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Adventures in Intergenerational Service-Learning: Laughter, Friendship, and Life Advice

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Résumé

Des essais réflexifs rédigés avant et après la visite d'un centre de soins de longue durée (SLD) par un groupe d'étudiants universitaires de 3ᵉ année suivant un cours sur les loisirs et le vieillissement ont été analysés dans le cadre cette étude. Les documents, qui ont élaborés dans le cadre d'un projet d'apprentissage fondé sur des services intergénérationnels, ont permis d'examiner comment l'expérience intergénérationnelle a aidé les étudiants à mieux comprendre le vieillissement, les foyers de SLD et les personnes qui y résident. Grâce à un partenariat avec un centre de SLD de la région de Niagara (Ontario), 50 étudiants ont recueilli, au cours d'une période de cinq semaines, des récits sur le parcours de vie de personnes âgées. En binôme, les étudiants ont établi des liens entre le contenu du cours et ces récits portant sur des transitions de vie qu'ils n'avaient pas encore vécues, en réfléchissant aux similitudes et aux différences entre les générations. Le projet global comprenait des devoirs incluant des biographies et des recherches par amorce photo, afin de créer des récits personnalisés pour chaque participant. Des cours supplémentaires ont permis aux étudiants de développer des compétences liées à la représentation créative des récits (par exemple, des leçons sur la photographie et la rédaction de biographies). Ce projet intergénérationnel s'est conclu par une exposition des ouvrages des étudiants à la fin du trimestre, dans laquelle ont participé les conteurs, leur famille et leurs amis, ainsi que le personnel du centre de SLD. Dans leurs travaux de réflexion entourant les visites en SLD, les étudiants ont décrit comment ces expériences ont bouleversé leurs présupposés sur les personnes âgées, les foyers de SLD et l'expérience du vieillissement.

Abstract

Using pre- and post-visit reflection papers from a third-year undergraduate leisure and aging course, this paper describes the ways in which an intergenerational service-learning project fostered greater understanding of aging, long-term care (LTC) homes and the people who reside in them. Partnering with a LTC home in the Niagara Region of Ontario, 50 students gathered first-hand life stories from older adults over a period of 5 weeks. In pairs, students considered course content in relation to stories of life transitions they have yet to experience and reflected on generational similarities and differences. The overall project incorporated biography and photography-based assignments in order to create individual narratives for each participant in the project. Supplementary coursework enabled students to develop skills related to creative representation of the stories (e.g., lessons on photography and biography writing). This intergenerational project culminated with an exhibit of students' work at the end of the term, attended by our storytellers, their families and friends as well as staff at the home. In pre- and post-visit reflection assignments, students described how their experiences disrupted assumptions they held about older adults, LTC homes and the experience of aging.

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Service-learning opportunities have enriched students' post-secondary academic experiences for well over 60 years (Butin, 2010). In line with the educational philosophy of John Dewey that promotes active engagement and learning by doing, service-learning extends beyond the classroom and prioritizes meaningful engagement in civic life (Augustin & Freshman, 2016; Tam, 2014). Under the broader umbrella of experiential education, service-learning is unique in its purposeful blend of academic content, community engagement and reflection. The immediacy of linking theory with application serves to enhance relevancy of content and allows students to critically consider content in action (Butin, 2010; Tam, 2014). Active learning is fitting for today's students who have shown an interest in contributing to the world around them through their post-secondary experience, and desire to do so through more active means of applied knowledge and practical experience (Ramsey, Mendoza, & Weil, 2014; Roodin, Brown, & Shedlock, 2013). Students explore theoretical and curricular concepts which they subsequently integrate into their community work, informing their developing ideas of theory and knowledge related to their area of practice (Cooke & Kemeny, 2014; Mitchell, 2008).

Research on service-learning has consistently demonstrated its benefits and impact on students (Hess Brown & Roodin, 2001). Students who engage in service-learning in their academic career show an increase in civic responsibility, a stronger potential for leadership, have better communication skills, tend to be more culturally aware and display a greater sense of empathy (Chen, McCoy, Cooper, & Lambert, 2015; Fisher, Sharp, & Bradley, 2017; Lundy, 2007; Penick, Fallshore, & Spencer, 2014). With regard to the perceived quality of education, students recognize that service-learning opportunities promote critical thinking skills, deep learning and self-efficacy (Chen et al., 2015; Mitchell, 2008; Roodin et al., 2013; Simons & Cleary, 2006).

Within the area of aging studies, intergenerational service-learning opportunities have prompted students to critique personal assumptions and stereotypes of older adults and consider a more balanced perspective on aging (Dupuis, 2002; Genoe, Crosbie, Johnson, Sutherland, & Goldberg, 2013). This is particularly significant at the post-secondary level, as research indicates that ageism is prevalent among younger generations (Darling, 2016; Penick et al., 2014; Ragan & Bowen, 2001; Snyder, 2006) and supported academic experiences can do much to disrupt long-held assumptions and beliefs. In an effort to challenge ageist misperceptions and stereotypes, intergenerational service-learning opportunities are increasingly being used as a way to improve understanding of other generations (Tam, 2014).

Service-Learning

Service-learning is a pedagogical methodology that applies course-based theoretical concepts through active community engagement. Incorporating this pedagogy into practice enables faculty members to address course learning objectives and support students in developing a range of developmental skills with the aim of instilling civic and social responsibility (Tam, 2014). Its design prioritizes opportunities for students to reflect on their community engagement and its application to theoretical constructs and course objectives (Jones, 2012; Warren, 2012). According to Caspersz and Olaru (2017), service-learning is transformative in that students consider "their previously held ethnocentric understanding through 'critical reflection on the assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind or point of view are based' and formulate a new 'frame of reference'" (p. 687).

Considered both pedagogy and philosophy, the principles of service-learning are often referred to as the four R's – *reciprocity, relevance, reflection* and *respect* (Butin, 2010). Together these principles work to establish the framework for meaningful and engaged service-learning. First, service-learning allows students to contribute to their own community in a positive way (Godfrey, Illes, & Berry, 2005; Kunstler, 2002; Moorman & Arellano-Unruh, 2002; Ralston & Ellis, 1997). Underlying the principle of *reciprocity* is the blurring of the lines between student and community member. Anyone can take on the role of learner and teacher in the exchange and as a result, become enriched as part of the service-learning initiative. Second, service-learning relates directly to the academic subject matter and has *relevance* to the academic content being explored in the class (Godfrey et al., 2005; Moorman & Arellano-Unruh, 2002).

Third, embedding opportunity for *reflection* enables students to assess their learning and consider the personal impact of the experience on themselves and the individuals with whom they are engaged (Caspersz & Olaru, 2017; Godfrey et al., 2005;

Kunstler, 2002; Moorman & Arellano-Unruh, 2002). Caspersz and Olaru (2017) write that "reflecting can foster a 'critical self' that questions the status quo (or what is known) to develop 'solutions' that are grounded in formal knowledge and skills" (p. 686). Finally, service-learning encourages students to learn from and with others, gaining knowledge about perspectives other than their own (Kunstler, 2002). Supplementary to the original three principles of service-learning, the concept of *respect* challenges the 'white knight syndrome,' the historical understanding that post-secondary faculty and students were responsible for 'saving' marginalized community groups through their selfless service-learning work (Butin, 2010). Respect endeavors to prompt a spirit of inclusiveness and awareness of diversity of life experiences and life perspectives. According to Kunstler (2002), students "practice respect for diversity as they strive to find commonalities with others" (p. 40).

Intergenerational Service-Learning

Intergenerational service-learning aims to bridge university learning with community practice to bring younger and older adults together to learn from and with each other. In line with Allport's (1954) contact theory, the overarching goal of intergenerational service-learning is to bring together different groups of community members in order to break down prejudice and stereotypes thereby challenging misperceptions of the other (Penick et al., 2014; Yamashita, Kinney, & Lokon, 2013). Murakami, Lund, Wright, and Stephenson (2003) identify benefits of applying a service-learning model to gerontological curriculum, including: a deeper connection between theory with practice; an increase in students' level of understanding of older adults; enhanced career opportunities and greater community-level awareness of gerontology.

Intergenerational service-learning opportunities with post-secondary students have sought to address a range of social issues (e.g., ageism, social isolation, community accessibility) across diverse settings. For instance, Chase (2011) conducted a 6-week virtual pen pal project with students and older adults in order to influence students' attitudes toward aging and older adults. Hewson, Danbrook, and Sieppert (2015) organized a 5-day digital storytelling course for social work students, which included an opportunity to solicit first-person narratives of home as told by older adults. In their evaluation of the project, researchers noted that students gained great insight on the "lives, issues, and points of view" (p. 138) of older adults which would help prepare students for gerontological practice. In another example, Gardner and Alegre (2019) partnered with a local housing authority to bring together students and older adults living in community to explore age-friendly neighbourhoods. In reflection journals written throughout the project, students came to not only recognize their own stereotypes of aging and older adults, but they also shared insights into renewed motivation to reconnect to their own grandparents as a result of the opportunity to partner on this project.

Research has demonstrated that intergenerational service-learning impacts both young and older adults. For young adults, service learning prompts positive attitude shifts and decreases in aging anxiety (Ames & Diepstra, 2006; Augustin & Freshman, 2016; Chase, 2011; Dupuis, 2002; Genoe et al., 2013; Kalisch, Coughlin, Ballard, & Lamson, 2013; Merz, Stark, Morrow-Howell, & Carpenter, 2018; Ramsey et al., 2014); greater comfort with the idea of aging and better understanding of the life experiences of older adults (Ames & Diepstra, 2006; Augustin & Freshman, 2016;

Kalisch et al., 2013; Krout et al., 2010; O'Hanlon & Brookover, 2002) and an increase in course understanding (Genoe et al., 2013; Kalisch et al., 2013). For older adults, research suggests that intergenerational service-learning can increase their sense of well-being, self-esteem, and quality of life (Bellamy & Meyerski, 2011; Clyne, Cordella, Schüpbach, & Maher, 2013; Santini, Tombolesi, Baschiera, & Lamura, 2018). Studies have also suggested that participation in intergenerational service-learning may help to alleviate loneliness and social isolation and contribute to increased social capital and community connectivity among older adults (Murakami et al., 2003).

Based on reflective journal entries submitted by undergraduate students engaged in a service-learning project at a long-term care (LTC) home, this paper describes the ways in which the project fostered greater understanding of aging, LTC homes, and the people who reside in them. This paper adds to the current literature by highlighting the personal and knowledge consequences of embedding intergenerational service learning into post-secondary education and demonstrates how bringing distinct groups of people together to learn can result in a re-examination of long-held presumptions and understandings of 'the other'.

Methods

Leisure and Aging is a third-year elective in an undergraduate degree in Recreation and Leisure Studies. This course is designed to explore the role of leisure in adult development with specific focus on the aging process and leisure services, best practices in recreation and leisure programming for older adults, and the contributions of leisure in aging well. For our service-learning project, all 50 students engaged in 5 hours of service-learning with older adults living at The Willows (pseudonym), a LTC home located in Southern Ontario. The Willows is a continuum of care, faith-based, not-for-profit home to over 150 people living in LTC, supported living suites and independent apartments.

In advance of our visits to The Willows, class content incorporated biography and photography-based assignments in order to inform students on the process of creating individual arts-based narratives for each storyteller. Additionally, students were exposed to the concept of service-learning and its principles through lecture content and supplementary readings. Finally, based on course content, we co-created a list of introductory icebreaker questions that students could ask storytellers during our visits. Students brainstormed questions on a range of topics including finding joy in life, what storytellers wish they knew at the age of 20, their most important life lesson, changes in technology, and what they would like to ask a young adult today.

The gerontological background and experience of students in the course varied greatly. Some students had grandparents who lived in community or retirement homes but had never walked into a LTC home, while others had previously worked part-time or volunteered in LTC homes. Given the range of personal experience, the decision was made to pair a less experienced student and a more experienced student with each storyteller (resident at The Willows).

The Therapeutic Recreation (TR) Supervisor and staff invited individuals from LTC and the supported living suites at The Willows to partner with us for this project. Staff used their knowledge of residents to recruit storytellers who they believed had rich life experiences to share with students. They specifically considered the ability of storytellers to converse independently with students and clearly communicate their thoughts and ideas. Staff also sought to match the gender of storytellers to that of students.

It was arranged for students to visit for 2 hours per week over the course of two weeks (Monday to Saturday), plus a 1-hour end-of-term photo exhibit. I received a teaching grant to hire a project coordinator, a graduate student who collected students' Police Vulnerable Sector Checks (PVSC), ensured storytellers and students signed photo waivers, co-supervised students at The Willows with me during their visits, and helped to organize the end-of-term photo exhibit.

On the first week, students met their storyteller in the public spaces of the home, including the lobby, dining rooms and a cafe. The aim of this week was to learn what was important to a storyteller and find out about was their most memorable possession. During the second week, storytellers brought along some of those memorable possessions including photos, trophies or asked students to visit their personal spaces to go through photo albums or see first-hand, larger personal items like quilts or handmade furniture. During the second visit, students took photographs of possessions such as a stethoscope (from a retired healthcare practitioner), war medals, family reunion photos, handmade mittens (donated to our local hospital), a bible, book of poetry, and photos of family pets. Together students and storytellers then wrote a narrative of the photo, explaining its history and meaning.

Pre-visit reflection papers, submitted prior to their service-learning, prompted students to share their perceptions or beliefs about older adults with whom they would be visiting, any personal thoughts or impressions they may have about LTC homes and their role in society, what they hoped to gain from this experience, as well as what they hoped older adults would gain. Post-visit reflections, submitted one week after the end of the term, encouraged students to read over their original reflection paper and share ways in which their initial thoughts, opinions, and expectations may have changed and why, describe what they learned about themselves as a result of this project, and share personal takeaways from the project (see Table 1).

The inspiration for this research came after reading student reflection papers and noticing shifts in their pre- and post-visit text. Initial apprehension turned to genuine enjoyment, worry about having a conversation turned to surprise at how easy it was to engage, and doubt that anyone would be willing to share their life story with a stranger turned to wonder at how engaged and invested storytellers were in students' lives. After final grades were submitted, I reached out to my university's Research Ethics Board (REB) to ascertain how to go about using the reflections as research data. Ethical considerations revolved around informing students of the research and ensuring consent for the use of their reflection papers as research data. I subsequently emailed all students with an information letter, describing the intent of the research and asking permission to use their reflections. I included a deadline for them to respond and explained that if I did not hear back from them, I would presume they did not want their reflections used in the research. Students were told that they were under no obligation to have their papers included in the analysis and that their decision would have no impact on future grades in classes I taught. A total of 32 students out of 50, consented to have their journal reflections analyzed.

Data Analysis

I used a critical gerontological lens in my analysis of the reflection papers. According to Biggs (2008), critical gerontology, with its

Table 1. Sample of Pre- and Post-Visit Reflection Question Prompts

Pre-Visit Reflection Question Prompts	Post-Visit Reflection Question Prompts
What is your view of the population with whom you are visiting? What are some of your perceptions or beliefs about the population with whom you will be visiting?	Look over your past reflections. How have your initial thoughts/expectations changed? Why?
What are some personal perceptions that you have about long-term care homes?	Describe what you have learned about yourself as a result of your service. What values, opinions, beliefs have changed? What was the most important lesson learned?
What fear, if any, do you have about interacting with this population?	Talk about any disappointments or successes of your project. What did you learn from it?
What do you hope to gain from this experience? What do you hope your partner at The Willows gains from this experience?	Did anything about your community involvement surprise you? If so, what?
Complete this sentence: *Because of my experience at The Willows, I….*	Complete this sentence: *Because of my experience at The Willows, I….*

emphasis on intergenerational engagement, seeks to "work toward a relationship of complementarity, rather than dominance, between groups who are at different points in the life course" (p. 118). Student reflection papers highlighted issues that aligned with my overall intent of the course, which was (and is) to bring together two seemingly disparate groups of individuals to learn from and with each other in order to naturalize older adulthood. Given the emphasis on interpersonal dialogue between students and storytellers, a critical gerontological lens enabled me to highlight students' growing comfort and levels of awareness as to the knowledges and abilities of older adults.

Thematic analysis involved a method of identifying and analyzing patterns of meaning within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2019). I first familiarized myself with the reflection papers by repeatedly reading them over and searching for meanings and patterns about students' learnings from the project. For instance, I looked at shifts in language from pre- to post-visit writings for each individual student – what apprehensions did students have initially, and how were they reflected upon in the post-visit papers. Next, I identified initial codes that were related to aspects of their learnings. Here, I identified aspects of the data that I believed would come to form the basis of repeated patterns (e.g., words students used to describe older adults, LTC homes and the people who live there). After that, I sorted the codes into potential themes by essence. For instance, after familiarizing myself with the data, it was clear that students took life lessons shared by our storytellers very seriously and treasured these words of wisdom. My final step of analysis involved refining the themes and defining them.

Findings

Four themes and associated sub-themes describe the ways in which an intergenerational service-learning project fostered greater understanding of aging, LTC homes and the people who reside in them. Alongside theoretical learning about aging, social stereotypes, and quality of living for older adults in Canada, students were

able to weave class topics into their conversations with our storytellers and hear first-hand about the prevalence and consequences of ageism and the experiences of aging in Canadian society. The findings are described using the themes of: *coming together disrupts assumptions of aging, taking life lessons to heart, surprising consequences of engagement* and *blurring the theory and practice divide.*

Coming Together Disrupts Assumptions of Aging

Coming Together Disrupts Assumptions of Aging describes how the simple act of bringing people together – two seemingly dissimilar groups – to share personal stories and experiences worked to erode misconceptions, misjudgments and assumptions related to aging, LTC homes and the people who live in them. Pre-visit writing contained language that described older adults as being *"lonely and bored"* and *"neglected and…forgotten by family and friends"* while LTC homes were viewed as *"dull, quiet places that house older, grumpy adults"*, with *"people sitting in windows for hours on end. I think of people withering away in a corner,"*, and *"dismal, depressing, institution-like places where the staff do not really care much about the residents"*. Below, a student shifts language used to describe older adults from her pre- to post-visit reflections, from pity to honoring humanity.

> Some older adults, especially the ones in Long-Term Care, may feel trapped in the home and hate being there. They may feel useless and not useful members of society. (pre-visit reflection)

> Nick is just a man [who] is becoming older. He is nothing less of a man because he is in long-term care and he is not less of a human for needing daily help. (post-visit reflection)

In the quote below, coming together served to shatter misperceptions related to the capacity of older adults:

> At first, I thought my partner was going to be very frail and fragile, but after our first interactions, my judgements and thoughts were completely wrong. Anna was wild and creative, very quick on her feet and extremely engaged. She had the most amazing stories. (post-visit reflection)

Another student shifted perceptions, from presuming there would be nothing in common between a university-aged student and a person living in a LTC home, to recognizing the wealth of wisdom older generations have to pass on, and the need for younger generations to listen:

> I'm scared that we won't have anything to talk about because we are from such different generations and share different views, experiences and beliefs about the world. (pre-visit reflection)

> One of the most important lessons I have learned during this assignment is that older adults have a lot to teach the younger generations. If other generations took the time to talk to these older adults, we could learn so much from their stories. (post-visit reflection)

For students, coming face-to-face with older adults who challenged their assumptions of aging served to shatter their existing impressions of aging and older adults.

Taking Life Lessons to Heart

Taking Life Lessons to Heart describes the magnitude of learnings provided by older adults to students in the class. As described by June, *"they talked about that which was important to them"* and the most important topics consistently included friends and family.

Life lessons ranged from living one's life with purpose, avoiding smoking and appreciating loved ones.

The quote below demonstrates how students were prompted to remember the 'simple things' when they were with their storyteller:

> *One success that we had while visiting with Carol was being able to listen to her favourite songs and watching her listen and savor the music. By simply watching her, I realized how often I forget to appreciate the simple things, rather than 'going through the motions.' (post-visit reflection)*

Being able to reflect on misperceptions of aging prompted some students to greatly shift their thoughts on their own aging.

> *I have learned so many things about myself. I used to be very afraid to get old, however Rachel has showed me that being an older adult is just another part of life and that I should embrace it. I would say that I am more comfortable with the idea of aging now. (post-visit reflection)*

'Finding life's purpose' was a frequent topic among students and storytellers. Given the age differences, student reflections noted unique insights into life experiences.

> *Joe's faith is a huge part of his life, and one of the major things I learned from him is to "live your faith." I am not a really religious person, but that certainly struck a chord in me because to me that means to live your life in a way that is respectable and has meaning to you, and to practice what you preach. It also means to live your life believing in something, so that your life has purpose. (post-visit reflection)*

During one of our visits, a student/storyteller pair discussed healthy lifestyle habits, with the storyteller advising against smoking. This prompted us to explore the shift in social acceptance of smoking over the past 60 years.

> *She had very specific advice for me. She was very firm on us making sure that we don't become smokers and told us that is the reason that she is still alive. (post-visit reflection)*

Students reflected deeply on these life lessons and some acknowledged impacts on values and beliefs, a freeing sense of empowerment and a re-dedication to one's own family.

Appreciating Family

Of all the life lessons shared by our storytellers, none had as much of an impact on students than conversations about one's family. For students, being away from family and friends during the academic year can be emotionally challenging. Here a storyteller shared a metaphor of family and material belongings that left an impression on him:

> *When we asked Robert what advice he had for the younger generation, he replied by saying that he has never seen a hearse followed by a U-Haul, and that you leave everything behind when you pass away. He went on to explain the importance of appreciating and valuing family and friends and stressed that material items were not very important in the long-run. Although I have always valued my family and friends, the most important lesson that I learned from Robert was that having a nice car or nice clothes isn't really that important as those things are very temporary, but family, friends and the memories and bonds you share with them are forever. (post-visit reflection)*

For some students, these gentle reminders served as a motivating factor in making family a priority. The three quotes below speak to the deep impact of these authentic conversations.

> *I think my view on my grandparents has changed the most. I will take more time to hear their stories and…ask some of the questions we asked for this assignment. I know I can learn from them through stories and information. (post-visit reflection)*

> *The most important lesson that I learned would have to be the importance of being close to family. She talked about the joy she has watching her grandchildren grow up, spending time with her family, reminiscing on the times spent with her husband, respecting one's elders and the raising of her children. I tend to take my family for granted, and I can easily forget what a blessing they are in my life. It is important to be thankful for family and I believe that I should not forget the vital role they play in my life, as they influence my life choices and affect my well-being. (post-visit reflection)*

> *This experience was empowering – I've been inspired to write a gratitude letter to my family and friends thanking them for their support. I couldn't count how many plans for social gatherings with them I had to decline over the years because I had to study, complete homework or go to work. This experience has jolted me to give back to those I care about and enjoy moments with them that have my undivided attention. (post-visit reflection)*

The impetus for students to act on life lessons shared by our storytellers highlights the meaningfulness and authenticity of what was shared in conversations.

Surprising Consequences of Engagement

Surprising Consequences of Engagement describes the sense of unexpected surprise and enjoyment students felt in relation to their service-learning partnership. These surprising consequences ranged from an increase in one's comfort level interacting with older adults to broader level considerations of gerontology as a potential area of employment. This theme also incorporates unexpected commonalities between students and storytellers that led to a deeper level of relating.

> *One successful aspect of the project is that it was fun. I enjoyed visiting with Robert and Elsa and found that each time I left [The Willows], I was in a better mood than when I came. (post-visit reflection)*

The service-learning project enabled students to reflect on the broader impact of their engagement with older adults. In the quote below, a student reflects not on *her* experience, but the impact of the project on her storyteller.

> *I found it extremely interesting that Martha loved to learn from us as well. She kept asking about our lives. It was noticeable that she enjoyed being around us and learning more about who we are. Although we learned about the benefits of intergenerational learning in class, I got to see these benefits for myself. (post-visit reflection)*

Surprise at the personal impact of the engagement was a common thread for some students who at first, discounted any potential employment within the field of aging.

> *I think the only thing that surprised me while doing this community project was the fact that I enjoyed myself so much. Going into the experience, I had always been dismissive of working with the older population, as I have always aligned my interests with youth and children, but this interaction shed new light on a new potential field of interest in my life. (post-visit reflection)*

An emphasis on the relational aspect of learning enabled students to deeply connect with older adults:

> *The success was initiating a friendship, which I didn't think was going to happen, but my partner and I thoroughly enjoyed our time spent with this particular individual. We hope to continue this friendship and maintain our visits beyond the expectations of this class. (post-visit reflection)*

A common challenge acknowledged by students was saying good-bye after each visit. Storytellers were happy to share their stories, and students were equally happy to hear them, even after our class time had passed.

> When we sat with him, we simply said: "we want to hear your life story" and he started to tell us everything from when his grandparents settled here in Canada until now. Even though we were supposed to be there for an hour, we were there for an hour and 40 minutes just listening to his stories because he had so many to tell! I did not even realize that so much time had gone by because he was so captivating in the way he told his stories. I did not want to leave. (post-visit reflection)

Students often reflected on how open and generous our story-tellers were with their time and insights. The student below was astonished by how welcoming his storyteller and family were to him:

> I now know all about Robert's family and even got to meet his daughter, son-in-law and newborn granddaughter. I was really surprised about how much you can get to know someone in such a short period of time and how much they would be willing to open up to us as well. (post-visit reflection)

Engaging with our storytellers prompted students to reflect on their learnings – both cognitively and emotionally. Some student reflections, like the one below, convey the deep impact this project has had on their life experiences.

> After getting to know Claire and hear her story, it gave me a different perspective on life and what really matters at the end of the day. I was blessed with the opportunity to listen to her advice on life, clever wisdom and tips that she shared on what she would tell the younger generation. Claire had such a remarkable energy about her even though she had gone through a difficult life and is now dealing with multiple health issues; she was content and kept positive. I really admire her for her positive outlook on life and ability to age gracefully because…she continued to do what she loved which was to spend time with her family. (post-visit reflection)

Reflecting on the language used to describe older adults and LTC homes in students' pre-visit reflection papers, it is poignant to highlight that when these two groups did come together, there was a palpable spirit of curiosity and genuine caring that served to break down pre-conceived ideas of 'the other' and instead, encourage students to share their own life stories, get to know someone and enjoy time spent together.

Unexpected Commonalities Lead to Deep Relating

Unexpected Commonalities Lead to Deep Relating highlights the moments over the course of the term when students and story-tellers discovered shared interests which inspired a deeper understanding of each other. These commonalities typically revolved around favourite leisure activities and hobbies or the importance of family. Suddenly, the conversation became less structured and superficial, with both parties becoming more relaxed and animated.

> Anita and I did connect at a personal level when I asked her about what she used to do when she was younger. She started to blush when she admitted that she was a very good runner. It made me smile knowing that the memories that I am creating now during my running experiences will stay with me for the rest of my life. (post-visit reflection)

Below, a student describes how shared leisure interests served to bridge any pre-conceived generational divide:

> We bonded on the many similarities that we both shared. It was so easy for the two of us to get off topic at times, where we would begin talking about our own fishing trips, to our best rounds of golf, and explaining to each other different types of card games and arguing which game was better. (post-visit reflection)

Unexpected commonalities sparked deeper connections between students and their storytellers while at the same time, served to bridge the distance in understanding another person.

Blurring the Theory and Practice Divide

Blurring the Theory and Practice Divide describes how front-loading lessons on service-learning and re-visiting its principles in class encouraged students to reflect on and incorporate terminology into their reflections. As a result, students had a greater awareness of the deliberate linkages between class material and their service-learning opportunity and were able to note key moments *as* they were engaging in service-learning.

> Before my visit to [The Willows], I assumed that older adults were mostly grumpy and not very motivated, especially older adults that are in long-term care homes or retirement homes. I feel as though I had some very ageist views of older adults even though I know that is not true because of the literature that has been studied in class and presented to me through workshops. (post-visit reflection)

The students below can now challenge society's tradition of categorizing older adults based on narrow needs-based deficits with their own understanding of the diversity of aging:

> The elders I was able to speak with broke many ageist stereotypes that give elders a bad reputation – they can learn new skills, have quick and witty remarks, are humorous, intelligent and strive to complete goals. A woman at the age of 93 routinely texts/exchanges emails with her family via a smart phone, another consistently donates hand-made knitted hats for premature babies, and another has an excessive knowledge of history. (post-visit reflection)

> Before this course, I had perceptions of older adults that were not based on the individual and were often false. For example, I believed that many might be sick or forgetful. These are learned stereotypes and not true for every individual. What was occurring was ageism. Now being in this course, I learned that age doesn't stop many people from doing what they want and love to do. Just because you're 80 years old, doesn't mean you can't drive like everyone else, or doesn't mean you can't run a marathon. Age is a number and shouldn't impact your life. (post-visit reflection)

Learning from someone with life experience was something that students recognized as a unique feature of the course:

> From becoming involved with an organization in the community and experiencing intergenerational learning, I now think, why does this not happen more often? I think that intergenerational learning is so important and valuable between two age groups. No other peer…will be able to share and teach life lessons like someone who is decades older. There should be interactions and programs like this experience implemented more in schools, universities, and potentially daycare settings. (post-visit reflection)

The student below speaks to the relevance of course content woven together with active engagement in community:

> Having hands-on experience enhances the quality of learning I have and allowed me to be involved in the environment. As a result of this experience, I was able to learn how to take the context of which we discuss something in class and apply it in real life. (post-visit reflection)

In combination with class content, the service-learning project enabled students to grasp material in a visceral way because of the one-on-one time spent with our storytellers. This opportunity permitted students to be presented with knowledge dissident from

their existing ideology and as a result, shift their opinions and beliefs. It is evident from pre-visit reflections, there was an initial 'growing pains' stage, when students were hesitant about meeting with older adults and intimidated by the LTC home environment. Simply walking into a LTC home can be intimidating with its alarms and door codes, but confidence levels increased as students became more at ease with their storyteller and more familiar with the environment of The Willows.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to describe shifts in students' perceptions of aging and the contributions of intergenerational service-learning in a third-year undergraduate leisure and aging course. It was evident that meeting with and learning from our storytellers challenged students' pre-existing perceptions of aging and personal capabilities of older adults. First impressions and worries about not having anything in common with someone over the age of 65 were quickly dispelled. Finding a common spark, whether an interest in fishing or cooking, or a shared sense of humour, went far to inspire students to reconsider their opinions, but when aligned with course content that brought concepts such as ageism to the forefront of conversation, students were able to deeply consider the root of their perceptions of aging and implications, on themselves and older adults.

Service-learning provided context for students with regard to aging. Meeting with older adults in their residence allowed for a glimpse into the life of another's daily experiences. Students were invited to join in on family visits, they witnessed personal resiliency in the face of health challenges and heard first-hand about life experiences they have yet to experience. Like others who have written about intergenerational connections (Ames & Diepstra, 2006; Hess Brown & Roodin, 2001), this project enabled students to have a better understanding of the issues experienced by older adults. The personal connection between student and older adult (and family) is enduring and one that will act to counter stereotypical portrayals of older adults into the future.

This service-learning project aligns well with Allport's Contact Theory (Allport, 1954), which suggests that interactions among groups can work to break down differences and create an environment of respect and empathy. In our case, these interactions were facilitated to prompt students and storytellers to learn more about each other. Each interaction allowed for components of the overall project to be completed (e.g., photography, biographical interviews). Christian, Turner, Holt, Larkin, and Cotler (2014) examined types of intergenerational projects in order to reveal the effectiveness of intergenerational service-learning. Key to the ability of the project to address ageism was the quality of the experience, with the authors encouraging interactions that fostered the development of empathy, the sharing of personal information, interactions that are enjoyable for both parties, and a focus on unique qualities of each other.

Creating opportunities for younger and older adults to come together to learn from each other via university-community partnerships can challenge biases by replacing misconceptions with new understandings (Dorfman, Murty, Ingram, Evans, & Power, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2015). In line with research by Dupuis (2002) and Genoe et al. (2013), this project also prompted conversations among young and older adults in which similarities were uncovered that helped to break down stereotypes of aging and older adults.

In light of the pressing need for greater consideration of gerontological careers by today's post-secondary students (Bergman, Erickson, & Simons, 2014; Coffey et al., 2015), it is vital that we not only bring these two generations together to enhance the comfort level of students, but that we also provide opportunities for young adults to envision themselves working for and with older adults – as a viable and personally rewarding career. As Yamashita, Hahn, Kinney, and Poon (2017) write: "it is incumbent upon gerontological educators to identify pedagogical strategies that entice students to the study of aging and prepare them to embrace the opportunities and challenges afforded by an aging society" (p. 1). According to Hess Brown and Roodin (2001), many studies have identified an increased interest among students to work with older adults after participating in intergenerational service-learning. Among the benefits of intergenerational service-learning are increased confidence in students' abilities to communicate with older adults, increased empathy and a decrease in aging anxiety (Ames & Diepstra, 2006; Bergman et al., 2014; Dauenhauer, Steitz, Aponte, & Fromm Faria, 2010; Dorfman et al., 2004; Hess Brown & Roodin, 2001; Krout et al., 2010).

The organizational framework of an intergenerational service-learning project aligns with the aim of shifting students' perceptions of aging. After an initial 'growing pains' stage, where students were intimidated by the LTC home environment and unsure of their role in it, their confidence in visiting increased. Students became familiar with the setting and looked forward to meeting up with their storyteller again to continue their conversation. Barnett and Adams (2018) highlight an essential difference between ageism ("them") and aging anxiety ("me"). This opportunity decreased both ageism and aging anxiety among students.

By front-loading student knowledge of service-learning and sharing some of the course organizational decisions, students were able to not only understand the links between class content and their time with storytellers, but they understood the meaning behind the principles of service-learning. In particular, it was important to raise issues of power with students. The aim of this project was not to view LTC homes and the people who live in them as being 'in need of fixing'. As Mitchell (2008) notes "faculty who wish to incorporate a critical approach [in their service-learning endeavours], must recognize and problematize issues of power in the service experience" (p.56). Pre-visit reflection papers served as an excellent means to solicit students' initial impressions of the project and reveal their thoughts on meeting an older adult in a LTC home.

Reflection provided the opportunity to link course content and shifts in perspective and actively involve students in breaking down the learning objectives of the course. It also allowed students with no experience and students with past experience engaging with older adults or LTC homes to be challenged. According to Mitchell et al. (2015), "as students…find their preconceived notions inadequate to explain the realities of their experience, critical reflection helps students revise the misconceptions they have about the world to align with new realities" (p. 50). This opportunity prompted students to step out of the world of undergraduate studies and walk alongside someone at a different life stage. Not all students enrolled in the course wish to explore gerontological careers; however, all will interact with diverse populations within their careers, including older adults.

Chonody (2015) cautions readers about social desirability when data are collected from students enrolled in one's courses, yet as a witness, I was also at The Willows and was present for some of the experiences described in this paper and many others not

mentioned. For instance, one morning I listened to a conversation between two students and a storyteller as he described his experiences in WWII. One of the students asked how old he was when he enlisted. A profound personal moment occurred when the students learned he'd enlisted at the age of 21, their present age. One of the personal benefits of embedding service-learning into this academic course has indeed been my own observations of the wonder of bringing these generations together to simply share life stories.

In terms of limitations, although additional visits at The Willows would have been ideal to establish deeper relationships between students and storytellers, this was our first year of partnering on a service-learning project with a community organization. After the term concluded and I was able to reflect on the impact of our intergenerational service-learning project, I met with staff and management at The Willows to discuss moving ahead with offering the course onsite in subsequent years.

Additionally, as only 32 of 50 students agreed to participate, it is possible that those with the most positive experiences were the ones who agreed to have their reflections included in the research. Further, there remains the issue of using data originally intended as a graded assignment; the question being could students "inflate" their learnings from the project in order to earn a higher grade and as a result, alter the authenticity of data presented. As a witness to the experiences described here and many others both at The Willows and in class, I observed students' demeanor, their level of engagement and interest from beginning to end. Students were supervised by either myself or the RA hired for this project at all times. I am confident that what students shared in their papers is reflective of what I saw happening. As I made the decision to analyze the papers only after the course had finished, future researchers hoping to explore the impact of service-learning could proactively hire a research assistant to recruit student participants and collect data to be held until after students' final grades have been submitted.

Conclusions

Findings of this research demonstrate that the enduring meaning of service-learning is the connection to personal experiences of impact, suggesting that students not only want to relate experiences to their academic learning but more importantly, they crave the personal connections cultivated when learning from and about others (Kalisch et al., 2013). Service-learning enables students to blend theory and practice, step out of the classroom, and make relevant connections between academic and relational learning. A focus on language in class (e.g., negative and positive stereotypes of aging) and coming face-to-face with an older adult who is more than a statistic on a PowerPoint slide cements the shift in respectful language.

Future research could begin to address some gaps in our understanding of intergenerational service-learning. First, it is widely acknowledged that a fundamental definition and conceptual framework in this area is lacking (Martins et al., 2019; Vanderven, 2011). Working toward general agreement on the key pillars of intergenerational service-learning could help to establish a common language among researchers in this area. Additionally, longitudinal research that follows a cohort of students across their undergraduate career and their involvement with a range of intergenerational projects would highlight the varied ways in which deep and sustained engagement between generations can foster a greater understanding of aging (Canedo-García, García-Sánchez, &

Pacheco-Sanz, 2017). Finally, future research could incorporate additional stakeholders, such as residents, family members and staff within intergenerational projects which could reveal additional nuances of the sustained impact of initiatives.

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