Intergenerational Service-Learning: An Innovative Teaching Strategy to Infuse Gerontology Content into Foundation Courses

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SUMMARY. This article provides an overview of intergenerational service-learning, an experiential pedagogy that involves students in learning outside the traditional classroom while providing a needed service in the community. Examples of intergenerational service-learning projects are presented that have been successfully utilized by the authors. These projects demonstrate the importance of using reflective practice assignments to help students deconstruct and reconstruct images, beliefs and paradigms about older adults. In addition, problems and opportunities in developing service-learning projects in urban and rural settings and with the Hispanic community are described, as well as some of the types of learning that may result from implementing service-learning experiences in various social work foundation courses.

doi: 10.1300/J083v48n01_11 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]
WHAT IS INTERGENERATIONAL SERVICE-LEARNING?

Service-learning is an experiential pedagogy that involves students in learning experiences outside the classroom. It is a philosophy, a community development model and a teaching and learning methodology (http://www.nylc.org/sl_definition.cfm). Intergenerational service-learning provides students the opportunity to apply theoretical concepts to real life situations with older adults, moving learning from the traditional classroom to the community, while focusing on genuine problems and solving real community needs. Intergenerational service-learning brings community service activities and the educational curriculum together while focusing on the interaction of older adults and students. It provides for increased collaboration between the academic community and the aging network, including exposing students to older adults and practitioners serving older adults, as well as the service delivery support system. Service learning in addition to providing service to the community and learning for the students also involves an opportunity for students to reflect on their learning experiences.

Service-learning is a both pedagogy/andragogy or a teaching strategy and a goal. It brings together teaching, research, and service, while connecting the academic institution with the needs of the community and the larger society (Astin & Sax, 1998). The five components of service-learning for faculty, students, service recipients, and the community partner include: (1) Planning the experience and identifying the skills and knowledge that may be learned from this experience, identifying community partners, selecting the reading, assignments and grading criteria; (2) Performing the service, analyzing the experience, and reflecting on the lessons learned through writing, discussion and presentations; (3) Receiving the services; (4) Recognizing the students, service recipients, and agencies with publicity, food, certificates and awards; and (5) Evaluating the experience from students, faculty, agency, and consumer/service recipients’ perspectives.

This teaching strategy is particularly useful for preparing students for a liberal arts education and is an extremely good fit for social work education. Colleges and universities who desire to prepare students as concerned citizens and press forward the “social good,” have recently begun their mission to advance knowledge, economic development, and community outreach by including educational activities that incorporate service-learning through direct community involvement (Rhoads, 2000). Institutions utilizing this community-building
approach encourage community residents and institution professionals to work together in an effort aimed at solving problems and enriching the lives of all its participants (Maurrasse, 2001). With collaboration, this approach relies on strengthening existing partnerships to bring about change in the community (O’Connor & Netting, 1999).

At the same time, social work education focuses on extensive community involvement of the social work students in order for them to understand the dynamics of a multicultural society and develop their skills as empathetic practitioners (Nagy & Falk, 2001). Accredited social work programs have successfully employed a variety of approaches to nurture both the integration of theory and practice or field placement, and the university’s approach of service-learning through university-community partnerships (Maurrasse, 2001). This has been achieved by elaborating “faculty-headed field units in existing agencies, the development of school-community learning centers, and university-based practice opportunities” (Rosenblum & Raphael, 1983, p. 67). Today many of these institutions have achieved national recognition (Maurrasse, 2001).

The service-learning experiences through university-community partnerships, similar to the field practicum, benefit the social work student ideally because “communities provide powerful opportunities that complement social work education” (Lawson, 1998). Through the successful integration of university-community partnerships, the student can acquire experience from both the classroom and community placement alike. This can include, but is not limited to, the promotion of leadership through direct community involvement, a closer identification of self as a caring person through exploration, reflection, and understanding (Rhoads, 2000), and a deeper comprehension of the three levels of social work practice–micro, mezzo, macro (Dhooper, Rompf, & Royse, 1999). Simultaneously, this environment allows practicum students to experience learning from the other foundation areas: social work values and ethics, diversity, promotion of social and economic justice, and populations at risk for the enhancement of a multicultural education (Dhooper, Rompf, & Royse, 1993). All of which, as stated by the literature, are also promoted through service-learning (Rhoads, 2000). However, service-learning differs from practicum as mentioned earlier because service-learning is “a philosophy of education that focuses on service to the community as students increase their understanding of a specific population’s needs, issues, problems and solutions” (Newman & Tompkins, 2000).

As mentioned above, reflection is an important component of the service-learning experience. Reflection is a thoughtful look at the meaning of one’s experiences, individually or in groups (Lucas, 2000). Using reflection, students can better identify what they have learned about themselves, called “process reflection.” They can reflect on what they learned about older adults or
the aging service delivery system, called “content reflection.” Or they can reflect on how they will apply what they learned, or the “so what? reflection” (Mezirow, 1991; Schon, 1983).

Process reflection questions might include, what took you by surprise? When did you feel most engaged? Why? When did you feel least engaged? Why? How did this experience challenge your beliefs about older adults? Content reflection questions might ask students to identify three concepts learned in class and apply the theory to their experience in the community. Compare and contrast the theories learned in class with your observations and experiences with the aging network. Describe the strengths and gaps in the aging service delivery system. “So what” reflection questions might ask students to determine how they will utilize the information they learned in the field. This occurs through a process that incorporates critical decision-making and evaluation of the effectiveness of service-learning. This teaching/learning strategy provides students with an opportunity to expand their knowledge through experience (Brookfield, 1987; Mezirow, 1991).

Faculty may use a variety of reflective practice assignments depending on the teaching strategies used, the type of students, the objectives of the course, and/or the service-learning setting (Cranton, 1994; Cranton, 2000). One type of reflective assignment is the use of critical incident analysis and includes content, process, and so what reflection. Students are asked to describe an incident that occurred during their service-learning experience. They are then asked to reflect critically on their reactions, thoughts, and feelings about the situation. What took them by surprise? What did they learn? How will they use this experience in the future? Another type of reflective assignment is the dialogue journal in which the student writes reflections on one page and the instructor provides feedback or asks critical questions on the opposite page. Students may be given a list of key concepts or phases that they include in their reflection. In addition, students may be given directed readings and asked to reflect on the readings. They may be asked to make class presentations about what they learned or participate in email or chat discussions (Taylor, Marienau, & Fiddler, 2000). Examples of reflective questions will be presented in the service-learning projects described later in the article.

Service-learning is a valuable instructional tool. “Research supports the contention that service-learning has a positive impact on personal, attitudinal, moral, social, and cognitive outcomes” (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996, p. 223). Astin and Sax (1998) conclude from their 1995 evaluation of service-learning that participation during the undergraduate years substantially enhances the academic development of students. Unlike volunteer work, service-learning is course-based and the purpose is to implant a sense of responsibility as the student integrates theoretical knowledge with experience (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996).
BENEFITS AND BARRIERS

An important component of intergenerational service-learning is developing an association with agencies and organizations serving older adults in the community, as well as with older adults. The involvement of community partners can provide benefits and pose barriers in planning intergenerational service-learning experiences. Some of the benefits of working with community partners include:

- Exposing students to older adults, which often results in a change of attitude for students toward older adults and to their own aging process (Newman & Tompkins, 2000; Schwartz & Simmons, 2001),
- Building bridges between the university and the community,
- Exposing students to practitioners working with older adults which challenges students stereotypes about social workers and gerontologists working with older adults,
- Identifying social work practitioners to serve as guest lecturers on various practice issues related to older adults and their families,
- Discovering areas for applied research in gerontological social work practice,
- Providing an opportunity for students to explore their own aging process, and
- Coupling students with community agencies and professionals that are potential employers.

Some of the barriers to establishing relationships with community partners include:

- A previous history of strained relationships between the community partner and the educational institution,
- An organizational structure within the community partner agency that is in transition or chaos,
- High staff turnover rates that affect the stability of student involvement with designated contact persons,
- Funding issues associated with liability,
- Indemnity release forms,
- Transportation of the student to the service-learning site,
- Lack of flexibility of the community organization,
- Misconceptions about the concept of service,
- Lack of an appropriate orientation to identify expectations of all partners—agency, community members, students, and faculty,
• Lack of student flexibility due to course scheduling and other demands,
• Lack of flexibility of the educational institution in relation to understanding the needs of the community partner,
• Student anxiety related to the initial contact with the older adults who will be involved in the service-learning experience, and
• Anxiety experienced by the service recipients about what is expected of them and how much time this will require.

**SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECTS**

The following section will identify different models of intergenerational service-learning experiences, the kinds of skills and learning experiences provided by each, and the variety of community based agencies that the authors have utilized. The models can be utilized in policy, practice, Human Behavior and the Social Environment, research and/or aging elective courses, with the assignments and reflective questions geared to the content and goals of the course.

Intergenerational service-learning experiences utilized by these authors have included working with an agency serving older adults to plan and implement a conference geared to the needs and interests of older women, interviewing older adults to help them prepare their spiritual legacies and working with a housing facility to conduct focus groups with older adults about transition issues related to moving from independent to congregate living. In addition, two examples will demonstrate challenges and opportunities of working in rural locations. One project reflects the barriers and benefits that occurred while developing an intergenerational service-learning project with a Hispanic serving institution in a rural setting. The final project describes individual service projects that occurred between students and older adults in rural communities.

**PLANNING AN OLDER WOMEN’S CONFERENCE**

Students in an aging and social work elective class were asked to help plan a conference geared to the interests of older women. Students participated by serving on the Planning and Marketing Committees at an agency that provides an array of services to older adults. Students reviewed the literature about older women and identified program ideas for the workshop session. They contacted distribution sites for the brochures and fliers to attract the attention of the target population. Students also participated during the
event by assisting with on-site logistics, registration and breakout sessions. This intergenerational service-learning experience assisted students in meeting the course objectives, which included helping students:

- To gain knowledge of physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of aging
- To gain knowledge of existing programs, both government and voluntary serving the older adult population
- To gain knowledge about the diversity of older adults and the specific factors affecting women, people of color, lesbians, gay men, etc.
- To identify career opportunities and roles for professionals in the field of gerontology
- To identify one’s own attitudes and beliefs about aging and older adults in order to work more effectively with this population

The participation of the students was so successful that at the de-briefing meeting the older volunteers, agency staff, and students overwhelmingly decided that the conference should evolve from that geared specifically to older women to an intergenerational women’s conference. The students made suggestions to the planning committee about how to attract younger women, including where to advertise, seminar topics to generate interest, etc. As a result of student suggestions the agency has redesigned their intergenerational women’s conference into an annual event that includes daughters and mothers, mothers and grandmothers, granddaughters and grandmothers, sisters and aunts, great aunts and nieces who share a day exploring issues relating to health, social situations, legal concerns, financial and economic planning, and spirituality that affect them as women across the lifespan.

From this experience students developed confidence in their planning skills and they learned about issues affecting older women, that their voices count, and about how lifespan issues affect women across age and racial/ethnic boundaries. They developed confidence in their planning skills. As a result of the students’ involvement, the agency learned that the community was open and hungry for multigenerational women’s programming. The instructor learned about thinking outside of the box, as the agency staff and volunteers decided to transform the Older Women’s Conference into a Multigenerational Women’s Conference.

It was important for the students to have an opportunity for class and individual reflections to examine their previous assumptions about older adults and to reflect on their recent experiences with older adults. Students responded to reflective questions in both oral and written forms. Some of the questions included: At what moment during the day did you feel most engaged with what was happening? Why? At what moment during the day did you feel most
distanced from what was happening? Why? What action taken by anyone (participant or facilitator) during the day did you find most affirming or helpful? Explain. What action taken by anyone (facilitator or participant) during the day did you find most puzzling or confusing? Explain. What about this experience surprised you the most? This could be your own reaction to what went on, or something that someone did, or anything else that occurs to you. Why? How will you integrate or apply what you learned at the conference with your social work knowledge, skills, values, and/or conscious use of self (Brookfield, 1987)? In addition to the experience gained from the students involved in planning and implementing this conference as a service-learning project, a MSW student working on her gerontology certificate became interested in the conference as a research project. She developed a program evaluation for the Older Women’s conference and interviewed students, older women, and the agency staff about the impact of the conference. Thus, students in the class also learned about applied research through this intergenerational service-learning experience. Exposure to older women helped these students to deconstruct negative stereotypes about older adults and replace them with positive and affirming ones.

**PREPARING A SPIRITUAL LEGACY PROJECT**

This service learning experience was designed to assist students to deconstruct their attitudes, stereotypes and biases about older adults by engaging the students with older adults in exploring how the older adults have made meaning of their lives. Although this service-learning project began as a partnership with a community based agency, because of changes within the administration of the agency at the beginning of the semester for this project, the agency social worker felt she could not participate in the project. Several other agencies were contacted but nothing could be worked out for the class as a whole. As was mentioned earlier, this is one of the barriers in developing service-learning projects. The students suggested that they interview an older family member, which turned out to be an incredible and meaningful learning experience for the students.

The service component of this project involved developing a spiritual legacy with an older family member that could be shared with the students’ families. Another component of this assignment was that the students were required to write their own spiritual legacies, which challenged them to think about their own lives with attention to the lessons they have learned, the impact they have made in the world and to explore the values in which they live and make decisions. This process of engaging the students in interaction with
family members helped to meet the objectives of this aging and social work course entitled “Assessing and Intervening with Older Adults.” By the end of the course, students were expected to:

- Understand the impact of physical, emotional, cognitive and social aging on older adults when assessing and intervening with older adults.
- Assess one’s own attitudes, values and biases regarding aging, death and dying.
- Recognize the similarities and the differences in older adults, including specific factors affecting women, people of color, lesbians, gay men, etc.
- Apply professional social work values and practice principles when assessing and intervening with older adults and their families, recognizing the diversity in this population.
- Critically analyze those social forces that are part of the older person’s environment (particularly older women, people of color, differently able, gay/lesbian, etc.) and be able to assess the impact of those forces on the client’s level of functioning.
- Develop an understanding and appreciation of how older adults make meaning of their life experiences.

The students scheduled time with their older family members and asked them to discuss their values, lessons learned, regrets, turning points, and significant people in their lives. As they interviewed their older family members, the students discovered the human being behind the role of grandmother or grandfather and they also came to understand better how their own values, beliefs, and perspectives had developed. At a time when young people are still individuating from family, these students found a connection with their heritage and their family. It was a transformative experience as they discussed concerns and topics related to living and dying with their older family member. As a result of these discussions the students developed a greater understanding about how their family members made meaning of their lives. The instructor learned how important it is to be present and attentive to the students when they have been given assignments that challenge their paradigms. Students responded to reflective questions about their experiences. What challenged your beliefs, thoughts, and attitudes? What took you by surprise or what happened that you did not expect to happen? What (readings, class discussion, speakers, exercises, etc.) helped you to prepare for the interview with your family member? What would you do differently the next time you interview an older adult? What would you do the same? What new understanding about yourself and your family did you gain from this experience? Based on the interviews with family members and preparing your own spiritual legacy,
what is of real value or importance to you and what to your older family member? How do you find meaning in life? How does your older family member find meaning in life? How are your responses to these questions alike and how are they different?

**CONDUCTING A FOCUS GROUP**

Students in a course entitled “Social Work Practice with Communities and Organizations” learned to conduct focus groups, which explored transition issues related to the housing continuum with older adults. At the end of the course, students will:

- understand how housing policies and the options on the housing continuum, which provide opportunities for older adults to age in place, affect older adults,
- demonstrate an understanding of how the history of an organization or community informs and shapes its current policies, programs, client systems, and positioning in the community,
- conduct or evaluate research that informs social change efforts and apply findings to generalist social work practice across the lifespan with diverse populations,
- understand ethical issues in conducting research with older adults, and
- demonstrate professional use of self, including ability to articulate and manage ethical and value dilemmas, and to apply principles of reflective practice and critical thinking skills to one’s own practice with diverse populations across the lifespan.

The setting was an affordable housing community for older adults, targeted to older adults who could no longer live in an independent setting and were attracted to a communal living facility with services designed to support them as frailty increased. These students were exposed to aging content, which included understanding issues effecting both the physical and psychological adjustment to the housing continuum. Students met with the administrator of a recently built affordable housing facility to learn about housing older adults and the transitions that occur as older adults adjust to the housing continuum.

A “mock” focus group conducted in the classroom gave student the opportunity to discuss their own feelings and experiences with personal moves, either from their family home into a dorm, an apartment, or their first home. This helped them to remember their own experiences with moving so that they could be more empathetic to the experiences of the older adults. Also, the
mock focus group helped them to understand the content and process of focus groups and how to analyze and integrate the experiences of the participants, as well as their own.

Based on their knowledge of focus groups, previous exposure to older adults and the moving experience the students developed questions for use in a focus group with older adults. They participated in a focus group with older adults at the facility where they learned about the residents’ experiences with moving from their own homes into this communal setting. After the focus group, the students analyzed the shared stories and made recommendations to the administrator. Through this experience, the students learned: (1) how to plan and conduct focus groups, (2) how to gather and analyze stories shared by participants, (3) how to understand issues related to housing and housing policy for older adults, and (4) how to interview and communicate with older adults. Students were asked to reflect on content, process, and the “so what” of the experience. Reflection questions included: What did you learn about older adults? How have your views about older adults changed from the beginning of the class through the end of the class? What surprised you about the focus group with older adults? Compare and contrast focus groups for data gathering with at least one other method of data gathering. Explain which one you would choose in the future if contacted by an older adult housing facility. Defend your answer. It became evident from the students’ reflections in class and their written reflective papers that as they deconstructed cultural messages about older adults they were developing a desire and interest for working with and advocating for older adults.

**INTERVENING WITH MEXICAN AMERICAN OLDER ADULTS**

This experience provides another example of intergenerational service-learning, which occurred in a rural setting. It summarizes some of the barriers and benefits of service-learning, as well as principles and concepts discussed earlier in this article. This title of the course is Aging: Cross Cultural Perspectives, which familiarizes students with the requisite values, knowledge, ethics and methods by which social work practitioners can more ably serve the needs of diverse elderly population in the El Paso/Juarez, urban/rural/border region. By the end of the semester the students will be able to:

- Identify and assess the economic, biological, psychological, social and cultural factors that impact the quality of life of older adults.
• Recognize and gain sensitivity to the diversity within the aging population; emphasis will be on older Hispanic and other diverse populations of the El Paso/Juarez, urban/rural/border region.
• Employ a goal oriented planned change approach to the development of intervention strategies.
• Become knowledgeable regarding the utilization of research methods to describe; explain; and predict human behavior in later years.
• Become familiar with social policy issues relevant to aging in American society.
• Apply critical thinking and writing skills in the development of an intervention strategy with older adults.

This class is a part of a social work program at a Hispanic serving institution located along the Texas/Mexico border. The county is primarily rural with many students coming either from Mexico to attend classes or from rural “colonias,” unincorporated communities characterized by poverty, high crime, low educational levels, high levels of unemployment, and the lack of running water (TDH, 1995). The majority of the students at the University are the first in their families to pursue a college degree.

As a result, parents of these students are often unable, due to lack of education, language issues, and non-citizenship status to obtain employment offering a livable wage or sufficient income that would allow them to contribute monetarily to the student’s education. Thus many of the students must work to pay for living and as well as educational expenses. As a result of these demands, a barrier often associated with the structuring of the service-learning experience was related to time availability. In addition to the time constraints, the anticipation of this new experience was accompanied by some anxiety. This too is a barrier that must be addressed when beginning a service-learning project.

Another issue to be considered in a rural area is that of the availability of partners to provide opportunities for the students. Limited options resulted in more anxiety regarding fitting requirements into specific time schedules. In addition to the time constraints, for many of the students this would be the first service-learning experience and the anticipation was also accompanied by verbalized anxiety and fear of what they considered the “unknown.” Much of the anxiety was countered by class discussions related to concepts of aging, demographic profiles and by having older adults come into the classroom to speak and serve as guest lecturers. In addition, students were provided the opportunity to discuss particular concerns and address those concerns on an individual basis. For example, if the student had only a specific slot of time
available then a service partner was located who had activities that could accommodate the student’s schedule. The students were partnered with agencies that provided services to older Hispanic (Mexican American) adults who live in El Paso County, a largely rural area along the Texas/Mexico border. To understand the significance of geography and culture one needs to be aware of the demographics of the older adult population in this portion of the Texas/Mexico border and of their specific service needs. Most of the older adult population in El Paso County migrated from Mexico, with 75% of the overall population identified as Hispanic, and primarily Mexican/American. Many of the older adults moved to this area as young adults, and settled in areas now known as “colonias” due to the opportunity for land ownership. These “colonias” are all within 40 miles of El Paso, a city of over 750,000 people. Many of the residents never applied for citizenship and are considered undocumented, a citizenship status that precludes eligibility for some government benefits and services. The educational level of these older adults is lower than the national average with only a small proportion having finished the equivalent of a high school education. A significant proportion lack English language skills.

The older adult partners selected by the students were recipients of services being provided by the limited number of agencies designed to assist with this population. Those services included transportation, nutrition, diabetes adherence, and group home monitoring. The reflections from the students’ journals indicated that prior to the service-learning experiences many had limited contact with older adults outside of their own families. A significant proportion of the students had never been to the “colonias.” They were unaware of the needs of the older adults in the area and lacked knowledge about the limited resources available to this population. Feelings of desperation were sometimes reflected in the journal writings of the students regarding the time limited involvement with these older adults and the immense unmet service needs. Those insights inspired discussions pertaining to the need to increase the advocacy and brokering role as social workers to expand culturally relevant service delivery to older adults living along the Texas/Mexico border. In conjunction with this process, students started to research policy issues that would impact service delivery, especially policies that excluded non-resident citizens.

The final phase of the reflection process occurred during an event entitled The Celebration of Aging, which took place during the last scheduled class of the semester. The purpose of the event was to show appreciation to the older adults and service partners who provided learning experiences for the students by recognizing their contribution and by the awarding of a certificate. Each student introduced the older adult with whom they interacted. The students had the opportunity to reflect on the significance of their shared experience.
The verbal reflections by the students indicated feelings of gratitude to the older adults for providing them an opportunity to integrate theory with practice, and to apply concepts and theories learned in the classroom to older adults. Most of the students expressed an appreciation for the experience, proclaiming that it provided an avenue to increase their understanding of aging in a way that could only be gained through direct involvement and observation. Students also expressed an increased respect for older adults who persevered in difficult circumstances, despite limited resources.

The course content, as reflected in the course objectives, was evident in the reflective musings of the students. They took a holistic approach to the study of the older adults looking at all issues that affect well-being and productive aging especially in this particular geographic area. The knowledge gained was channelled into a productive means of social action. The objectives were achieved through readings and a course pack that addressed all area of the aging process, involvement of older adults as guest lecturers, interface with aging related organizations and service learning experiences with older adults.

Overall, many misconceptions regarding older adults were dispelled as a result of the service-learning experiences and many of the students expressed interest and intentions for working with older adults after graduation. These statements coincide with findings by Hatchett, Holmes, and Ryan (2002) from a survey administered to Hispanic students indicating that an increased familiarity with older adults has a positive impact on attitudes regarding older adults, especially women, and the intention to work with older adults.

**PARTNERING WITH INDIVIDUALS IN COMMUNITY AND RESIDENTIAL SETTINGS**

In this intergenerational service-learning project students were paired with older adults in a rural, country setting. Some of the service recipients lived independently and some were in residential service settings. Students were paired, either through personal selection or with the assistance of their instructor, with two older adult service-learning partners per student. One older adult partner was dependent upon social services as a result of their physical or emotional state and the other partner was living independently continuing to function in an active lifestyle. The purpose of having two service-learning partners was to explore the conclusions of Schwartz and Simmons (2001) that favorable experience with a population is more likely to heighten attitudes toward a population than unfavorable experiences. Amir (1969) postulates that favorable conditions tend to reduce prejudice; unfavorable ones may increase prejudice and intergroup tension (p. 338). Thus, contact with an elderly population
may not in and of itself increase attitudes about a differing group but the experience must be perceived as positive.

The objectives of this course were to help the student define:

- Who are the elderly? How is aged defined?
- How is Engagement and Disengagement theory exemplified in this population?
- What is successful aging?
- How are the attitudes of older adults similar or different as a result of their living and care conditions?
- What restrictions are associated with older adults and how might the restrictions be addressed through advocacy and policy changes?
- Does religion and spirituality play a role in the daily decisions and activities of this population and if so, how?
- How is sexuality an issue for this population?
- How does the transition from independence to communal support occur and do preparations occur for the end of independence and life?

Reflection exercises occurred by way of class discussions and journal writings. Classroom activities included discussions about required and elective readings, interactive activities with the service recipients and the learning experiences of the student as a result of the activities, service needs identified by the student and their service-recipient, social relationship issues, family issues that impacted the social and living conditions of the service recipient, financial issues experienced by the recipients, and issues related to spiritual and religious involvement. Sexuality was briefly discussed but the majority of the students did not feel comfortable approaching the topic with their service recipients. Therefore, most of the reflections about sexuality were presented in a written format that discussed the observations the students made of the older adults and their significant other.

The assessment instruments used to determine student attitudes and interest for working with older adults indicate improved interest regardless of the dependency attributes of the service-learning recipient. Similar activities were conducted with the service recipients regardless of their physical or emotional state. Some of the activities conducted regardless of their physical or emotional state. Some of the activities conducted were video histories, photo journaling, written histories of life stories, travels, and where applicable, military experience journals, internet usage, meal preparation, shopping excursions, gardening, and dining out. Many of the older adult participants lacked transportation and the students, after providing sufficient evidence and documentation to address liability issues, transported their participants to various locations of interest. The culmination of the intergenerational service-learning experience was a
banquet coordinated by the service-learners and presentations of mementos of appreciation to the service recipients.

The students identified the various life-transitions that the differing older adults were experience but the interactions with the differing population yielded no significant differences on the increase in attitudes. However, the conclusions of this specific study should not be generalized due to the small size of the respective sample (n = 13). Students’ written and oral reflections indicated that learning occurred and numerous students stated that they had developed a greater interest for working with older adults and an increased level of comfort with older populations as a result of this experience. Similar to the findings of other researchers the students learned gerontological concepts, how to communicate and interact with the older adults, the complexity of problems faced by older adults, the limitations and gaps in services needed to address the issues of aging (Pine, 1997; Brown & Roddin, 2001).

CONCLUSION

Intergenerational service-learning is a teaching strategy that combines community service with academic learning, helping to prepare students for social work practice with older adults in micro, mezzo, and macro settings. These practice settings are highly beneficial and mutually rewarding to students and to older adults. Intergenerational service-learning can be used in a variety of settings and requires generalist knowledge about aging, including communication skills, assessment and problem solving skills, diversity among older adults, social issues and policies related to aging. Because intergenerational service-learning challenges cultural stereotypes about aging and exposes students to real people and not case studies, it provides a good vehicle for infusing gerontology content into a range of foundation courses that exist within the social work curriculum.

NOTES

1. Funding for these projects was provided by the Corporation for National and Community Service, Learn & Serve Higher Education through a grant to The Association for Gerontology in Higher Education in partnership with Generations Together/University of Pittsburgh and from the Geriatric Enrichment in Social Work Education (GeroRich) grant funded by the John A. Hartford Foundation through the Council on Social Work Education.

2. At the time of the service learning project, Bonnie Hatchett was on the faculty of the University of Texas at El Paso.
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doi:10.1300/J083v48n01_11