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### Listening to life's lessons: Using music lyrics and poetry to face issues of aging in the classroom

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# Listening to life's lessons: Using music lyrics and poetry to face issues of aging in the classroom

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*The use of poetry and music in college courses on aging is discussed. The format can help instructors reach their students in new ways. Poetry and music can be used to engage students in material that may be emotionally charged. In addition, poetry and music can be used to help students confront stereotypes about the elderly.*

**Keywords** *Aging; college; education; gerontology; music; poetry*

“I ask them to take a poem  
And hold it up to the light  
like a color slide”

—Billy Collins (2004), *Introduction to Poetry*, 16

The examination of challenging concepts in a college classroom setting can be pursued in a number of ways. Creative approaches are especially useful in the instances when a course frequently introduces emotionally charged concepts such as courses in abnormal psychology, developmental disabilities, adult development and aging and gerontology. Each teacher develops classroom techniques that fit not only the content of the course but their interests and teaching style. Among the many approaches that instructors use, the inclusion of music and poetry will be discussed here with special attention to issues related to aging.

Many techniques to enrich lectures and engage students have been successfully introduced for a wide range of college classes. Instructors share full-length films or film segments (Green, 2003; Paddock, Terranova & Giles, 2001), use humor (Powers, 2005), or storytelling (Green, 2004), or share children's picture books

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(Meyerson, 2006). Other instructors have discussed using music and poetry as well. Several instructors in the social sciences have reported playing music and music videos in a wide range of courses (Daehler & Miller, 2004; Leck, 2006; Deluga, Personal Communication, July 12, 2007; Morrison, Personal Communication, July 11, 2007). They use music to build rapport, to orient students to key concepts and to improve intellectual access to challenging theoretical ideas. Also poetry writing and related exercises have been used to promote empathetic responses toward individuals with mental illness and other problems discussed in abnormal psychology and social work courses (Conner-Greene, Young, Paul, & Murdoch, 2005; Furman, 2007).

Additional ideas have been presented for college classes that focus on the elderly. For example, instructors have brought in theatre techniques, such as having an elderly character give a life review during a dramatic performance in gerontology courses (MacRae & Pardue, 2007; Schmidtke, 2000). Student drawings of the elderly have also been used in class discussions to confront students' preconceived notions of the elderly (Barrett & Cantwell, 2007). Other instructors have students imagine themselves at an older age and then create displays with a range of visual images to represent their perceptions (Masters & Holley, 2006). A common goal for these varied techniques has been to help college students see the elderly more clearly than they had in the past.

There are settings beyond the college classroom that also necessitate facing some of the challenging issues of aging. Clearly, nursing home residents face a host of concerns including maintaining optimal levels of independence. Art therapists use a range of creative techniques to support resident well-being including discussing folk tales and their connections to the residents' lives and their concerns (Warner, 2006). In addition, poetry has been used as a form of therapy in groups for individuals with Alzheimer's disease (Weinberger & Russo, 2005). For example, poetry therapists have used the poem, *Where I'm From*, by George Ella Lyon (1999), that describes a woman's personal history in the context of the broader culture of her times. Group members can attend to and discuss the geographic, historical and psychological origins of the character in the poem. Group members are asked to reflect on their own origins and to write about their lives. This gives the writers an opportunity to recall notable aspects of their lives and creatively express themselves. Their creations are tangible gifts that can be shared with family members about their lives, providing opportunities for greater understanding and connection.

There may not always be enough time in a college class to have students write their own poems or lyrics. An advantage of having the instructor present music and poetry in a class setting is that it can be easily introduced without taking up as much time as showing a film or giving a dramatic presentation. In addition, students may find music and poetry to be relatively accessible to them as they think about the key issues. Music in particular is familiar to students and they may have more of a sense of freedom to discuss it as compared with other representations of information such as empirical research reports. The same freedom requires instructor flexibility because the songs and poems can easily evoke themes that may not have been expected by the instructor. For example, Patty Griffin's (2002) song, *Making Pies*, often brings to mind memories about family members making pies and how

comforting this and other family traditions are. Even though the song is not about this family tradition, the song can open the door to the meaning of family traditions and family roles. While open discussions may be challenging to facilitate, they can also support certain academic goals.

A primary pedagogical goal for instructors is to have their students gain a deeper understanding of important concepts. With respect to courses dealing with aging, the lives of individuals being studied may differ significantly from the lives of the traditional student body. Thus, instructors may seek to provide a realistic mix of models of how individuals face aging. This may increase understanding of the issues and potentially increase student empathy for older adults. In addition, in classes that are primarily lecture-based, poetry and music can facilitate student engagement in classroom discussion by changing the way the material is presented. Hearing a poem or a song changes the auditory experience. However, directly incorporating music and poetry as part of the class is only one way to use these resources. Some instructors choose to play songs prior to class (Daehler & Miller, 2004). For example, Morrison uses music to mark the beginning of a class period and Deluga shows music videos before and after class solely to break the ice and build rapport with students. Other instructors use class time to display lyrics and discuss the relevant themes and have assigned students to find songs of their own that demonstrate the concepts under discussion (Leck, 2006; Weinberger & Russo, 2005; Weinrauch, 2005). Increasingly, internet options include audio files that can be used in class (e.g., The Writer's Almanac at <http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/> and the Academy of American Poets at <http://poets.org>) and video segments. For example, the animated poem *Forgetfulness* is read by the poet Billy Collins on the YouTube website. If an instructor wants their students to closely attend to the words, it is recommended that students be able to read along when the poem is read or the song is being played. This can be done by either projecting the words on a large screen or providing a handout with the words. While a handout requires more resources, it allows the students to take the words and the source information with them. This is especially useful if the material connects to an assignment or an exam.

Some of the challenging issues that are addressed in a class on aging include sensory loss, memory loss, physical decline, morbidity and mortality risk factors as well as death, dying and bereavement. While most of the course may focus on research and supporting statistics related to aging individuals, spending time listening to music and poetry allows students a chance to intellectually and emotionally connect with these experiences. Each poem or song may evoke one or more nonmutually exclusive themes related to the course. A sampling of poems and songs that connect to a range of topics are presented in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. The collection reflects the author's own interests in music and poetry and changes with student and colleague input. Instructors can begin to cull poems and music lyrics from their own collections. For example, a marketing instructor uses his interest in show tunes to find songs that best fit his course material (Weinrauch, 2005). As an instructor begins to use these materials in class students are reminded of their own collections (more often musical selections than poems) and can be encouraged to share them with their instructors. In addition, colleagues are also a

TABLE 1. A selection of poems that address issues of aging.

Theme	Poem title	Poet	Source	Sample line
Coping; bereavement	Elegy	May Sarton	Coming into Eighty (1994) W.W. Norton & Company	<i>You will always be walking Down the grassy path Toward me</i>
Coping; dying	After the long enduring	May Sarton	Coming into Eighty (1994) W.W. Norton & Company	<i>You who noticed everything With wide open eyes I got out of bed on two strong legs. It might have been otherwise. "Be patient"</i>
Coping; physical decline	Otherwise	Jane Kenyon	Otherwise (1996) Graywolf Press	
Death	Contemplating death	Ramson Lomatewama	Silent Winds (1983) Badger Claw Press	<i>The time will come for you to make the journey I think of the young man who wanted so badly to die and of the old man now who doesn't care whether he does or doesn't</i>
Death	Poem for my 70th birthday	Charles Bukowski	Slowing toward Nirvana (2005)	
Dying & personal history	Do not go gentle into that good night	Dylan Thomas	Harper Collins The Poems of Dylan Thomas (1971) New Directions Publishing	<i>Old age should burn and rave at close of day; Rage, rage against the dying of the light</i>
Loss	Affirmation	Donald Hall	The Painted Bed (2002)	<i>Even when we are young, we glimpse it sometimes, and nod our heads when a grandfather dies</i>
Loss	In view of the fact	A.R. Ammons	Houghton Mifflin Company Bosh and Flapdoodle (2005) W.W. Norton & Company	<i>... at the same time we are getting used to so many leaving, we are hanging on with a grip to the ones left and neither of them ever said what they meant and I guess nobody ever does</i>
Loss	Legacies	Nikki Giovanni	The Women and the Men (1975) William Morrow & Company	
Memory loss	Forgetfulness	Billy Collins	Sailing Alone around the Room (2001) Random House	<i>... the memories you used to harbor decided to retire to the southern hemisphere of the brain, to a little fishing village where there are no phones</i>

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Theme	Poem title	Poet	Source	Sample line
Personal history	Where I'm from	George Ella Lyon	Where I'm From (1999)	<i>I am from clothespins, from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride</i>
Physical decline	Friend or enemy	May Sarton	Absey & Company Coming into Eighty (1994) W.W. Norton & Company	<i>I can look at my body as an old friend</i>
Physical decline	Getting dressed	May Sarton	Coming into Eighty (1994) W.W. Norton & Company	<i>Pulling on a sweater I get lost inside it</i>
Physical decline; continuity	Somebody else	Charles Bukowski	Slowing toward Nirvana (2005) Harper Collins	<i>Who is that ugly old man? he frightens me</i>
Successful aging	The way it is	William Stafford	The Way It Is (1998) Graywolf Press	<i>There is a thread you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn't change.</i>
Successful aging	That was I	Ted Kooser	Delights & Shadows (2004) Copper Canyon Press	<i>Instead I was looking with hope to a grapevine draped over a fence in a neighboring yard, and knowing that I could hold on.</i>
Successful aging; physical decline	On aging	Maya Angelou	And Still I Rise (1978) Random House	<i>When you see me sitting quietly, Like a sack left on the shelf</i>
Successful aging; death	Coming into eighty	May Sarton	Coming into Eighty (1994) W.W. Norton & Company	<i>Through time, travail and triumph, Eighty years Of learning what to be And how to become it.</i>

good resource for making suggestions. Poetry anthologies on core themes can be particularly helpful as well. A recent review on poetry anthologies dealing with grief and bereavement is a useful resource to instructors searching for these specific types of poems (Bowman, 2007). There are excellent web-searching options as well, including [www.poetryfoundation.org/](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/) and [www.poets.org/](http://www.poets.org/) for poems and [www.metrolyrics.com/](http://www.metrolyrics.com/) for lyrics.

One of the most challenging units discussed in a course on aging is death and dying. It is not surprising that there is a rich collection of poetry and songs that address death and dying. One well-known example is Dylan Thomas's (1951/71) poem, *Do not go gentle into that good night*. In this poem the reader hears a son's pleading for his father to fight his imminent death. The reader is exposed to the raw emotions and desires of someone witnessing a loved one as he is dying. A different perspective of someone witnessing a loved one dying is presented by May Sarton

TABLE 2. A selection of songs that address issues of aging.

Theme	Song title	Performer	Writer	Album & copyright owner	Sample lyrics
Bereavement	Don't know why	Yoko Ono	Yoko Ono	Seasons of Glass	<i>My body is so empty, the world is so empty without you</i>
Coping	Valley of pain	Bonnie Raitt	Allen Shamblin & Gavin Hodgson	Ryoko Disc Silver Lining	<i>Don't let the darkness drive me insane while I'm walking through the valley of pain</i>
Coping; personal history	Making pies	Patty Griffin	Patty Griffin	River Oaks Music/Maybe I Can Music and Rollywood Music/Built On Rock Music	<i>You could cry or die or just make pies all day</i>
Coping; bereavement	Wanting memories	Sweet Honey in the Rock	Ysaye Maria Barnwell	1,000 Kisses ATO Records	<i>I am sitting here wanting memories to teach me</i>
Coping; support	Lean on me	Eric Bibb, Rory Block & Maria Muldaur	Bill Withers	Sisters & Brothers	<i>Lean on me, when you're not strong</i>
Coping; support	In my time of need	Joan Baez	Ryan Anderson	Interior Music Dark Chords on a Big Guitar Barland Music	<i>Cause I will come for you when my days are through</i>
Death & relationships	Long ride home	Patty Griffin	Patty Griffin	1,000 Kisses	<i>Forty years of things you say you wish you never said</i>
Dying & personal history	Lake Charles	Lucinda Williams	Lucinda Williams	ATO Records Car Wheels on a Gravel Road Mercury Records	<i>Did an angel whisper in your ear?</i>

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Theme	Song title	Performer	Writer	Album & copyright owner	Sample lyrics
Life cycle	When I'm 64	The Beatles	Paul McCartney & John Lennon	Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band Apple Corps	<i>Doing the garden, digging the weeds, who could ask for more?</i>
Life cycle	Nick of time	Bonnie Raitt	Bonnie Raitt	Nick of Time Kokomo Music	<i>I see my folks, they're getting old, I watch their bodies change</i>
Life cycle	I know what love is	Don White	Don White	Rascal Lyric Moon recordings	<i>They are sixty and their history spans forty odd years</i>
Life cycle	The circle game	Joni Mitchell	Joni Mitchell	Ladies of the Canyon Siquomb Publishing Company	<i>We're captive on the carousel of time</i>
Life cycle; bereavement	If I could	Jack Johnson	Jack Johnson	In Between Dreams Brushfire Records	<i>New life makes losing life easier to understand</i>
Life cycle; Support	I will follow you into the dark	Death Cab for Cutie	Benjamin Gibbard	Plans Atlantic Records	<i>You and me have seen everything to see</i>
Memories	Precious memories	Bob Dylan	Bob Dylan	Knocked Out Loaded Special Rider Music	<i>In the stillness of the midnight, Precious sacred scenes unfold</i>
Personal history; continuity	75 Septembers	Cheryl Wheeler	Cheryl Wheeler	The Women of Kerrville Penrod and Higgins Music/ Amachrist Music ACF Music Group	<i>Are you more amazed at how things change or how they stay the same?</i>



TABLE 2 (Continued)

Theme	Song title	Performer	Writer	Album & copyright owner	Sample lyrics
Successful aging	Thanksgiving Eve	Bob Franke	Bob Franke	The Other Evening in Chicago Flying Fish	<i>But love til you've loved it away</i>

(1994) in her poem, *After the long enduring*, about her friend's painful decline. In this poem the singular insight of the friend in spite of his deep suffering and decline is highlighted. The potential for one to continue to be influenced by someone else who has died is elegantly sung about in *Wanting memories* by Sweet Honey in the Rock (1993), "I thought you were gone, But now I know you're with me You are the voice that whispers All I need to hear." One of the lessons to be learned in a unit on death and dying is that there is no single correct way to experience this part of life. Providing a variety of voices from music and poetry can potentially help students accept such diversity of experience.

Addressing our stereotypes about the elderly and the aging process is also likely to be included in one or more class discussions. Negative attitudes about the elderly are widespread in American society (Nelson, 2005). Ted Kooser's (2004) poem, *That was I*, reveals some of our implicit assumptions about the elderly and how our assumptions are not always correct. Kooser leads the reader to expect the elderly character in his poem to be fixated on death ("And that was I you spotted that evening just before dark, in a weedy cemetery west of Staplehurst, down on one knee as if trying to make out the name on a stone", p. 71). As Kooser continues we see that the individual is not reading the stone but is focused on the life and death of insects invisible to others ("Instead I had found in its perfect web a handsome black and yellow spider pumping its legs to try to shake my footing as if I were a gift, an enormous moth that it could snare and eat"). Reading poems can be used in conjunction with other teaching techniques. For example, asking students to make sketches of elders is another way to draw attention to their assumptions about the elderly (Barrett & Cantwell, 2007). In listening to Kooser's poem and drawing sketches of the elderly students are less likely to deny their own stereotypes.

Another topic of class discussion that may involve confronting one's assumptions about aging is an interesting paradox about aging and subjective well-being. While older adults tend to have more objective hardships and losses as compared with younger adults, they do not report lower levels of happiness (Lacey, Smith & Ubel, 2006). This counter-intuitive research pattern can be explored with a variety of songs and poems so that students can hear the voices of older adults explain how they have coped with their lives and managed to experience satisfaction too. Optimally, the varied explanations revealed in the lyrics and poems can be linked to different theoretical explanations noted in the course textbook or empirical articles. For example, in the Beatles' (1967) song, *When I'm sixty-four*, it is clear that there is an

expectation that with age comes accommodation (i.e., simple pleasures such as “Sunday mornings go for a ride” supersede the thrills of youth) and new benefits arise over time (“grandchildren on your knee”). Other songs and poems can also be used to address other aspects of this paradox. For example, in Patty Griffin’s (2002) song, *Making Pies*, the central figure could be described as one who is modestly satisfied with her life and has adjusted to loss by doing her work, in this case making pies, staying close to family and volunteering at her church. The listener also hears that she has shifted her expectations and no longer worries about wearing a plastic cap while she works since her hair is now gray.

Almost any unit in a course on aging could benefit from discussing one or more poems or songs even if it is not used consistently throughout the course. Whenever poems and songs are used the possibility of transforming facts and theories into memorable and coherent life portraits occurs. This can help to convey ideas that may be uncomfortable for students. Students can also see the value of other people’s lives and better recognize their own stereotypes about aging. In conclusion, playing music with lyrics and reading poetry in a college class on aging can promote thoughtful reflection and discussion about issues students may otherwise resist.

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