

Mentor in the Third Age: A Learning Perspective

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Abstract: Older adults can bring decades of knowledge and expertise to the mentoring table. We explore where older adults serve as mentors and the educational benefits they derive from mentoring, in light of prejudices ascribed through ageism. As mentors, older adults can remain engaged and continue to find meaning beyond retirement.

Prejudice based on age, or ageism, is a socially-condoned and institutionalized form of bias in the United States (Nelson, 2005). This “dislike of aging and older people [is] based on the belief that aging makes people unattractive, unintelligent, asexual, unemployable, and senile” (Atchley, 1991, p. 291). Stereotypes stemming from ageism can be detrimental to the psychological, social and physiological well-being of older adults. We tend to marginalize, institutionalize, and strip older adults of responsibility, power, and ultimately dignity (Nelson, 2002). Appearance and clothing, television commercials, and individual behaviors perpetuate ageism, societal attitudes and negative stereotypes towards older adults (Skinner & Chowdhary, 1998).

Despite negative stereotypes, adults in the third age are now taking advantage of educational opportunities, changing careers, and seeking developmental avenues to positively influence the lives of others (Weiss & Gomperts, 2005). The third age is described as adults around age 55 “post-work... [who are] no longer primarily involved in earning a living or with major family responsibilities,” (Withnall, 2000, p. 1) and in the process of making decisions regarding future working life (Rocco, Stein & Lee, 2003). Purposeful involvement which frequently occurs at the community level (Karpiak, 1992) extends older adults’ ability to continue to learn, to be creative, and to fill leadership roles. When individuals in the third age become mentors they may, through the exchange of knowledge, remain engaged in learning while continuing to serve society. We believe that older adults, being experienced and knowledgeable, can serve as excellent mentors to others.

Mentoring occurs when a more experienced person, or mentor, supports and guides another, the protégé (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson & McKee, 1978). It is a learning relationship that develops knowledge and empowerment. As mentors, older adults bring decades of knowledge and expertise to the mentoring table, empowering both mentor and protégé through the exchange of knowledge. The protégés can connect this knowledge to new information and skills and construct meaning for themselves by interacting with the mentor (Kerka, 1998). The mentor, through interaction with the mentee or protégé, becomes a catalyst for learning, through engagement, loving care, and societal contributions (Bennetts, 2001; Erikson, 1980).

We believe that older adults who serve as mentors can find positive educational benefits from interaction with protégés and others involved in the mentoring relationship. We explore situations where older adults serve as mentors, whether they benefit from the mentoring relationship, and implications to adults in the third age. The paper will be organized into four main sections: conceptual framework, method, discussion, and implications. First is the conceptual framework, which shows the constructivist aspects of mentoring. Second is the method section, which describes the processes used to conduct database searches into mentoring

among older adults. Third is discussion, showing where older adults serve as mentors, and whether they benefit from doing so. Finally, we present implications on mentoring in the third age.

Conceptual Framework

As a social and reciprocal relationship, mentoring provides a learning mechanism, personally, professionally and psychologically, for those involved (Golian & Galbraith, 1996). Mentors and protégés learn from each other through close interaction. The networking, counseling, guiding, instructing and modeling (ibid., 1996, p. 100) that occur in mentoring relationships enable learning. Such learning is guided by constructivist thought wherein “learning means constructing, creating, inventing and developing our own knowledge” (Campbell & Brummett, 2007, p. 50) through relational interaction with others.

Piaget’s constructivism (1950) describes internalization of knowledge through accommodation, where we reframe what we already know, and assimilation, wherein we align new learning, within our existing frameworks. As older adults interact with others, they have the opportunity to gainfully apply previous experiences and knowledge. Combining existing knowledge with other information, they can learn from the mentoring relationship to construct meaning. In constructivist theory, learning is most effective when new knowledge and skills are combined with existing knowledge, within the context of interaction with others (Kerka, 1997).

Method

AgeLine, ERIC, ABI Inform Global, and OmniFile Full Text Mega were selected because a preliminary search showed that these databases contained extant literature on mentoring, engagement of older adults and ageism. Since older adults are involved as mentors across education, business, and interdisciplinary fields, these databases were selected as sources that contained literature on mentoring in those fields. The key descriptor of *mentor* was included in every search since the focus of this paper is mentoring, and our goal is to explore mentoring as a benefit to older adults. Additional descriptors of *older people*, *older adults*, *learning*, *retired*, and *volunteers* were then searched using various combinations, to identify all possible avenues where older adults serve as mentors.

Titles were scanned for initial relevance to mentoring and older adults, and abstracts from articles supporting our research, based on availability of our key descriptors, were read. This produced a list of records that were then read for details on mentors; articles not specific to older adults serving as mentors were eliminated. Articles were then sorted into education, business and healthcare, being three broad categories which emerged, showing older adults serving as mentors. Additional articles were obtained using Internet searches for information representative of multiple organizations invested in aging, elderly, gerontology, older adults, generational and retiree information and development. This approach allowed us to expand our search to private and public organizations to further explore avenues where older adults serve as mentors.

Discussion

Where Older Adults Serve As Mentors

Older adults constitute 81% of mentors in the United States, serving primarily in education, business, and healthcare (Greene, 2005; O’Connor, 2006; Thompson, 2005). Children, young adults, employees, and even other older adults become protégés, in productive and beneficial mentoring relationships, both formal--created and maintained as a corporate function, and informal--not as function of an organization (Kent, 2001). Volunteers aged 65 and above averaged 96 hours annually on activities such as mentoring and counseling (Division of

Labor Force Statistics, 2005). Practitioners, researchers, and foundations are both formally and informally engaging older adults as mentors.

Mentoring in education. Retired teachers served as mentors to beginning teachers and helped them improve teaching performance by explaining students' behaviors, by sharing technical skills, and by inducting them into the social system of schools (Azzara, 2001). This support, up to two years in some cases, helped to reduce attrition among new teachers. School principals and other administrators also benefited from retiree mentors (Goddard, Habermann & Reimer, 2001) who guided them on administrative and instructional practices.

Retired adult mentors were matched with young adults enduring crisis periods including the danger of dropping out of school (Freedman & Jaffe, 1993). A four-year research study of this group found some dissatisfaction with interaction styles, content and timing of the mentoring relationships, although where content and timing were youth-driven however, there was greater satisfaction (Styles & Marrow, 1992). In another instance, older adults who were paired with inner city kids, teenage mothers, youth offenders and other kids who dropped out of school worked with them to forge powerful bonds, and became gainfully occupied while doing so. The youngsters reported that elders helped them "weather potentially debilitating crises," bolstered their stability and sense of competence, and became advocates on their behalf (Quinn, 1990, p. 5).

Mentoring in business. Businesses benefit from older workers' high levels of loyalty, attendance, and morale, commitment, flexibility in scheduling, skills, and experience (Crampton, Hodge & Mishra, 1996). Mentoring is a beneficial way to retain such employees and attract new employees who may have retired earlier on, whether voluntarily or involuntarily. Young entrepreneurs in business are turning to older parents, teachers and colleagues as mentors who can share experience (Poe & Couter, 2000). Employees with mentor support reach the executive level an average of two years earlier than counterparts without such help (Kent, 2001). Through paid sabbaticals, flexible work schedules and even phased retirement, corporations might encourage older workers to remain gainfully engaged as mentors (Rocco et al., 2003).

Mentoring in health care. In another study, medical students who discussed health care challenges and integrated classroom material into clinical settings through pairings with healthy elderly individuals gained valuable experiences not found in school (Huang, Thornhill, Roberts, Hajjar, Richeson. & Eleazer, 2004). A Canadian study found that 71% of older adults sought input from peer seniors on how to stay healthy while aging (Ellis, 1995). As many as 67% wanted trained older adult volunteers to help them to cope with specific diseases and 64% would use the services of trained peer counselors and exercise group leaders (Ellis, 1995). Health-related agencies and organizations were willing to use trained older adults as volunteer mentors and counselors even though no other programs used older adults in these roles (Ellis, 1995).

How Older Adults Benefit from Mentoring

Older adult mentors who are assimilated into organizations or teams find social interaction, encouragement and support through increased involvement and active participation in the development of others (Kent, 2001). Active participation encourages productivity and involvement, enhances self-esteem, transfers knowledge, skills, and values, and stimulates learning. It also helps mitigate the negative effects of physical and psychological problems often experienced after retirement (Generations United, 2002). Mentors' self esteem is enhanced when they become role models and can support and help build a high-performance culture among peers, new employees and children.

Intergenerational mentoring programs support developmental needs of young adults (VanderVen, 2004) since they benefit from the experience and the emotional support of older adult mentors. The nurturing, attention, social and life skills, practical skills (especially in reading and math), and the opportunity to learn about other age groups (Dubois, Holloway, Valentine & Cooper, 2002) are also benefits. These exchanges enhance reciprocity between generations where knowledge and care extends across age groups and cohorts (Cornman & Kingson, 1998–99). Through effective communication, active listening skills, compassion and understanding, mentors help protégés resolve stressful situations and problems (Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute, 2003), while remaining engaged, active and useful.

Implications

Improved health and increased longevity have increased the amount of time older adults have to devote to new pursuits (Rogers & Taylor, 1997). Enhanced community life and lifelong learning have also improved the quality of life and well-being of older adults. As mentors, they can stay engaged as active learners and teachers and can contribute to society, yet few existing public policies encourage intergenerational partnerships. Instead of retiring completely, many older adults prefer to work part-time as mentors or as volunteers (AARP, 2003) to connect with and to assist others (Rowland, Lederhouse & Satterfield, 2004).

Sixty million Americans are currently over age 55, and the growth rate of those 60 and over is expected to remain above average (Weiss & Gomperts, 2005). Earlier predictions estimated that by 2025, America will have over 82 million adults age 60 and over (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). These “older adults constitute the healthiest...and best-educated American generation ever” (Weiss & Gomperts, 2005, p. 22). Retirement frees up 25 hours a week for men and 18 hours a week for women; about 6 to 14 million older retired Americans currently seek part-time volunteer opportunities—without success (Henkin & Taylor, 2006).

For a majority of adults, sharing knowledge and learning new things are vital (Rowland et al., 2004). Specific goals, action plans and structure are needed (Wild & O’Sullivan, 2003) within all mentoring activities. Teaching and learning strategies can be used to increase mentors’ and protégés’ competence in communication skills and styles, and to encourage engagement through formal and informal mentoring (Rowland et al., 2004). Since each mentor and protégé has different values, emotions, and identities, there is scope for deeper levels of interpersonal development from advising, counseling, planning and decision making (Kerka, 1997). Older adults can gain greater satisfaction, increased health and psychological benefits, by remaining actively engaged as mentors, by interacting and by supporting others (Freedman & Jaffe, 1993). Mentoring programs can fully utilize the knowledge, skills, time, love, care and commitment that many older adults are eager to share while they renew positive emotions, learn and construct meaning in their lives.

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