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## **Using Experiential and Collaborative Learning with Undergraduates and Rural Elders as Part of an Introduction to Gerontology Course**

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*This study examines an Introduction to Gerontology course for undergraduate students that integrates experiential and collaborative learning experiences as part of a general course requirement. Experiential learning encourages students to go outside of the classroom and learn about aging from an older person in a field setting. The collaborative group approach is designed to have peers work together in the course. This study used qualitative methods to examine undergraduates' learning experiences as a result of participation in a multiple-interview and groupwork-based project through their enrollment in the Introduction to Gerontology course. Content analysis was used to analyze multiple sources of data produced by the 43 students enrolled. Data were retrieved from students' self-reflections in open-ended questionnaires and blinded course evaluations along with the authors' own observational work. Findings indicate that students benefited from the experiential component which served to dispel stereotypes and preconceived ideas about older persons, though that did not necessarily translate into generating students' interest in making gerontology a career path. Collaborative work, although seen generally as positive, had some mixed results based on students' roles in the group and dynamics of a few groups. Issues of some student roles in the group unexpectedly not meeting with the older person are also discussed along with the impact of the project upon the community-partnered organization.*

*Keywords: Experiential learning, Collaborative learning, Qualitative research, Older adults, College students*

As the first waves of Baby Boomers (those born 1946-1964) reach 65 years of age, this 65-and-older age group is projected to more than double in the next 40 years (U.S. Census, 2010). While an estimated 72 million Baby Boomers will reach retirement age by the year 2030, the number of students entering the field of aging is not keeping pace (Bragg, Warshaw, Meganathan, & Brewer, 2010). Gerontology programs are being closed and must actively work to attract more students (Karasik, 2012). Gerontology curricula provide opportunities for educators to reach undergraduate students in a variety of ways; however, many gerontology educators lack access to the pedagogical tools and resources necessary to reach their undergraduate students (Bergman, Erickson, & Simons, 2014). This lack of curricular opportunities leads to the paradox of an increasing older population, but undergraduate interest not keeping pace with that growth. One such explanation is that undergraduates may not see the relevance of gerontology to their own fields of study and future careers. Expanding gerontology curriculum to allow students to learn basic concepts they can apply to their individual fields of study is essential for the growth of the field and improved treatment of older adults (Gugliucci & Weiner, 2013; Rodin, Brown, & Shedlock, 2013). Because engaging students and enhancing their learning in gerontology courses

continues to offer challenges, it is critical that teaching approaches and gerontological curricula be reevaluated and modified to be more relevant and of greater interest to today's undergraduate students.

### **Adding Experiential and Collaborative Approaches to Didactic Learning**

Higher education has long consisted of teaching methods typically focusing on didactic lectures and tests based on factual recall (Williams, Weil, & Porter, 2012). Instructors, in an effort to improve pedagogy, are shifting away from these older methods of teaching and combining methods to create newer ones. These activities move beyond “memorization to actively constructing knowledge” in ways that are linked to academic and personal growth outcomes (Villar, Fabà, & Celdrán, 2013, p. 368).

Millennial learners have demonstrated that they want to contribute to society but desire to do so through more active learning (Furco, 2010). In fact, in the *Newsletter of the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education*, Kruger and Van Drussen (2014) suggest that community engagement should be explored as a way to introduce students to the field of gerontology. They recommend programs in which students spread the word about their courses that have practical application and programs that promote “engaging activities that challenge students and facilitate integration of their existing knowledge with new material will generate energy and enthusiasm” (9). Gerontological and geriatrics educators are finding pedagogies that include real-life experience are becoming increasingly important in teaching (Lee, Dooley, Ory, & Sumaya, 2013; Niles-Yokum & Howe, 2013).

This work offers a study of two particular pedagogical techniques, experiential learning (interview-based experiences) and collaborative (groupwork), in an introductory undergraduate gerontology course in an attempt to answer questions about the impact of each method upon students.

### **Experiential and Collaborative Learning in a Gerontological Course**

#### **Literature on Experiential Learning in Gerontology**

Experiential learning, in the broadest sense, can be thought of as “learning activities that engage the learner directly in the phenomena being studied” (Kendall [1986] in Moore, 2013, p. 44). Simply, this approach combines experience and learning in an environment of mutual and educator-supported learning (National Society for Experiential Education, 2014). Early work on the general experiential learning method found it improves several levels of students' abilities. Students gather concrete experiences and use them to reflect and apply, in more abstract ways, what they have learned. They can also apply what they learn in the field to their own fields of study or future careers (Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning mixes the best of both worlds, the classroom and community, giving students “meaningfulness in the mind and heart” (Billig, 2011, 10). Using a combination of methods goes beyond “listening to lectures and reading textbooks, the conventional modes of learning, [which are] are particularly vulnerable to producing superficial understanding” (Warner, Glissmeyer, & Gu, 2012, p. 6). Experiential learning has been empirically linked to improved learning outcomes in a wide array of fields of study, from agriculture to sociology (Teixeira, Cameron, & Schulman, 2011).

Experiential learning can also make gerontology real. As gerontological and family-studies researchers found, the field setting becomes the classroom, and the community is

the teacher (Karasik & Berke, 2001, p. 314). Student learning happens in a community setting, often in the case of gerontology courses in an independent, assisted, or skilled nursing care setting. It is the experience at these community sites that facilitates learning. Quality of contact with an older person has improved attitudes towards aging and older people in college students and increased interest in gerontology courses (Bergman, Erickson, & Simons, 2014). By allowing students to interact with older persons in their local community, myths are more easily dispelled, and the difficulty of trying to apply classroom learning in the real world dissipates. Undergraduates often have preconceived ideas that older persons are frail, in poor health, do not like technology, and dislike young people. Contact works to dispel these commonly held prejudices (Van Dussen & Weaver, 2009). Kalisch, Coughlin, Ballard, and Lamson (2013) found time spent in the field as part of an Introduction to Gerontology course helped students apply concepts and decrease stereotypes while piquing interest in future gerontological work. Through the use of pre and post testing on the Fraboni Scale of ageism, Wurtele and Maruyama (2013) found experiential work in a lifespan development course reduced negative stereotypes of old age as a time of non-productivity and passivity. Villar, Fabà, and Celdrán (2013) and Loe (2013) found life narrative work, as part of a gerontology course, generates students' interest in their own lives and family histories. Meetings between undergraduates and older persons also build strong interpersonal relationships and bonds that are reciprocal for both partners (Zuccherro, 2011).<sup>1</sup>

### **Literature on Collaborative Learning/Groupwork in Gerontology**

Collaborative learning has many meanings and may differ by disciplinary approach – but Barkley, Cross, and Major (2004) found some commonalities of the term's usage to include a process of student pairs or groups to achieve learning goals (4). They suggest collaborative work must be intentional, labor-based, and offer students meaningful learning exchange. O'Donnell and Hmelo-Silver (2013) note that collaborative work should include an equal emphasis on principles of equality and mutuality. Also, collaborative learning can help college students, in a diverse range of levels and learning styles, build upon cooperation through social cohesion.

Groupwork as a form of collaborative learning can create positive conflict when students realize their ideas are not unanimously agreed upon by the group, which gives students the opportunity to practice skills in resolving conflict (Willis, 2007). As Webb (2013) suggests, in the best-case scenario, students can present and solve problems by working through disagreement. By creating situations inside the classroom requiring conflict resolution, students develop resolution skills in a closed, safe and monitored environment. Collaborative learning also promotes a setting in which students can feel free to share, develop, and challenge alternate viewpoints (Chen, Chung, Crane, Hlavach, Viall, & Pierce, 2001). By this process, students ultimately create a larger knowledge base within themselves which broadens their educational viewpoint. Working collaboratively in groups teaches students to produce quality work by using each member's strengths and collectively reaching conclusions. Learning how to convey opinions while respecting other people is a lifelong skill that can be used in any field of study.

Undergraduates may perceive groupwork courses as taking more time and may feel that group work generates barriers involving time and scheduling (Phillips, 2013). Webb (2013) cautions us that collaborative learning may also have what she calls “debilitating processes.” She defines six of these processes that negatively affect groupwork. Groups

can fail to present ideas with sufficient elaboration. They can fail to seek help from other group members or suppress participants (such as giving a member lower status or blocking mutual interaction). Groups may also have too little or too much conflict. Groups can lack coordination or strategies to integrate ideas. And, lastly, groups may have what Webb (2013) calls “socio-emotional problems” such as rudeness, hostility, or sarcasm. In gerontological undergraduate classes, Karasik (2005) found these same logistics (e.g. finding a common meeting time, student behaviors that contributed to a lack of commitment to the group) were impediments to active collaborative learning.

### **Course Overview and Aims**

The course examined by this paper is designed as an on-campus, 200-level introduction-to-gerontology class intended for undergraduates; it is an elective in a human-services-based major and an elective option in the university’s liberal arts core. The course’s aim is to introduce students to the field of social gerontology and provide an overview of issues of aging and older adults. The course has a life course perspective approach to examine aging at the individual and societal levels (including the impact of policies and historical context upon an individual’s life). Upon completion of the course, students will be expected to be able to:

- Identify physical, psychological, cognitive and social changes that occur with age.
- Identify social policies, historical trends, and demographic characteristics that affect older persons.
- Identify services and programs for older adults, at the federal, state, and local levels, and demonstrate an understanding of how to secure information from and about these resources.
- Identify cultural, ethnic, and gender differences among aging populations.
- Demonstrate critical and complex thinking about issues concerning older adults.
- Effectively communicate knowledge of aging in writing.
- Compare/contrast personal experiences of older adults with trends and findings in the field of gerontology.

In terms of learning activities, language in the syllabus informs students that as part of the course they will be engaged in active learning and critical reflection. For both the experiential and collaborative aspects, instructor expectations are explained. The experiential portion consists of at least two meetings and interviews with an older person. For the collaborative portion, students are assigned to groups with each group member taking on an assigned role in order to interview an elder about their life experiences. Each group consists of interviewer(s), historian, observer, and a question designer (creating an extra set of questions specifically around their interviewee’s interests). Throughout the course, groups analyze and present what they learned by reflecting upon the interview text and incorporating gerontological concepts from the course. Groups produce a common presentation and write a collaborative final paper.<sup>2</sup>

### **Research Questions**

In this study, we explore the role of collaboration and experiential learning as ways of expanding gerontological curriculum and influencing student perceptions of older persons and aging. We place undergraduate students in groups to conduct multiple, semi-structured interviews with persons aged 60 or older, and we specifically address the following research

questions:

RQ1. Does the experiential learning (interview) experience change students' perceptions of older persons and aging?

RQ2. How do students evaluate the collaborative (groupwork) experience as part of the course?

These questions are the first steps to assess ways to make coursework in undergraduate gerontology courses engaging for students which could eventually lead to ways to increase overall interest in the field.

## **Methods: Steps in the Process**

### **Setting**

This study was conducted in a public university in a moderately conservative state in the western United States. Average undergraduate university enrollment is approximately 10,000 students. Almost all undergraduates have full-time status (94%) with an average course load of 14 credit hours and are in-state students (93%). About 30% are first-generation students, and the same percentage live on campus. In terms of race and ethnicity, recorded for undergraduate and graduate students combined, 25 percent self-identify in a minority ethnic or racial group.

### **Students**

Students were drawn as a convenience sample and recruited from a 2012 on-campus section of Introduction to Gerontology. While all students in the class participated in the experiential and collaborative learning work of this IRB-approved study, signed informed consent forms to use students' data for research and publication was obtained from 43 of the 48 students – resulting in a response rate of almost 90%.<sup>3</sup> This sample was mostly women (77%). In terms of academic year, 20% of the sample were freshmen, 31% sophomores, 33% juniors, and 16% seniors. Participants ranged from all academic years and 13 individual fields of study. The top four majors were Recreation, Tourism and Hospitality (32%); Psychology (15%); Human Services (10%); and Pre-nursing (10%). Students also came from other, related fields of study, such as Sports and Exercise Science, Business, Interdisciplinary Studies, Communications, Sociology, Rehabilitation/Athletic Training, Audiology, Geography, and Anthropology (with 7% or less from each of these individual fields).

### **Older Persons from the Community and the Community Organization**

Older persons were members of the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP). In its 2011-2012 Impact Statement fact sheet, this particular RSVP locale counted 938 volunteers in 115 stations or settings in the community (Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, n.d.). Station setting types included being reading partners with school children, doing grocery shopping for homebound persons, acting as bulk mailers, serving as Medicare navigators, working as nutrition program volunteers and acting as handyman/repair services. The fact sheet found these volunteers to have given 97,000 hours of volunteer service worth the equivalent of over \$2,000,000. RSVP's parent organization, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), stresses the value of active, collaborative learning on two levels. CNCS mandates RVSP members engage students in communities, "making significant investments to stimulate and support student volunteering and service-learning on college campuses" (8).<sup>4</sup> CNCS's language in its *RSVP Handbook* (2008) also strongly

supports service-learning:

Service-learning, in the context of RSVP projects, is a learning method that allows volunteers to reflect on their volunteer experiences and apply their insights. Service-learning can help RSVP projects make a difference in the lives of their volunteers, by helping them to stay mentally and physically active; use or learn skills they might not otherwise; present challenges to build on; and apply wisdom and knowledge they have acquired – thereby validating such wisdom .... [and that RSVP should] regularly provide opportunities for RSVP volunteers to reflect on their volunteer experiences and apply insights to their service, client advocacy roles, social issues and their own lives (p. 73).

With the organization's move and the mandate in their operations manual, many RSVP members expressed a great willingness to volunteer and to learn from the collaborative project. The ten older persons interviewed were all living in the local community. They were mostly women (73%), married (73%), and, on average, 71 years of age (with ages ranging from 58 to 84). They had, on average, 4 siblings, 3 children, and a total of 3 grandchildren. The majority of older persons (80%) self-identified as rural (or recently moved to town from a rural setting). For the older persons interviewed, the average number of years of education completed was 13 years, or one year of college. In terms of daily activities, an average report was 4.3 activities each day. These activities included: volunteering, visiting with friends, attending the senior center, and reading, religious activities, cooking, and visiting with grandchildren. Almost 54% reported that their health was "good," and 80% said they were very satisfied with their lives. In terms of their retirement benefits, 74% reported receiving Social Security, 60% a government pension, and 53% a State pension. Most commonly, healthcare was covered by Medicare, private insurance, and insurance linked to past employment.

## **Procedures and Project Overview**

### **Instructor's Background and Approach**

The Course Instructor has experience working in field settings across several disciplines (community health, public health, sociology, and gerontology). She has been involved in experiential and group-based learning since her own undergraduate work in the 1990s and has managed teams of people working in the field in medical and health settings. In terms of pedagogical practices, the Instructor tried to clearly define the project and roles while modeling and encouraging critical thinking, supportive discussion, and deeper application of course materials (as suggested by Webb, 2013). She followed fellow gerontologist, Karasik's (2012) rules of engagement for faculty. These guidelines include knowing your student audience and being present for students and their concerns. Karasik calls on instructors to make courses personal but remain professional – showing students that we all are human. Karasik suggests we get to know each student, individually, teaching "one student at a time" (126). She favors the use of humor and keeping content both current and relevant for students.

### **Semi-structured Interview Guide**

To fulfill the experiential learning portion of the study, members of groups interviewed a person aged 60 years or older. The groups were given semi-structured interview scripts covering topics such as demographics, family history, daily activities, health, programs

and services, and the older person's perceptions on aging. Questions were reproduced with permissions (and additions) from Wacker and Roberto's (2011) *Aging social policies: An international perspective* and were intended to allow students, through the interview process, to gain an understanding of older persons' lives. According to Cohen and Crabtree's Qualitative Research Guidelines Project (2013), a semi-structured interview is beneficial when you have more than one interviewer in the field because this design type provides "a clear set of instructions for interviewers and can provide reliable, comparable qualitative data." The student interviewer has a structure to follow, while the older interviewee has flexibility in the way he or she can address each question.<sup>5</sup>

### **Group Assignment**

Since students tend to be more attentive when interviewing people they do not know (Wellin, 2007), the professor, and not the students, was responsible for recruiting the older persons for the project. As Webb (2013) found, although group-composition theories vary, it is a good practice to keep groups more heterogeneous and mixed by gender with clearly-defined group-work tasks. So, students were divided into 10 randomly assigned groups with four or five people in each group. Once groups were assigned, they met during class to determine what role each member would carry out. There were four role choice options (interviewer, historian, observer, and question designer). Interviewer(s) conducted the interview with the older person. Historians coordinated the project from within the group and did record-keeping functions such as note taking at group meetings.<sup>6</sup> The observer accompanied the interviewer(s) to the interview and wrote down their observations both direct and inferred. Observers also created a map of the physical setting. The question designer created additional questions based on the interests of their interviewees. Topics of additional questions included: travel, mission work, the interviewee's profession, and the experience of growing up on a farm. Groups were encouraged to schedule a meeting with the professor and the graduate assistants to discuss any/all issues pertaining to the projects or personality conflicts that could cause an unequal distribution of the group work. Older persons were assigned to the student groups in the order that the volunteers signed up to participate in the project; there was not a formal matching process to assign older adults to a particular group of students.

### **Student Interview Training**

Students prepared for the interview experience with older persons in several ways. First, a class session was devoted to "Interviewing and Working with Older People" where characteristics like students and older persons' appearance, social class, gender, race, age were discussed in relation to how they could affect the interview experience. Students reflected about how they see older persons and how the older persons may perceive them. They read articles about ethnographic and observational research and evaluated their own strengths and limitations as interviewers by answering questions such as: "What are some strengths you will bring to the experience?" and "What are some items you want to work on?"

Four structured role play and mock interviewing sessions were conducted. In the first, students got to experiment with the different tones of an interviewer (gruff, professional, rushed, etc.) and try out different levels of interviewer preparedness and ability (better or less ready). Students got to consider the impact of setting and having others present in several hypothetical settings (a hospital/facility setting, one's home, and with or without



others present during the interview). The second session, “More than Words,” was devoted to noting and reacting to non-verbal communication. Here, students practiced writing direct and inferential field notes. In a third session, students continued to role play around issues related to hearing, vision, changing cognitive status, and possible chronic diseases. We discussed communication with someone with a disability and students concerns around these issues. For example, we tried out ways to improve sound quality and what to do in cases of an interviewee having visual impairments (such as macular degeneration, etc.). For example, students were asked: You are interviewing someone, and you realize that they are nodding their head “yes” but probably cannot hear your question; what would you do? In the fourth session, a class about general interviewing skills, we covered “good” and “bad” interview questions and responses with ways to use neutral probes (such as “tell me more”) to gather more information. Informal, free practice interviewing sessions were also held at the ends of classes where students could debrief and work through any interviewing concerns they were having at the time.

### **Formal Instruments Used to Gather Data**

#### **Final/Exit Survey**

During the last week of the course, students completed an in-class survey that consisted of six open-ended essay questions pertaining to students’ self-evaluation of any perceived changes in their attitudes towards older persons and an assessment of the role of groupwork in the course. Questions included: Has the interviewing portion of the class changed your perceptions of older persons and aging?; At the beginning of the semester, how did you feel about working in groups? Did your feelings change over the course of the semester?; Do you believe doing the interview project as a group helped or hindered your learning experience? and; What challenges did you encounter in this class’s project? Were you able to resolve them?. Sufficient space was left for students to write detailed answers as an open-ended format allows for more flexibility in response (Salend, 2011). These surveys also collected demographic data, such as gender and major. As a method of addressing social desirability, students were encouraged to openly share opinions about the course and assured they would not be penalized for negative answers (Cook-Sather, 2002).

#### **Group Interview Paper**

The conclusion of this collaborative paper included each member of the group assessing what they learned about aging and whether the experience will influence their views about aging in any way. Students were asked to discuss any insights on aging and older people that the group gained from conducting this interview and working with the group. There was also a catch-all question that asked students to include their opinions about any aspect of aging and about any and all aspects of doing the course activities.

#### **Blinded Course Evaluations**

At the end of each semester, the college provides students with the option to complete an anonymous course evaluation. Neither professors nor graduate teaching assistants are allowed to be in the room during the evaluation, and completed evaluations are delivered in a sealed envelope to an administrative assistant by a student in the course. Instructors do not see the evaluations until after final student course grades are inputted. Two open-ended questions were used to gather data in the hopes that the blinded responses would reduce social desirability further. They asked “What things did the instructor do well...”

and “In what ways could the instructor improve the effectiveness of her/his instruction?” These questions were chosen because, in the college, they are commonly the place where students provide the most detailed narrative comments about the course. Students often critique course design and pedagogy in these evaluations as part of their answers to these two questions. Any relevant pedagogical comments gleaned from the blinded evaluations were used to triangulate (compare with) data given in other forms used in the analysis of research questions in this study.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Organization of Data**

To analyze study data, each student’s final/exit survey and individual portion of the group paper was assigned an identification number (from 1-43). Materials were also identified by the student’s group (from A-J) and their role in the group (interviewer, historian, etc.). The researchers maintained a master list matching students’ names to their documents.

### **Approach to Research Questions**

The first research question asked about the impact of the experiential learning (interview) experience upon the student’s perceptions of older persons and aging. Student data from the final/exit survey questions (“Have the [experiential/interviewing] activities in this class changed your perceptions of older persons?” and “Did you witness any myths or stereotypes about older persons during [your time in the field in] the semester?”) were analyzed. Two open-ended questions on the blinded course evaluations were used to gather any additional students’ information and responses to add to the information provided in the final/exit surveys. As mentioned earlier, in the blinded evaluation students use the two opened-ended questions about what the instructor does well/needs to improve in her/his instruction as a place to fully comment about the course. If any assessments of the experiential aspect of the course were written in the students’ group-interview papers, they were also used as textual data.

The second research question, asking about the students’ assessment of the collaborative (groupwork) experience data, came mainly from questions on the final/exit survey as students. On that survey, students were asked: “At the beginning of the semester, how did you feel about working in groups?” and “Did your feelings change over the course of the semester?” We asked students to evaluate the group processes: “Do you believe doing the interview project as a group helped or hindered your learning experience?.” They were asked to write about: “Did you enjoy the group-interview project? Why or why not?” Just as in the first research question, if any assessments of the groupwork aspect of the course were written in the students’ blinded course-evaluation or group-interview papers, they were also used as sources of data.

### **Coding and Emergent Themes from the Data**

Using content analysis as a method for analyzing open-ended text or data, text from the individual questions on the final/exit survey, group paper, and blinded course evaluation (where appropriate) was read through completely by an initial coder, a graduate assistant on the project. Using open coding, each major theme, or dominant idea expressed in the narrative text, was noted and entered in a spreadsheet, to calculate the frequency of each theme. The data for this study were originally coded in May 2012 but recoded again in July 2012. In cases of discrepancies in assigning a theme to a student’s narrative text, the

Instructor was available to independently review and also code the data.<sup>7</sup>

## **Examining Reliability and Validity**

### **Addressing the Elements of Trustworthiness**

Several methods were used to strengthen trustworthiness in qualitative analysis based on standard practices suggested by methodologists, especially those working in the field of aging (Creswell, 2012; Denzin, & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Rowles & Schoenberg, 2002). For credibility, in addition to the initial coder, we employed the feedback of a second coder in the case of discrepancies. In terms of transferability, rich, deep descriptions are provided for the reader's own interpretation. It is up to the reader and other researchers to assess the applicability of our findings to their settings. Triangulation and discrepant analysis were used also to increase credibility. Since triangulation requires cross-checking data from multiple sources in order to come to a conclusion, we used data from the final/exit surveys, group papers and, when possible, blinded course evaluations. Our discrepant case analysis sought data that challenged findings and recognized both the positive and negative themes in study data.

Several techniques were employed to enhance dependability. An on-going audit trail was kept describing how data were collected, how codes/themes were created, and how decisions were made throughout the research process. Hand-written audit trails were kept as memos and noted on data-analysis spreadsheets. These audit trails helped ensure that our results were shaped by the participants' data and not our views, thereby addressing confirmability.

## **Findings**

### **RQ1: Experiential Learning and the (Interview) Experience**

Our first research question asked: "Does the experiential learning (interview) experience enhance students' learning?" In their qualitative, open-ended exit surveys, students mentioned the interviewing component humanized older persons and challenged preconceptions of older persons as in poor physical and mental health or with negative attitudes towards themselves or the students. The majority of the students (88%) felt their perceptions about older adults had been changed through the experiential component of the course. Comments from the final/exit surveys and the group-interview papers suggested students felt the active course components helped them see older people as individuals instead of one homogenous group entitled "senior citizens."<sup>8</sup> A group wrote in their final paper: "This [experiential] project demonstrated how people in their old age live. They are not cranky and unhappy like, we are ashamed to admit, we previously thought."

Final/exit surveys indicated the interaction gave students the opportunity to see an older person as a person with a name and a face, desires, wants, and needs. A student stated:

I have come to realize that not every older person is the same. Before taking this class, I thought of older personally people as one big group. I didn't feel connected or related to. Now, I am able to see older persons as what they are, separate distinct individuals with various habits and personalities.

By being given the opportunity to meet older persons, other than their grand-parents, students were able to broaden their perspectives of older adults. One student shared her thoughts about the experiential work in the course:

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*Experiential and Collaborative Learning in a Gerontology Course*

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This class has changed my perceptions of older persons because I always thought they were all categorized in the same field and had zero differences. My grandparents were always so up and down with emotion and hard to be around, creating a bad image in my head about older persons. But with this class, interviewing and understanding older persons and aging, I think their life shapes them with their experiences and trauma they have lived through creating all older persons differently.

Another remarked:

Before this class, I did not even think much about older persons. Now after meeting an amazing older person within our community and learning in class, I know the truth about how older persons are treated within different societies. This class has taught me that older persons have so much knowledge, experience, and a work ethic that is not seen as much in society today. This is a subject that I want to continue to learn about more in the future and help older persons get their voice heard and gain the respect from society they desire.

After completing the interviews, students felt informed about the struggles older persons may face in daily life. One student wrote, "...growing older can get depressing especially financially. Before this class, I never thought about how getting older can be hard." Another student was surprised to learn that older persons can be "victims of abuse [economic, sexual, or emotional]." A third added, "I also learned a lot about [what effect] depression, loneliness, loss of loved ones etc. can have on an individual. That getting into the older-person years is a major change and can be a much harder transition than many may think."

Experiential learning through authentic interviews with an older person challenged students' thinking and gave them an opportunity to apply what they had learned in class. One explained:

For me personally, the interview group project helped my learning experience. [Our interviewee] told us that she had a husband, but he had committed suicide. She told us this made her a stronger person, and I learned, personally, that older people could go through really hard times, maybe even harder times than some younger people. I also learned that she is extremely active and lives to volunteer in her older-person years. It taught me that older people are not lazy.

Here, the student analyzed her perceptions about an older person, and the interaction challenged her to think critically without being prompted by the instructor. By hearing the stories personally from the older adult, students learned about different life experiences of which they were unaware. This firsthand transference of knowledge seemed to help make classroom concepts about older persons real for the students and motivate application of these concepts outside the classroom. The experiential portion of the project helped students become more insightful about their own lives. One student wrote:

A lot of the older persons interviewed had lost someone and had gone through tragedy, and something that we all learned was to take every day as it comes and appreciate it because you never know what tomorrow will bring.

This project created insight amongst the students and convinced them that they can create change. One group concluded their paper by stating, "...the younger generations in the world today have little or no knowledge about our older generations. And if we learn

and understand aging, people would be less ignorant and more thoughtful to older persons.”

In terms of the blinded course evaluations as a source of comparison, students added text about the course design and pedagogical method for the instructor-based questions (“The instructor did the following things well/ could improve their effectiveness”). One reported that (s)he liked the “very interactive” class. The experience in the field “made the class discussion [by] explaining everything, making course material easy to understand, and [giving] examples” of concepts. Through the experiential method, they could “relate the course material to personal experiences so [they] could understand what was going on.” In terms of pedagogy support, a student focused on the experiential nature of the course, writing that the Instructor’s field-based “teaching methods were great, she taught the class in a thorough and fun manner” and “was knowledgeable, entertaining, and engaging.”

### **RQ2: Collaborative (Groupwork) Experience**

The second research question addressed students’ assessments of the group experience (itself): How do students evaluate the collaborative (groupwork) experience as part of the course? As noted earlier, questions from the final/exit survey were used to gather these data. These questions asked about changes in feelings about groupwork from the beginning to the end of the semester and if students felt groupwork helped or hindered their learning experience. Students were also asked to explain why they did or did not enjoy the groupwork aspect of the course. Their responses were seen as a way of evaluating the use of collaborative/group work as pedagogical methods for possible beneficial future curriculum options. Over half of the students in the course (60%) stated that they did enjoy the group project. They felt the collaborative group experience helped enhance the coursework. In fact, 50% directly said they felt that groupwork was an overwhelmingly positive help to their understanding of course materials. Students appreciated learning from their classmates’ viewpoints and having additional resources to utilize (other than the professor/graduate assistants). A little over one-quarter of the students stated that they did not like some aspects of the group project, and almost 14% stated that there were both some aspects of the project that they liked but also some aspects that they did not.<sup>9</sup> These students felt they carried an unfair amount of the group work due to other group members not contributing as they should. Of students who disliked groupwork at the end of the semester, close to one-half also offered some positive aspects about the groupwork done in the course. They saw the groupwork as bittersweet. One shared:

Although I dislike working in groups, I think working on the interview project as a group helped my learning experience. When you work as a group, you are able to hear many different perspectives and actually learn new things or maybe think about things you wouldn’t have thought about if you were working alone. Working as a group helped my learning experience because it allowed me to think outside of the box and to consider others’ opinions.

Another student recognized the value of working with even less-than-ideal group dynamics:

I believe it [groupwork] helped. It helped a lot by teaching me patience; it gave me a taste of working in the real world. In the real world you’re not always going to work with people you enjoy, and you just have to suck it up. That is why I believe that overall this class group project helped my learning experience. But, when it came to the paper part of the project, it definitely hindered my learning. This is because I was

stressed out that no one would get their part of the paper done on time so I would spend more time trying to get a hold of my group than focusing on the paper.

## **Unexpected Groupwork Outcomes**

### **Historian and Question Designer Roles**

As noted earlier, each group consisted of interviewer(s), historian, observer, and a question designer (creating an extra set of questions focused on their interviewee's interests). An unexpected outcome was that 12 of 48 students, 25% of the total course, did not meet the older person. Of these 12 students, 9 were in the historian and 3 in the question-designer roles. Subsequently, those in the historian and question-designer roles were more likely to feel that the groupwork hindered their learning experience because they did not meet the interviewee. For example, one question designer explained: "I never got to interact with an elder, so I didn't gain anything from the project. It would have been nice to have all of us interview so we all could get a chance to be with an elder." A historian added, "I really liked the project, and loved being the historian, but since I was one who didn't physically get to meet elder, I felt in a way left out because everyone said she was so amazing."

Not only did some students miss the interaction but they were also then required to write their portion of the group paper based on one of their group member's notes. As a historian stated, "I was unable to attend the interviews, so I do not know how they went. It was hard to write a paper when I only knew that [the interviewee] liked to play shuffleboard." A second echoed this statement: "being the historian, I personally didn't get to take part in the interview, so when writing my sections of the paper, it was hard to relate, which ultimately made it harder for me to complete." The lack of some historians or question designers meeting with the older interviewee was evident in some inconsistencies about the older person's narrative reported in the final group papers. A simple example: in one case, an interviewer reported an interviewee had two children, and in the historian's portion of the paper, the same interviewee had three children.

### **Group Dynamics**

Three groups had a higher concentration of members that reported they did not enjoy the collaborative portion of the project. Students stated that bad group dynamics impacted their enjoyment of the project because they "did not have the best group members." One stated: "I think I would have enjoyed it more if I wasn't always constantly stressed about if my group was doing their part or not." Out of these three groups, 38% of members noted issues with group members as the main reason they had a negative group experience. For example:

I feel that the interview part as a group was beneficial because then we all got to compare our thoughts and look over [our interviewee's] story together, but the paper part hindered because we all only did certain parts which didn't help all of us understand everything, and most of the paper got put on certain students and caused a lot of pressure.

It must be noted, the seven remaining groups reported positive and productive group dynamics.

## Conclusion

Experiential learning (interviewing) and collaborative (groupwork) approaches were combined to engage gerontology students in the learning process. Here we discuss the impact of the experiential and groupwork experiences upon students and older persons, and RSVP community partners. We review where we are now, our lessons learned, and future directions of this project.

### Benefits of Experiential Learning versus Collaborative Groupwork for Students

Using data from this Introduction to Gerontology course, with a 90% response rate<sup>10</sup>, we believe that experiential work, to a greater extent, and groupwork, to a much lesser extent, are effective methods for use in an introductory gerontology course. Our findings support what Rodin et al. (2013) learned: “Working *with* older adults is a very different mind-set than working *for* older adults” (19). Our results showed students in roles meeting with the older person found great value in experiential work. Interviewing older persons dispelled many myths and stereotypes amongst the students making class concepts more “real.” As noted by Van Dussen and Weaver (2009), undergraduates often see older persons in stereotypical ways, and contact dispels commonly held prejudices. Students in our introductory gerontology course felt interaction humanized older persons and challenged their myths of older people being exclusively ill or disagreeable. Students also enjoyed the interaction supporting the bonding and interpersonal-exchange benefits mentioned by Zucchero (2010). We found, as others, that experiential learning was related to changing perceptions of older persons and aging, though not directly promoting future aging-related careers (Bergman et al., 2014).

While experiential work was favored by students, the collaborative, group-based work was less successful. Historians and question designers wrote they did not feel they received as much benefit from the project as they could have because, in some cases, they never met the older person.<sup>11</sup> Students did appreciate the idea of working in groups and having peers to help with questions, but three groups had conflicts when it came to writing the group papers. In addition to the lack of some roles meeting the older person, the groupwork issues could be due to the more difficult logistics of time management for a group of four or five people (Karasik, 2005). Each of these three groups had experienced too much conflict or the lack of ability to integrate ideas as Webb (2013) describes in her “debilitating processes” for groups. Age cohort may have been an issue in the appeal of groupwork as some have found groupwork with millennials to have only “marginal success” (Siegal & Kagan, 2012, 23).

### Implications of This Work

**Where we are now.** As this undergraduate introduction to gerontology-based experiential learning project has gained momentum, we are now being approached by many partners in the local aging network with them asking for us to work with them at their facilities. In terms of our setting, we are moving from the partnership with RSVP and community older persons as volunteers to more formal requests from assisted-living facilities.

With our new partners, we will begin to adapt many more formal service-learning techniques into the course, with an ultimate goal to convert the course to a full-service-learning model. Throughout the process of increasing the experiential and groupwork focus

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of the course, the Instructor noted the benefits of active learning. Despite the difficulties of logistics in organizing the interviews, issues of some group members mistakenly not meeting the older persons, and a few groups with problematic dynamics, the Instructor and graduate assistants recognize the impact on student and older-person groups. The benefits to students and older participants (especially noted from the spontaneous RSVP member feedback) did not deter the path to a more service-based pedagogical approach; rather, it has increased the Instructor's desire to make the older persons and community organizations more active partners in the next iterations of this project.

In terms of the course organization, it is reiterated and more clearly posted in course materials that all students in all roles must meet with the elder and attend all field visits. This was the intention from the onset – but some misunderstanding prevented all students in each group from meeting with the older interviewee in the study presented here. Groups are now smaller, so that in groups of 2 or 3 students, the focus is on the interviewer role. Additional focus is placed on process and mid-semester evaluations with journaling throughout the semester to help address issues, such as group members not meeting the interview, when they arise. To attend to a few groups' collaborative paper writing concerns, we now require students to interview in groups and create a collective group PowerPoint presentation. But, they write some sections of the paper individually and others as a group, to place greater accountability on each individual student.

**Challenges, limitations, and lessons learned.** As with all research, there are limitations. First, we used a convenience sample consisting of students in the class in which the researchers were the professor and graduate students. Most notably and not intended, 25% (12) of students did not meet with the older interviewee. As noted in the methods section, this sample was mostly women (77%) and Recreation, Tourism, and Hospitality majors (32%), which may not be similar to other introduction-to-gerontology classes. This study was conducted for the first time in this course; so there were no previous comparison data for prior semesters. Although safeguards were in place, and multiple steps were taken to decrease social desirability in responses, the accuracy of the data depended upon students' willingness to give truthful answers. Also, experiential and groupwork with older persons in a rural setting, including older interviewees from farming communities, is less common. While there are studies about rural older persons (see Davis & Magilvy, 2000; Hinck, 2004, or Silverstein, Cong & Li, 2006), they do not focus on the use of this study's pedagogical methods. The older persons in this study were also in better health than average and had greater education attainment than average older persons (J. R. Karasik, personal communication, February 28, 2014).

**Specific direction of future work**

While we found, as other researchers, the experiential learning component of interviewing an older person in the community worked to change students' attitudes about older people and aging, we could not assess if this learning method increased interest in aging as a major (Bergman et al., 2014; Kalisch et al., 2013; Dussen & Weaver, 2009; Wurtele & Maruyama, 2013). We suggest more work needs to be done to evaluate the role of experiential and groupwork in Liberal Arts Core courses, such as our Introduction to Gerontology course, not only as a source of changing student perceptions but as a way to have students gain interest in careers in aging as a course outcome.

More formal assessment of the experience on the part of the older person and the



community partner or organization is needed. In the present study, at the end of the interviews, the Instructor informally – often while walking an older interviewee to his or her car – would ask how the interview went and how they felt about the process and its impact on them. Common responses were that the older persons learned about the present-day struggles of students with school, family and work responsibilities. Two women, both in their 80s and widowed, also spoke of the way the interview served as a form of lifestory review where they were able to put elements of their life in perspective (for example, recent widowhood and a residential move from a farm setting to town). Older adults expressed that the interviewing process was a way they could provide guidance and friendship to the students (in some cases with baked goods). As many were alumni, or were once affiliated with the university, they felt the interviewing allowed them to give back to it – holding the university experience (where some met spouses and formed careers) in a very favorable light.

Older persons, in their roles as RSVP members, spoke about generativity in giving back to the University and spending more academic time on campus. The ability to support undergraduates on campus and also simultaneously, through the interview process, reflect upon their own daily lives and service roles, let the RSVP members fulfill their parent organization's mandate about assessing their volunteer roles in an ongoing basis while engaging current students on campus (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2008). In work with 50 intergenerational projects, Davidson (2012) found that intergenerational initiatives are a win for all involved: individuals, non-profit organizations, and the local community. She found the "argument for developing intergenerational work is more compelling than ever ... the new paradigm of older communities can be one of support, respect and friendship across the ages" (315). Our project seems to have begun to foster intergenerational exchange and partnership between the RSVP and other courses on campus. For example, since our initial project, another Instructor and her community health education class had students and RSVP members work together to make a promotional video for RSVP. While we are in the process of developing a brief Community Partner Interview Protocol form and debriefing strategies, like those suggested by Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring, & Kerrigan (2009), we need to pilot these methods in our local setting.

As this project grows to become a true service-learning model, we will revisit whether more facility-based community-partnered experiences will move the student impact from the loss of stereotypes about older persons and aging to considering a gerontological profession. Also, as we further develop the group processes and change the group task to meet the needs of our community partners, we can get a better assessment of the impact of such collaboration. More work to parse out the impact of experiential learning and collaborative groupwork will also be beneficial. Overall, through an experiential and collaborative-learning approach, students felt learning was moved from the classroom, alone, to an interactive and engaging environment. We believe this is an experience the students will take with them when they interact with older persons.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>For the older persons, experiential learning allows for the transmission of knowledge and the written recording of one's life course and experiences. Narratives and recollecting lifestories as a form of reminiscence are an added benefit (see Randall, Prior & Skarborn,

2006). Older persons' reflections about the interviewing process are discussed in the Conclusion.

<sup>2</sup>An unexpected outcome was that 12 of 48 (25%) of the total course or 15 students in the historian (n=9) and question-designer roles (n=3) did not meet the older person. The experiences of those not meeting the older adult are discussed in the Findings and Conclusion sections. It is now reiterated and more clearly posted in course materials that all students in all roles must meet with the older adult and attend all field visits. This was the intention from the onset – but some misunderstanding prevented all students from meeting with the older interviewee in this current study.

<sup>3</sup>The five students not included expressed a verbal desire to be in the study but failed to return their signed consent forms – so they were not included in the analysis.

<sup>4</sup>While CNCS refers to service-learning, we acknowledge our project is based on experiential and collaborative learning methods.

<sup>5</sup>See: <http://www.qualres.org/HomeSemi-3629.html>.

<sup>6</sup>See Endnote 2 for a discussion of issues that arose with the historian and question-designer roles.

<sup>7</sup>Although set in place as an option, if needed to resolve coding discrepancies, the Instructor was not needed as a reviewer/coder.

<sup>8</sup>To assure students' comments were based solely on the experiential/interviewing course components, we focused questions to ask directly about these course components apart from learning that occurred as part of the overall course.

<sup>9</sup>Role in the group could have impacted view of groupwork. An unexpected study result was that those in historian, administrator, and question-designer roles were more likely to feel groupwork hindered their learning experience because a majority of them, unexpectedly, did not meet the interviewee.

<sup>10</sup>While students were involved in experiential and collaborative work as part of the course, 90% of students signed the formal IRB consent form so that the classroom research could be published. All ten older persons (100%) signed formal IRB consent forms so that their interview data could be used for publication.

<sup>11</sup>See Endnote 2 for a discussion of issues that arose with the historian and question designer roles.

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