students were interviewed to further explore their attitudes and perceptions about aging and service-learning with cognitively impaired older adults. The journals and interviews were then analyzed. The findings of this study explore and examine to the extent exposure to service-learning and cognitively impaired older adults changes college students' attitude and perceptions of aging.

Service-Learning and Gerontology Education

Service-learning is a credit bearing educational experience requiring students to engage in an organized and meaningful service activity that meets a genuine community need. Service-learning is different than community service in that it not only heightens the levels of awareness and the ability to effect positive change in communities, but it explicitly includes "learning". Students are given the opportunity to reflect on their communities and apply critical thinking skills and academic knowledge to the why and how of making positive social change. It is a form of experiential learning that cultivates the application of academic knowledge and critical thinking skills to address genuine community need. Students reflect on their service activity through writing, discussion, reading and journaling to gain further understanding of their course content, broaden their application to the discipline, and to enhance their civic responsibility. Service-learning is an organic commitment to education and addressing community need.

The service-learning model is evolving within higher education and is expanding in many Gerontology programs throughout the country; there are over 45 colleges and universities with Gerontology programs that offer students the chance to grow through service-learning. These programs recognize the importance and celebrate the salience of service-learning in the higher education model, the commitment to the process of learning, searching, and serving is evident. A qualitative study by Laura Hess and Paul Roodin found that Gerontology students who participated in service-learning developed better insights about aging and older adults, were able to break down myths and stereotypes (personally and for others), cultivated a stronger ethic and values of service and volunteering, become more familiar with the positive and negative realities of long-term care for older adults, and were able to hone skills and to better solidify future plans for careers in the aging network. Service-learning connects theory to practice and links colleges and universities to communities. It can enhance the curricular goals of Gerontology and fosters a civic responsibility within students. Incorporating service-learning into Gerontology curricula introduces a furthered expansion and richness of service-learning, intergenerational service-learning.

Intergenerational service-learning involves three main types of service, youth serving seniors, seniors serving youth or youth and seniors serving together. Service-learning has its obvious benefits; adding the intergenerational component is an organic expansion of an already profound type of learning. Generations are meant to learn from and to teach one another, as they all have so much to offer. Intergenerational service-learning encourages the development of long-term relationships across generations within a community; it works to break down myths and stereotypes about the different generations, and promotes life-long learning. Intergenerational service-learning accentuates the reciprocal needs of the youth and elders involved. Whether it is youth serving seniors, seniors serving youth, or youth and seniors serving together, intergenerational service-learning fulfills basic needs. It fulfills the need to be nurtured and to nurture and to learn and to teach. It also provides the opportunity to learn about the past and to offer insight into the anticipated future, and it gives hope to connect with preceding generations and the chance to leave behind a legacy. Intergenerational service-learning is the key to linking generations, and perhaps healing a society that so devalues the importance of its children and elders.



Methods

The purpose of this study explores the impact of intergenerational interaction with individuals with dementia on Miami University students' attitudes toward aging and older adults with dementia. It also examines attitudes toward community service and attitudes toward working with older adults. The study also aims to investigate the influence of intergenerational interaction on students' understanding of academic knowledge and course content in gerontology.

Students in the course GTY 154: Aging in American Society volunteered once a week for ten weeks at The Knolls of Oxford (a local CCRC). Each session lasted approximately one hour. Volunteers served in the Memory Unit at the Knolls of Oxford and helped with the Knoll's Montessori Education Program and the Opening Minds through Art Program. In addition, as part of the course students were informed about relevant topics such as stereotypes, and ageism. Also, student participated in a tour and orientation session at the Knolls of Oxford before beginning the service.

The service-learning component, which was embedded in the course, was presented on the first day as a mandatory assignment. Students who are uncomfortable participating were advised to register for one of the other sections of GTY 154, in order to ensure that participation was voluntary. Multiple sections of GTY 154 were being offered during the semester, and many of these sections had several available seats.

Students participated in reflective journals and seven students elected to participate in pre-test and post-test evaluation, which consisted of an interview to assess the students' experiences and their attitudes toward aging and other age groups.

Findings

Through a thematic analysis, the following themes emerged:

Students felt the service-learning experience enhanced the course content:

- "It definitely emphasized the stuff in the class."
- "I gained a broader perspective of issues in aging."
- "It made me more familiar with issues that the aging population experiences."
- "Whatever we learned in the course, we used in a real life scenario."
- "It put the class into perspective."
- "It brought the text to life."
- "I was aware of what to expect and could understand why it happened."

Students indicated that the service-learning course impacted their education positively:

- "It positively impacted me and I am now going to minor in gerontology."
- "I enjoyed the class and learned a lot; it was a great experience."

Students stated that the experience changed their views of older adults with dementia:

- "It made me more empathetic."
- "It just broadened my perspective. I realized [people with dementia] could have joy and purpose."
- "[Before the experience], I didn't have any clue what dementia or how it affected people."
- "The residents [with dementia] were more connected than I thought - we could have conversations like a normal person."
- "People with dementia can have a good quality of life."
- There is a "potential for people's [with dementia] quality of life to be really high - definitely worth something and exploring the potential."

The students expressed mixed views on how the experience impacted their personal view of aging:

- "I am afraid to get dementia - I don't want it and to have a loss of control."
- "I am not afraid to get old anymore...you can shape the outcome."
- "The possibility of dementia scares me a little."
- "I feel more prepared. I understand the best case/worst case scenarios. I think I was ageist before - now I think more positively."

Students felt a possible point of improvement was to engage students with a more diverse population of older adults - in other words, spend part of the time serving in a context with older adults with dementia and part of the time serving in a context with older adults without cognitive impairments.

Sample Journal Entries

"By spending time at the [CCRC], it has only helped me visualize the concepts we have talked about in class as well as analyze what I see from the facility, the interaction of the residents, and the interaction of others with the residents. The readings....can be applied to the [CCRC] and come alive."

"This service-learning experience has helped me to have a better understanding of aging with those suffering from memory loss. Before the beginning of this semester, I was unsure how to approach my grandpa who has advancing dementia. I always thought he was crazy and did not know how to handle situation. After taking this course and volunteering in the memory unit with OMA, I think I will have a better understanding of my grandpa's situation and how to approach his behaviors in a positive way. I know I will be more patient with older adults because you can never judge someone just by looking at them from the outside. We are all going through some sort of aging process together and we should be there to support our fellow peers and loved ones throughout life."

"I have really enjoyed my service at the [CCRC]. It is a fun thing that I look forward to rather than just being another assignment for a class."

"I am learning a lot at the [CCRC]. I learn...a lot about the residents and what makes them happy. They definitely value the conversation and time spent with the volunteers. I am learning that I can work with Alzheimer's patients despite my worries before we started [the service-learning]. I am also growing more comfortable each time, feeling more natural talking and working with the residents. The more relaxed I feel working each week, the smoother the time goes and the easier it is for me to interact well with the residents. From working with the residents, I have learned that having Alzheimer's and dementia does not mean a person cannot express himself/herself and that patients can still have adequate cognitive ability, or at least enough to carry on conversation even when memories may not last past the end of the sentence. I think it really shows that Alzheimer's patients deserve care, respect, and admiration, things that I am not sure all patients suffering from the diseases get. I also find it disconcerting when people compare Alzheimer's patients to babies because they are not. Sitting down and talking to...several of the residents will prove that they have had lifetimes worth of knowledge and can still tell a good story."

"As I analyze what I have learned at the [CCRC] and what I have learned in class, it is clear that aging is an individual experience. Each person is unique and has led a life that is different from anyone else. Older adults have had different experiences regarding health, family life, jobs, etc...though many experiences are shared across a cohort or time period. It is a true injustice to lump all older people into a single group characterized by outdated, false stereotypes. Older adults have much to offer everyone. They have lived a long life and can share their experiences, wisdom, and opinions which can awaken new ideas and new ways of thinking in younger generations."



"Throughout the semester, myself and many of my peers have had the opportunity to work with older people in places like the Knolls. After reading [the text]...I was able to open my eyes and see the lack of connection between all generations today....There is more to learn from being with people of different ages, than from peers. Everyone ages differently and working with older people with dementia is different than working with older people who are cognitively intact. By being involved in [the service-learning experience], I have gained a new perspective on the older generation and older people with dementia. Having experienced classroom instruction as well as learning from a 'real-world' perspective at the [CCRC], I have found myself more capable of understanding the theories and concepts that have been introduced to me in various class lectures."

"From service-learning, I see that even loss of capabilities does not mean there is no joy to be had."

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