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## EMPLOYING SERVICE-LEARNING TO TEACH RESEARCH METHODS TO GERONTOLOGY STUDENTS

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*In this article I argue that service-learning is an ideal method to teach and practice research skills in gerontology. Examples of research are presented on the impact of a natural disaster on older adults, and the impact of decade on older women.*

The Association for Gerontology in Higher Education, the Corporation for National Service, Generations Together at the University of Pittsburgh, and 30 academic grantees have been working together to build an intergenerational service-learning infrastructure in gerontology. Sally Newman (1998) explained that the goal is to develop gerontology education partnerships among academic institutions and those who provide services to the aged. Partnerships subsequently encourage gerontology students and older adults to interact while they offer services and learn from one another. The Corporation for National Service claims that service-learning entails integrating community service activities with academic curricula.

Service-learning is an ideal way to teach research methods in gerontology. As gerontology is an applied interdisciplinary science, teaching our research methods should be about building an interdisciplinary team that can employ the methodological skills of a variety of disciplines. Students should learn to work together, just as soon as they master a few shared theoretical concepts such as birth cohort,

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period effect, and chronological aging. Using service-learning to teach research methods to gerontology students, academicians can build a team that includes local service providers, older adults, and faculty and students from a variety of disciplines. Diversity becomes our asset; combining disciplines is our strength.

Traditional age college students may approach the study of gerontology as they do the study of a foreign culture. Many have limited experience with elders outside the context of the family. Although we rarely refer to it as research, almost all introductory gerontology professors require students to spend time with older adults and to write about their experiences. Unfortunately, most don't seize the opportunity to link this practice with a lesson in gerontology research methods. Observation and interviewing are qualitative research methods. When we send students out of the classroom to interact with elders we should introduce them to the language of researchers. We need to tell them that when anthropological gerontologists record similar observations and reflections, they refer to them as "field notes." We should initiate partnerships with service providers before creating assignments so we can teach students how to apply research methods in gerontology to the local context. A professor might introduce a lesson on interviewing skills, for example. Service providers could add an explanation of the concept of "needs assessment." Following the lecture, students might be assigned the task of interviewing older people about what these older individuals need to solve their problems. Collaborations such as this one would allow students and faculty to assist service-providers in their needs assessment process. When we give students assignments with regard to actual community needs, students can reflect on their accomplishments, the applied research practice, and what they learn about aging.

Of course, I guide students as they attempt to help agencies solve problems. Their research skills include observing, interviewing, analyzing qualitative content, employing a codebook to reduce qualitative codes to statistical codes, reducing quantitative data using a statistical software package, and coauthoring research reports. The disciplinary backgrounds of students vary and their service-learning assignments are given accordingly. Students work in teams, sharing skills and strengths. The students thus provide research data to local agencies and agency personnel help teach students about the aging service network.

Service-learning programs have several strengths, not the least of which is that they are adaptable to the needs of the community. When Hurricane Floyd blew into our area in September 1999, the Cape Fear Area Agency on Aging asked the UNCW gerontology program to help

assess the impact of the storm on older adults. Three service-learning research activities were added to my sociology of aging syllabus so that students could gather data related to the storm. Each activity required collaboration with other faculty members and with local service providers. Each activity was carefully planned and submitted to our university's institutional review board for the protection of human subjects.

The first project taught students to conduct video life-history interviews with elderly flood survivors and presented the videos to the elders as gifts. A professor of communication studies, whose research efforts have led to the production of award winning documentaries, volunteered to instruct students in video techniques. The second project had gerontology faculty working with service providers to design a survey instrument. Then students who had studied survey design in prior courses critiqued the survey and helped other students pretest the instrument. A colleague from another discipline presented a guest lecture on survey research methods. Service providers came to class and conducted two workshops on how to communicate with older adults. Then the class of 32 students conducted 167 face-to-face interviews with older meals participants in four counties to learn how these elders made evacuation decisions and to assess the impact of the flood on their lives. In the final service-learning research project, students conducted open-ended interviews with service providers and then assessed the extent to which the storm had an impact on service delivery to older adults. When data were gathered from all these projects, gerontology faculty collaborated with students to prepare reports for service providers. These were presented to older adults, emergency management personnel, and the Cape Fear Area Agency on Aging at a meeting that also celebrated service-learning accomplishments. The media was represented at the meeting, televising service-provider promises to alter the way they manage crises in light of the research findings. All agreed that with faculty guidance, students are great research assistants.

I also teach *Women and Aging*. In this class generations of women are teaching and learning from each other about the impact of personal attributes, birth cohort effects, period effects, and stratification on the aging process. The students are learning from the elders and the elders are learning from the students. Graduate and undergraduate students from differing disciplines are enrolled. Some are interested in feminist theory. Others take the course as an elective applied to an undergraduate gerontology minor or a post-baccalaureate certificate. Prior disciplinary training among students is as different as nursing is from accounting. Rather than attempting to even out the playing field,

I use student differences to teach phenomenology. Differences help to illustrate lived experience. Similarly, I play to student strengths and knowledge, when designing a service-learning research project for this course.

While there are a growing number of studies on older women, there is no textbook that encompasses what we would like to be able to teach. Students hear lectures on the life course perspective. They read a sample of research articles (MacDonald & Rich, 1991; Roberto, 1996; Roundtree, 1999; Thone, 1992) on women and aging early in the semester as an illustration of literature review.<sup>2</sup> The class project begins with a seminar discussion of the literature. Students are given a list of avenues of inquiry that they can use to conduct open-ended life history interviews. Students each conduct a series of four interviews of aging women. Each interview includes a review of the life course of a woman in a different decade of her life. Thus each student interviews one woman in her sixties, one in her seventies, one in her eighties, and one in her nineties. When permission is granted, the interview is recorded on videotape.

In all cases, students are taught about research ethics and the right to privacy. Students must return a form signed by each interviewee that indicates permission has been granted for their interview. Each student writes four sociological biographies describing their interviewees. The students discuss how normative or how unique each interviewee is by referring to theories, statistics, and descriptions presented in the course readings concerning women in different age groups. Each student also comments about differences among the four interviews that may have occurred as a function of chronological age, cohort or period effects, and differences that seem to be a consequence of idiosyncratic experience. The service-learning research project eventually involves the analysis of the entire data set of interviews; I offer workshops on data analysis. In concert, the students attempt a qualitative content analysis of the interviews, beginning by grouping the interviews in decades. We compare all the interviews of women in their sixties to one another and then we compare them to all of the interviews of

<sup>2</sup> Reading assignments include:

*Relationships Between Women in Later Life*, edited by Karen A. Roberto (NY: Harrington Park Press, 1996, also published as *Journal of Women & Aging*, Vol. 8, Number 3/4 1996).

*Look Me in the Eye: Old Women, Aging, and Ageism*, by Barbara MacDonald and Cynthia Rich (Spinsters Ink, November 1991)

*Women and Aging: Celebrating Ourselves*, by Ruth Raymond Thone (NY: Harrington Park Press, 1992)

*On Women Turning 70: Honoring the Voices of Wisdom*, by Cathleen Roundtree, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).

women in their seventies, and to all the interviews of women in their eighties, and finally to all of the interviews of women in their nineties. The students' first goal is to decide whether there is more variation within or between age groups. Then they begin to look for experiences that are common or diverse and code those interviews thematically. They analyze whether their findings are attributable to period effects, cohort effects, or personal attributes. Some classes have produced a quantitative codebook for further analysis. Students then can compile data from the entire student sample of aging women that can be compared to national and regional norms on the life course of older women. Of course, those with statistical backgrounds can also compute T-tests or an analysis of variance to statistically measure differences within and between age groups. Analyzing the class sample of women's interviews becomes their assignment in a take-home final exam.

It's a wonderful course in which students contribute to what we all learn about aging women as they study how to conduct research on aging women. When they add the age range of students (19–55) to the age range of interviewees, students discover their access to data on an entire century of women's lives. In course evaluations, students have told me that they can think of no better way to study women and aging.

Service-learning is an ideal method to teach and practice research skills. Students and elders benefit and alliances between academic institutions and service providers are strengthened. The more we practice research skills, the better we perfect them. With proper guidance, service-learning research practice can be introduced to introductory gerontology students and continued through a graduate curriculum.

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