

Intergenerational Undergraduate Gerontological Research Suggested Increased Commitment and Reduced Apprehensions to Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to share an intergenerational approach for learning as undergraduate students became researchers. Student-researchers selected one topic as a team that was anchored in gerontological theory and then interviewed and taught elder participants using a qualitative approach. The richness of this qualitative research process suggested heightened engagement in learning. Students expressed increased connectedness to their academics and interest toward working with elders. Additionally, elder participants enjoyed both hands-on learning activities and interviews. For the presentation, various intergenerational research projects were described including: technology, reminiscing, life meaning, journaling and entertainment. For this synopsis, one project about technology will be interwoven as an example that was written by six student-researchers in one Psychology of Aging course.

Keywords: Gerontology, Undergraduate Research, Service Learning, Intergenerational, Real World

Introduction

Aging is a certainty. Yet with the perplexities of ageism there is much that people do to avoid interactions with or deny that aging is taking place. This can contribute to students' disinterest in enrolling in gerontology coursework. Higher education enrollment advisors and educators have described students' enrollment in gerontology coursework as challenging (Reynolds, Haley, & Hyer, 2007). Increasing numbers of aging baby boomers will certainly require increased gerontological services (Arai et al., 2012). Researchers have surveyed students to understand what piques their interests in careers related to gerontology in an effort to meet future employment needs, and ageism surfaces in their comments as a detriment to career pursuits (Eshbaugh, Gross, Hillebrand, Davie, & Henninger, 2013; Lun, 2012). The learning quest was to engage undergraduate gerontology students in a way that they discussed their learning of gerontology with fervor and their feelings of ageism would hopefully dissipate.

Engaging students in collaborative research environments has shown to improve connectedness between the understanding of research concepts and curricula in varied sociological and psychological science disciplines including gerontology (Anagnopoulos, 2006; Black & Ziamba, 2014; Dowse, van der Riet & Keatinge, 2014; Henkel, 2006; Lovell & Karr, 2013; Luederitz et al., 2016; Singelis, 2006; Szuchman, 2006). Educators working with undergraduate students suggested that students' participation in parts of the research process, combined with consistent faculty support, assured a positive learning experience. Welikala and Atkin (2014) described students interviewing research participants as "co-inquirers"; students were given a glimpse into research practices while being guided by their instructors through the interview process rather than being responsible for all aspects of the study. Six undergraduate social science student-researchers utilized community-based participatory research (CBPR); faculty described this

teaching medium as a positive learning experience and productive in making contributions to research and community (Bulmer et al., 2016).

A team of six student-researchers found sources and wrote the literature review about seniors' engagement in technology. Students used a team discussion to write the literature review. The team interviewed participants and then used a hermeneutic approach to identify themes from their quotes. To complete the study, two students from the team pursued work-study positions and continued to work on the themes, write the methods, and identify conclusions.

Literature Review

Perceptions vary among older adults about the use of technology. These may be reflected by extreme enthusiasm and crashing despair; happiness is often expressed in what the technology can do; exasperation is frequently expressed with the actual usage and inevitable glitches that can be encountered (Mitzner et al., 2010). The joy of intergenerational communication is rich, "linked not only to each other, but to something bigger, to the past and to the future, to the flow of life" (Langer, 2017, p. 1). Perspectives on time and the communication of time have shown positive correlations to well-being and acceptance (Zambianchi, 2015). Despite these positive accolades, technology appears under-utilized by older adults; this may in part be due to ergonomic needs including sizes of fonts, glare of screens, and rapid clicking/double click (Calvo, Elorriaga, Arruarte, Larranaga, & Gutierrez, 2017). Maintaining social connections is a prominent interest when using technology despite feelings of anxiety and intimidation; this appears to be a primary source of motivation to use technology (Gould et al., 2017; Vroman, Arthanat, & Lysack, 2014).

Method

Design

In a "Fundamentals of Aging" class, six student-researchers selected the subject of technology in order to explore technology use among older adults. Institutional Review Board approval was received. Motivations to pursue this study originated from an observation of the potential generational gap between college students and older adults. Frequent updates in technology were perceived as an overall intimidation for older adults. For this reason, student-researchers felt it was beneficial to detect the general knowledge towards technology for this group, and what generational barriers they may face. Following interviews, a secondary goal was to assist and teach older adults with technology they expressed interest in. A phenomenological qualitative approach with a hermeneutic design was used to discover common themes from (N=16) elder participants.

Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were used to generate themes, reading through transcripts as an entire class, and then a more extensive analysis was completed by two student-researchers with "HyperResearch" software which aided in the interpretation of results. Trustworthiness and validation was established through: (1) Institutional Review Board approval; (2) consent forms for authorization to be audio-recorded; (3) using pseudonyms for all volunteers to maintain their

privacy; (4) use of direct quotes from transcribed interviews to establish themes; (5) careful analysis of interpreted results.

Results

Four themes were identified as student-researchers reviewed transcripts. Descriptors for themes came from initial interviews as elders shared their feelings about technology, and then as they shared their perceptions while learning about technology. Student-researchers were both interviewers and teachers.

Theme One: Aggravation – prefer existing habits – limitations

Elders speak their minds sharing their frustrations about technology related to computer games, cell phones, and being placed on hold in an automated answering service. A preference for familiarity was evidenced. When elders expressed interest to learn about new technology, they referenced physical limitations. Several examples of the responses that gave us these insights are as follows:

B: No, I don't care for them video games or playing them... I don't care for that kind of stuff. No I'm not interested, those things don't interest me. I like playing baseball in person or basketball but I've never been into playing Nintendo...

AJ: Yes [own a cell phone], it's just an ordinary flip-phone ...just like this. [Takes phone out of her pocket to show]. Serves its purpose.

Student Researcher: Okay. Right, so, you don't have one that has a touch screen on it quite like this one? [Pointing to the one recording the conversation].

AJ: No, I had one and I didn't like it... No, I couldn't get used to using it. There was so much, and you touch it and I have to come out here and tell the girl [employee at assisted living], 'Hey it did this, what do I do? I can't get out of this' and I'd bug her and I got used to using it and then I finally decided, no I'm going back to my old flip-phone. And I did. I had to have a new phone and I went back out to Wal-Mart and I said 'I want an ordinary plain old flip phone.'

Student Researcher: Customer service to try and get a hold of somebody but you keep having to press buttons to get a hold of the person... have you ever dealt with that?

S: Oh, yeah, like when you're calling to make a Dr's. appointment or something? Oh, yeah

Student-Researcher: Yeah, does that frustrate you?

S: Oh, absolutely! I always press zero.

Student-Researcher: Yeah, I know. I found that out recently, too [ha-ha]. Instead of listening to the whole thing!

S: Yeah, forget this crap!

W: I don't like to text. No, I don't! ... My daughter does it *all* the time... Yeah, I can't do that... it's too damn dangerous.

S: Or a CALL... I mean, to me, it's kind of crazy to text for half an hour when you could have finished the call in three minutes...

Student Researcher: Okay now, which of the following activities would you like to learn about if you had to choose? Cell phone, Computer, Social Networking, Internet, Computer Games, Exercise, Kindles, or Tablets?

A: Umm... Tablet... Bigger screen than what the phone has, you know.

R: And I have trouble spreading my fingers like you did to get that.

Student Researcher: Okay, chicken peck with just one finger, there's no shame in that.

R: Well I can't do it ...

Theme Two: Learning - computers, websites, social networking, tablets

Elders were asked if they would like to learn about new technology, and they selected computers, websites, social networking, and tablets. Although different levels of expertise were described, there was a preference for learning more:

Student Researcher: Is there anything you wish you knew how to do on the computer, anything at all?

B: How to turn it on!

C: Yeah! I would like to learn, you know... I come from a generation... where they didn't have ... well they did have computers, but they were so big and awkward back then, they used them in the Army when I was in there and they would calculate how far the shells would go and all that stuff.

B: It's amazing what they can do now, like that skype and email and Facebook... and all that, that's what I want to find out more, Facebook is where you type on the computer and send them messages and stuff like that about maybe where you live or what you're doing and things like that and then email is where they send you like a piece of paper over the mail no, that's faxing right?

C: You know, I'm... I hate to tell you, but I've never used one [computer]... Yeah! I would like to learn.

Student Researcher: Yep. [teaching on her computer] Then to the blue arrow. This is back and then you can go forward again too if you want. See and then you can go back, back to where we were at the Google search.

R: Well, would you want to on mine [computer]? To do some of that messing around and let me watch you?

Theme Three: Positive perceptions about technology – mixed feelings

Mixed messages were heard about technology. While there were comments about the positives of technology, there were hints that communicating in person, before the days of texting and Facebook, were preferable:

MC: It's kind of like a depends kind of thing, where it's nice to shoot someone a text but it's also nice to have a conversation.

P: You know, frankly, I like communicating... I have friends all over the world, and way before I ever got on Facebook, I had friends from all over the world from another website, and it would be lovely to be face to face with these people... but that's just not going to happen, so ... I think I'm going to go neutral on that, because it could go... either way.

Theme Four: Computers for knowledge and games

Participants described varied uses for their computers. Here is an example of using the computer for knowledge and games:

Student Researcher: So, you haven't been using the computer then, since you've had that?

B: Umm... My husband used to play solitaire on it for about 6 hours every day... at least 6 hours every day, but I would just use it for...um... I like to go into Dr. Oz's... and I like ... I have a program on there called learning bridge and I've been into that... but that was up until I had my surgery, last March. I had only been on the internet maybe a couple of times.

Conclusion

Many barriers exist concerning older adults' adaptation to technology updates. Common themes related to such barriers are evident, but the results also indicate a profound desire to overcome the obstacles. Older adults as well as student-researchers seemed very enthusiastic about the intergenerational communication and socialization that these learning experiences provided. Both elders and student-researchers wanted to use technology to socialize with friends and family, which established a common ground for sharing similar interests. Upon reflection, physical limitations for elders were evidenced by arthritic hands and visual imparities that added frustration to the use of technology devices. Furthermore, findings suggest the need for adaptive devices for elders' needs, thereby enhancing opportunities to achieve their goals. Intergenerational learning through the lens of research appeared to be a benefit to both older adults and undergraduate students in their commitment to learning and overcoming senses of intimidation about learning--whether the topics were technology, gerontology, or research.

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