Cover Page

Title: Students Enhancing Social Connections through Co-construction of Mini-Memoirs with Seniors

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes that students heighten their own social connections and those of seniors by co-creating mini-memoirs with older people. Mini-memoirs are short collections of self-selected memories that the seniors wish to save and to share with others through various modes of communication and in any language. Drawing insights from such areas as Positive Psychology and Service Learning, the article suggests possible benefits of the memoir co-creation process for both the seniors and the students. Recommendations are made about how to do, store, and share memoirs. The article argues that co-constructing memoirs represents one important path toward a more connected, more reflective, more sustainably developed, and healthier world.

Keywords: Mini-memoirs; Social connections; Positive Psychology; Service Learning; Sustainable Development Goals

Introduction

The 1974 song by Harry Chapin, "Cat's in the Cradle," tells the story a parent's remorse that when his child was young, the parent refused to prioritize spending time with the boy, and when the boy became a man, he seemed to take revenge by telling his now-retired dad that it was his turn to be the busy one (Grayeb, 2004). *Cat's in the Cradle* captures the sad reality that too often people reject social connections; yet these connections with family and others play a vital role in both mental and physical health (Grover et al., 2018). Ornish and Ornish (2020) reviewed research on factors impacting people's health. Their review was summarized into a slogan: "Eat Well (i.e., a plant-based diet), Move More (i.e., exercise regularly), Stress Less, and Love More (i.e., establish and maintain social connections)."

The purpose of this article is to propose that secondary school and tertiary level students boost the social connections of seniors by co-creating mini-memoirs with older people. Mini memoirs are short collections via such sources as video, audio, photos, and/or text of self-selected memories that the seniors wish to hold onto and share with others. Co-creating these collection benefits all involved. The article begins by explaining mini-memoirs, followed by suggesting

possible benefits of co-creating them, and then offering advice on creating, storing, and sharing the mini-memoirs.

What Are Mini-Memoirs

A memoir is a self-selected collection of memories that people, alone or in groups, construct about their lives. Usually, memoirs are about only one person, but they can also tell stories of a pair or a larger group. For example, perhaps a student's grandparents want to construct a memoir together, or maybe two people who have been neighbors for 63 years would like to do a joint memoir, or maybe a group of people who have volunteered at the same charity for 40 years would like to tell their story to contribute to the charity's institutional memory.

Please notice that this article does not talk only about "writing" a memoir. In reality, memoirs can come together in many ways. While traditionally, memoirs are in writing, drawings, mindmaps, audio, collage, and video are just some of the other means that can be employed alone or in combination (Mercado-Salas et al., 2020). Plus, various modes of communication, including social media, can be combined with assistance from students.

What and How Much to Include in Memoirs

"Self-selected" is crucial in the definition of a memoir. The term "mini-memoir" highlights that people are under no obligation to include every major event in their life. Many of us did things that we wish we had not done or have experienced events that we wish never happened. Those are parts of everyone's life. We can decide whether or not to include them, or perhaps instead we can share only the good times.

The seniors and the students also can make choices about how many stories to include and how long each story should be. They can begin with only a few stories and then perhaps go on to do one or two more, even many more. Each story, each photo, each audio, etc. represents a gift from the memoir team, both a gift to themselves and to their readers, viewers, and listeners. ICT (Internet Communication Technology) provides easy ways for creating and sharing memoirs. Additional stories can be added whenever memories pop up. Plus, existing stories can be changed when, perhaps, new memories appear that help people elaborate on what they have already written.

Who Can Do a Memoir

Anyone can create a memoir. Traditionally, people have thought of memoirs as something done only by the famous. In reality, any person has stories that need to be shared. In our more democratic times, we are all important, each of us in our own unique way. We saw how everyone is important during the height of the COVID-19 zoonotic pandemic, a time when formerly overlooked people, e.g., cleaners and delivery people, suddenly received their long overdue status as essential.

Furthermore, memoirs are not just for older people. True, memoirs do seem to fit with the later stages of the eight stages of human lives, as explained by Erikson and Erikson (1998). Nonetheless, people of any age can benefit from the opportunities that memoirs provide to remember, reflect, and share about their lives. The additional advantage for younger people is that they have so many more years to implement any ideas for life changes that may come to mind while constructing their memoirs.

For example, according to Erikson and Erikson, people in their teens and twenties often grapple with matters of identity, and memoirs provide a space for reflection on identity issues, for example, whether students are meant for office work or for working with their hands (Kist, 2017; Williamson, 2018). Dialog journals, which have similarities to memoirs, are a favorite tool of teachers in languages and other curriculum areas, as the journals encourage students to reflect and to set goals (Peyton, 1993). Thus, working with seniors on their memoirs can motivate students to do dialog journals and similar projects, and teachers can ask students to do journaling about their memoir work with seniors.

We are indebted to an anonymous reviewer for a few valuable suggestions on the issue of learner identity and memoirs. These include how the seniors' memoirs can serve as identity texts for the students. By learning more about their roots through helping seniors, family members or otherwise, to construct their memoirs, students gain further insights into their identities. Another of the reviewer's suggestions was that rather than creating separate memoirs, the students and the seniors can create one joint memoir which shows both the continuity and the variance in the lives of the members of the same family and/or community. Still another possibility is to include in the final product an afterword in which the students highlight their reflections, including their identities.

The Language of Memoirs

As suggested above, any language works for memoirs, and a combination of languages would be most useful if students and seniors are from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. When multilingual students can be paired with seniors who share a common language, the memoirs can be in that language. Later, the students can prepare English summaries of one or more of the stories they helped the seniors construct. Another idea would be for students and teachers to discuss the memoir construction process in English.

Benefits of Doing Memoirs

For Seniors

Seniors benefit in many ways when constructing their memoirs with student assistance. Memoirs enable seniors to preserve their memories, which sadly can be taken away by dementia and other problems that seniors face. For instance, if doing childcare was important to a senior's identity, stories, photos, etc. in their memoir of them with young children could provide a cherished tool for holding on to their ego integrity, i.e., their sense of self (Choi & Yeom, 2019). Additionally, memoirs assist people in reflecting on their lives. So much has happened over the lives of seniors, i.e., 365 days in year, multiplied by 80 years, represents an overwhelming number of memories, yet it can seem as though all those years passed in a blink of an eye. Memoirs slow down time and might enable a more big picture view of what happened during those 80 years.

Concepcion (2018) proposed that memoir writing can also help people find relief from sad memories. Recounting of troubled times has long been used to provide escape (Herman, 1997; Raab, 2020). Additionally, telling about happy times also promotes mental health, in particular when people have an audience, either in the present or the imagined/hoped for future. Sharing of any kind can build social connections which are invaluable for longevity (Ornish & Ornish, 2020). A review of research by Duflos et al. (2020) examined the role of connections between seniors and their adolescent grandchildren. According to the researchers, what mattered were such factors as expression of emotions, the duration of the relationships, and whether the younger and older people all felt that they impacted each other. Memoir construction offers multiple opportunities for such impacts.

Can seniors escape the ravages of dementia and similar types of mental decline? Fratiglioni et al. (2020) proposed that they can if seniors stay cognitively, physically, and socially active, along with following a diet high in plant-based foods. Constructing and sharing memoirs satisfies

the need for cognitive and social activity. Plus, the students can encourage their senior co-constructors to exercise and to eat well (NutritionFacts.org, 2021). Ideally, the students would join the seniors in exercising and eating well.

For Students

Seniors and students jointly constructing memoirs for the seniors has, as mentioned above, multiple benefits for the seniors, and the students benefit as well. For example, 50 or more years ago, most people used far fewer resources and had smaller carbon footprints than today. Students can learn about this in their conversations with seniors and perhaps adopt some of the seniors' past behaviors. Exploring this history fits with a content-based approach to language learning (Speneder et al., 2020) and the linking of education with the exigencies of the climate crisis (Chemi et al., 2017).

Positive Psychology

In Positive Psychology instead of highlighting the negative points and attempting to raise people from worse than average lives to achieve normalcy, the goal is to begin with what already works well and to raise people up to very good (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Central ideas in Positive Psychology are expressed in the acronym PERMA (Seligman, 2012): **P**ositive emotions, **E**ngagement, **R**elationships, **M**eaningfulness, and **A**chievement. Students and seniors co-constructing memoirs can promote PERMA for all involved, as both parties have an *engaging*, challenging task to do. Both can develop a *relationship* with each other, i.e., people whom they might not otherwise contact. Memoir co-construction is certainly a *meaningful* task which should result in feeling of *achievement*, because, as mentioned earlier, memoir construction is an extremely flexible task. Let us hope that the fulfilment of the ERM and A in PERMA also results in many *positive* emotions along the way.

Service Learning

Service Learning (Folgueiras et al., 2020) is a term that describes students working on two seemingly diverse goals while performing the same task. Those two goals are (1) to help others in society and (2) to learn knowledge and skills prescribed in their curriculum. Helping seniors compile their memoirs seems to meet the two criteria for being Service Learning. Firstly, students have much to add when they work on seniors' memoirs, e.g., providing encouragement and social connection to the seniors, as well as contributing their language and IT skills.

Secondly, and perhaps less obviously, students can learn knowledge and skills that fit with their schools' curriculum, although curricula do differ. In terms of knowledge, what students can learn includes history, e.g., what it was like to be their age 50 or so years earlier, the current conditions of seniors, and how to do various language and IT tasks. Among the skills students can learn are communicating with people different from themselves, helping people without offending them, encouraging people to speak more, and resolving disagreements.

Sustainable Development

Service Learning fits well with sustainable development, which like Service Learning, is a combination word. "Development" means providing the basics of life, e.g., sanitation, food, housing, clean water, education, transportation, and electricity, to the billions of people who are without one or more of them. "Sustainable" means that the benefits of development are provided in such a way that harm to the environment is limited. Many advocates of sustainable development focus on the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Leal-Filho, 2020). Healthy aging is included among these goals. Thus, when students help seniors with their memoirs, this can be seen as contributing to the SDGs.

Everyone has a role to play in meeting the SDGs; everyone can contribute to the greater whole. For example, perhaps seniors can influence students toward a simpler, more sustainable life, a message that one might also draw from the following poem by Pablo Neruda, "I Ask For Silence."

I only want five things,
five chosen roots.
One is endless love.
Two is to see the autumn.
I cannot exist without leaves
flying and falling to earth.
Third is the solemn winter,
the rain I loved, the caress
of fire in the rough cold.
My fourth is the summer,
plump as a watermelon.
And fifthly, your eyes.
Matilde, my dear love,
I will not sleep without your eyes,
I will not exist but in your gaze.

I adjust the spring
for you to follow me with your eyes.
That, friends, is all I want.
Next to nothing, close to everything.

How to Do Memoirs

Preparing

The best way to do large tasks is often to begin with small steps. Anything that sustains people's memories can be useful in preparing to do memoirs. Often, much material is already available, including photo albums. The next step is to curate these materials, involving categorizing, as well as adding annotations and captions. Additional sources include:

a. Social media (Cardell et al., 2017): some seniors have long been using various social media. This can be harvested for use in memoirs.

b. Diaries and journals: these are done by people of all ages. It is so insightful to look through what people wrote years ago.

c. Selfies, photos from analogue days, plus videos.

d. Drawings by the seniors themselves or others or from the internet of key places and people in the seniors' stories.

e. The seniors themselves are not the only ones who can contribute to their memoirs. Anyone from anywhere in their lives may warmly welcome opportunities to supply items.

f. Traditional media: much of it is now searchable and downloadable, and can be a valuable source of memories, as well as a source of background knowledge to increase others' understanding of seniors' memories.

g. Already existing memories by people in seniors' lives can be useful. Therefore, the more memoirs in existence, the easier it becomes to create new ones and the more memoir construction and sharing becomes a part of people's culture.

h. Just as there are gardening clubs, pickleball groups, etc., so too can people gather, in person or online, to work on memoirs. These groups provide support and encouragement, as well as feedback.

Revising

The proverb, "The perfect is the enemy of the good" applies to memoir construction. Yes, professional expertise would be ideal in the various skills needed in doing memoirs. Nonetheless, it is the content that is number one. Also, especially with the aid of the IT and the internet, memoirs can always be upgraded. Thus, willingness to listen to feedback and to revise plays an important role. Students and the seniors whom they assist should view memoir construction as a recursive process involving (1) finding materials and thinking of ideas, (2) getting those materials and ideas ready to share with others, (3) seeking feedback, (4) implementing any changes and additions (Pennington & So, 1994). "Recursive" means that the steps in the process can be repeated.

Control and Confidentiality

In many areas of memoir construction, students may be better than the seniors with whom they are working. Students probably write better, do IT better, and create and manipulate visuals better. Thus, it may be tempting for students to take control of the memoir construction process. No, that would be wrong, as the seniors must own their own memoir. It consists of their stories, photos, etc. Just as teachers must allow students to, with teachers' guidance, own their own writing, projects, etc. (Wall & Peltier, 1996), the students supporting seniors' memoir construction must be clear who directs where the stories go and what is and is not included.

Confidentiality must also be dealt with sensitively. Getting older brings with it many possibilities for embarrassing moments. The students need to handle these moments with utmost care, so as not to add to the discomfort the seniors are already feeling. This can be especially difficult for students who have not witnessed the plagues to which elders are beset. Just as patients must have confidence that health care workers will respect their confidentiality, so too must the seniors be relaxed around the students who are helping them with their memoirs.

Audience Awareness

As with creating anything for others, memoir creation also requires being aware of what audiences know and don't know, are interested in and perhaps less interested in (Jones, 1995; Thickstun, n.d.). What terms to explain? What information to provide? Because students are from a different generation, they may be able to help seniors understand what audiences will or will not know. Other audience awareness ideas include:

a. Close to the beginning of memoir construction, discuss who the audience(s) might be, although decisions can be changed later.

b. The standard tools of good writing increase audience comprehension. These include topic sentences, subheadings, previews, and introductions.

c. Consider attention grabbers, such as quotations, surprising facts, questions, and comparisons. In particular, inclusion of stories plays a key role in attracting audiences' attention.

d. Stories offer a proven means of holding people's attention (Yang & Hobbs, 2020). Stories should "show not tell" (Colorado State University, 2021), e.g., instead of saying that a storm was large, make a word picture or use visuals to show streets turned into rivers, empty prams rushing past in the flood, fallen trees, people clinging to roofs.

Sharing and Storing Memoirs

Constructing memoirs is only an initial step. The next big step involves finding audiences and hoping for a warm reaction from those audiences, which will, in turn, encourage more interest in memoir creation and viewing. Marketing ability is, therefore, one more skill that students can use. Marketing can be done in many ways, and the memoirs can be produced in both hard and soft copies, including audio books.

Memoirs are precious and may not always attract a big audience at first. Therefore, means of secure, long-term storage must be considered, and multiple people should be involved in the event of accidents, such as forgotten passwords or damaged hard copies. Government bodies, NGOs, museums, family members, and seniors' organizations may be willing to help. Most important is that the seniors themselves have easy access to their creations, both to be able to share with others, as well as the number one reason, to be able to reread, rewatch, etc.

Conclusion

The goal of this article has been to encourage secondary and tertiary students to assist seniors in the seniors' construction of their memoirs in whatever form and at whatever length appeals to the seniors. The article highlighted that memoirs consist of self-selected stories, visuals, etc. and can be in any language or even a combination of languages. These memoirs principally benefit the seniors at the center of the stories. At the same time, the seniors' family, friends, neighbors, and colleagues also benefit. Last, but not least, the students who provide invaluable

assistance to the seniors benefit by participating in a powerful learning experience, an experience which can provide insights into the world and encourage students to make reflection an ongoing part of their own lives.

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