
Speaking the Same Language: A Case Study in Intergenerational Interactions to Promote Understanding across Generations

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To meet the needs of a growing older adult population, some undergraduate courses add service-learning projects where younger students interact with older adults outside the classroom, either as an alternative approach to traditional classroom learning or as an outside application project. College students who are learning a foreign language also participate in off campus service learning projects, allowing them to reinforce their academic curriculum. While these projects are beneficial, there are barriers for establishing such programs, such as funding and lack of scheduling flexibility. One alternative may be to offer intergenerational service-learning opportunities inside the college classroom. For that reason, we invited older adults from the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) into the college classroom to learn introductory French from college students who had taken at least one semester of college-level French. Results of a case study examination of the in-class service learning design are consistent with prior language studies of service learning completed outside of a traditional classroom (see Natvig, 2007; Pine, 1997). Hence, altering the service-learning format by inviting older adults into the college classroom do not seem to affect the benefits that may be gained from the experiential learning process. Results also suggest college students were able to adapt to generational differences and learning styles that might influence future intergenerational experiences. Although this case study found both age groups gained mutual respect for each other, younger participants still displayed some evidence of age-related stereotyping, therefore, a more in-depth approach to developing respect and reducing age related stereotyping is recommended.

In the United States, the fastest growing population comprises adults who are 65 years and older (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011, November

30). More impressive is the proportion of older adults who consider themselves to be in good, very good, or excellent health, which has grown 76% (Federal Interagency Forum on Age-Related Statistics, 2012). Thus, older adults are aging more successfully and are interested in maintaining both physical and cognitive function while pursuing meaningful activities (Natvig, 2007). To meet the needs of a growing older adult population, some college classes have added intergenerational service-learning projects where younger students interact with older adults outside the classroom, either as an alternative approach to traditional classroom learning or as an application project for younger students who are using academically acquired skills to serve older adults and the community.

Studies of intergenerational service-learning projects find benefits for both older and younger adults when it comes to service projects completed outside the college classroom. For example, Natvig (2007) found college students who were majoring in business administration increased their understanding of older adults' challenges while helping older adults living in a continuing care retirement community accomplish tasks that they could not complete on their own. Performing services for older adults also led to an increase in the amount of social interaction and companionship for older adults who were less able to move out into the community for shared activities. The benefits of performing service-learning activities were also found for both college students and less mobile older adults living in a long-term care setting by Pine (1997).

In recent decades, foreign language educators and researchers have studied the effects of experiential learning on students who take their language studies outside of a traditional classroom and engage in authentic language production to reinforce their academic curriculum (Carter, 2005; Cooper, 2007; Jay, 2008). This research indicated students who can see a direct purpose to their course material are more likely to retain knowledge and take responsibility for their own learning. For example, Burke (2007) found that students who engaged in service learning courses and projects within an academic setting successfully retained the vocabulary and language structures they had learned in class after they were able to use it in the real world. Likewise, Abbot and Lear (2010) noted that their students made a deeper connection with their community by teaching English to Spanish immigrants. By doing so, students developed confidence in their language and communication skills both in their native language and in the foreign language that they were studying at school. Thus, students

were empowered in their language learning and could see the benefits of learning a foreign language as part of their college program. Finally, Nelson and Scott (2008) found additional benefits in their research of service learning in postsecondary language education as students who engaged in service learning activities had increased motivation to continue learning the language and developed a more acute awareness of the language learning process.

While service-learning projects designed to meet the needs of older adults outside the classroom appear beneficial for both younger and older participants (Bulut & Johnson, 2006), there are barriers for establishing such programs such as funding, staffing and documenting issues, and lack of time and flexibility for students who are balancing their schedules between work, family, and school responsibilities (Cohen, Hatchett, & Eastridge, 2006). One alternative to service-learning projects outside the college classroom may be to offer opportunities inside the college classroom by inviting older adults who are participating in lifelong learning programs into traditional college classrooms. To attain this goal, one of the authors reached out to members of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) to establish a program for intergenerational learning inside the college classroom. This program, entitled the OLLI Intergenerational Program (OLLI iGen Program), was launched in 2012, with the goal of encouraging intergenerational interactions between college students and older adult learners (50 years and older) to develop an increased understanding and mutual respect between populations of these diverse age groups, to reduce ageism, and to reduce age stereotypes. The program is multi-faceted with college students facilitating OLLI classes, older adults serving as tutors for college students and as volunteer patients for undergraduate health care programs, and to a lesser extent, both younger and older adults learning together, as students in the same classroom.

One of the most successful OLLI iGen program examples of younger and older adults learning together is a service-learning project that forms the basis for this case study. This innovative project involved a group of undergraduate college students who had taken at least one semester of college level French language classes and who enrolled in a service-learning course, with the goal of introducing the French language to older adult learners participating in the OLLI iGen program. Learning a foreign language is a subject that affects all generations, young and old, and all generations of students decide to study another language for a variety of reasons. Because

of the communicative nature of language learning, it was decided that this context would be an excellent opportunity to engage both groups of learners. Younger college students and older adult learners could share, compare, and benefit from each other's language learning styles, which may provide motivation for learning and for experiencing the French language and French culture. This project had the additional benefit of offering an in-class service-learning opportunity to college students.

In this study, intergenerational interactions inspired respect for older adults and a decrease in age-related stereotypes. Thus, service-learning projects appear to help younger students gain information about older adults and their lives. Service projects also help younger adults acquire new perspectives about the older adult population and breakdown stereotypes about older adults. These diverse age-group interactions are also accepted as an effective educational tool because these projects offer an important form of experiential learning in which younger students fully engage with older adults and the community (Bulot & Johnson, 2006).

Taken as a whole, the in-class intergenerational service-learning format offered a way to engage individuals from both age groups with the course material in a more meaningful way than could be accomplished by means of a traditional language-learning program. To examine this belief, we completed a qualitative review of the reflective feedback provided by both younger and older adults to explore whether intergenerational interactions inside the college classroom: (1) created a conducive atmosphere for learning and exploring the French language and French culture, (2) developed an increased understanding and mutual respect between younger and older adults; thus, reducing age-related stereotypes, and (3) increased college students awareness for the need to adapt teaching and learning strategies to the age-related changes experienced by most older adults.

A Case Study in Intergenerational Interactions

Participants

Overall, this case study included five young adult undergraduate college students ($n = 5$) and four older adults ($n = 4$), from the OLLI iGen Program. All participants were recruited via one of three class offerings, which were included in either the fall quarter 2012 OLLI course offerings or the fall semester 2012 undergraduate college course offerings.

Three of the college students (2 females; 1 male) were enrolled in FREN 2090-Service Learning in French and all three agreed to participate in this case study. This is an elective course, which has a pre-requisite of one semester of college level French and involves students taking on the role of teacher to lead a course in basic French to a small group of OLLI members. One student had previously participated in a service-learning program that focused on teaching French to elementary school children. The other two students had never taught French before the current service-learning experience. The students in the Service Learning in French course were at diverse proficiency levels in French, from beginning to advanced levels.

There were also two college students (1 female; 1 male) who were enrolled in PSYC 2007- a psychology course entitled “Adulthood and Aging” who agreed to be in this case study. The Adulthood and Aging coursework required a semester-long research assignment with poster presentation given at the end of the course. During the second week of the semester, all 29 students in the Adulthood and Aging course were offered a list of possible research topics including an option to explore the intergenerational interactions that occurred during the Service Learning in French course. Two students selected the intergenerational interactions exploratory option. During the semester, college students in the Adulthood and Aging course completed background research regarding lifelong learning curriculums and the OLLI program. They also attended one of the Service Learning in French weekly debriefing discussions with the undergraduate students who were teaching French to OLLI members and two of the Service Learning in French classes to observe and interact with the older adult learners and the younger college students who were serving as French language teachers.

Finally, this case study included four older adult participants (3 female; 1 male) from the OLLI program. These participants enrolled in the OLLI course entitled, Introduction to French (OLLI Course 2372), through the OLLI Course Catalog. This course was an eight-week class offering that began during the fifth week of the college semester. Although a high dropout rate is common for all of the lifelong learning class offered by OLLI, there was an especially high dropout rate for the older adults in this project. At the beginning of the Introduction to French course, there were 10 OLLI students. Because some of these older adult learners had already attained a proficient level of French, they discovered this was not the appropriate level of language class for them and stopped coming to the class. Several of the OLLI members who stopped attending class admitted that they did not read

the course catalogue where it was stated that the course was a beginner level class. At the end of the eight-week course, the four OLLI students completed the Introduction to French course and were given the voluntary survey materials. All four OLLI members chose to participate by completing the case study survey at the end of the course.

Measures

All participants were given the same five-question survey at the end of the course. While OLLI members were given the survey at the end of their eight-week French language course, college students were given their survey during the last two weeks of their 14-week college class. Surveys were given to allow students enough time to reflect and free-write their answers. None of the participants discussed their answers before completing the survey. Questions included on the survey were: (1) What was your interest in participating in a class where you interacted with individuals across generations? (2) What did you learn? What took you by surprise? (3) How did the relationship between younger and older individuals develop over the course of your time together? Please, give at least one specific detail or example. (4) Based on this experience, would you participate in another interaction across generations? What are your reasons for participation or participation? and (5) How will you use/benefit from this experience in the future?

Class Activities

During the first week of the 14-week semester, college students were assigned readings on the benefits of learning a foreign language and classroom discussions were based on the readings and the students' background with the French language as well as any previous experience in a leadership role. The second week of the semester was focused on the older adult learner and involved further reading, discussion and a lecture by one of the authors, who is an expert on adulthood and aging. This speaker provided the students in the Service Learning in French course with common age-related physical, cognitive, and social changes that may have an influence on the educational experience, for example, changes in vision, hearing, memory, and motivation in order to better prepare the students for their classes with the older adult learners.

In preparation for the teaching the Introduction to French course to the older OLLI adults, college students in the Service Learning in French

course researched language teaching materials and methodology and began to prepare lesson plans and activities to use in their class. The opportunity to teach the older adults began during the fifth week of the college semester. Once the teaching began, the college students enrolled in Service Learning in French course met once each week to debrief each teaching event and to prepare for the next OLLI class. During debriefing sessions, college students enrolled in Service Learning in French were invited to reflect on the previous class, and offer suggestions for improvement. As part of the service-learning course design, the students were also required to complete discussion board journal entries each week during the eight-week teaching project. These students also wrote two reflection papers (one pre-teaching, one post-teaching) where they were given a series of prompts upon which to reflect about their confidence in using the French language outside of a traditional classroom and about taking on the role of teaching and working with an older adult population.

During the last two weeks of the eight-week OLLI course, the college students from the Adulthood and Aging course attended the Introduction to French class to observe the intergenerational interactions between the younger and older adults. Additionally, college students taking the Adulthood and Aging course were required to attend at least one of the weekly debriefing sessions to interact with the students in the service-learning program and to discuss the intergenerational issues. During the last week of the 14-week semester, the students in the Adulthood and Aging course gave a poster presentation to their own classmates and to the students enrolled in the Service Learning in French course. This presentation summarized their research regarding lifelong learning curriculums, the OLLI program, and the intergenerational interactions that occurred during the Service Learning in French course.

Results

To examine the hypotheses, a qualitative review of the reflective feedback provided by both younger and older adults was completed to explore whether intergenerational interactions created a conducive atmosphere for learning and exploring the French language and French culture. The questions of whether intergenerational interactions helped to develop an increased understanding and mutual respect between younger and older adults and whether intergenerational interactions increased college students' awareness for the need to adapt teaching and learning

strategies to the age-related changes experienced by older adults were investigated. Our qualitative review of participants' reflective feedback surveys resulted in five identifiable findings, which were most frequently communicated by participants.

Finding 1. Generally, reflective measures suggested that both age groups furthered their French language skills and understanding of French culture. This was indicated by college students enrolled in Service Learning in French who asserted that, "... my French proficiency improved" and in OLLI members' desire to use the language skills that they learned "...while traveling!"

Finding 2. Participants in this study also seemed to gain an understanding and mutual respect for each other. For example, older adult participants indicated that they had a renewed respect for today's youth in some part of their reflective survey, while college students, especially those in the Service Learning in French course mentioned valuing the bond that grew between the age groups. Statements supporting development of an intergenerational bond include:

I think that we got more comfortable together. We got to the point where we would tease and joke with each other (older adult, Introduction to French).

There was a bond formed between my generation and the elder [generation]. The OLLI students were not only there to learn, but also got to know the personality of our group. This began a link between the generations (college student, Service Learning in French)

College students also appreciated older adults for their wisdom and confidence, commenting:

I was surprised by how confident the older adults were in the classroom and interacting with their teachers (college student, Service Learning in French).

I didn't spend much time directly interacting [teaching older adults] but I enjoyed observing the older students' tenacity and confidence. (college student, Adulthood and Aging)

Finding 3. College students appeared to gain awareness for the need to adapt teaching strategies to common age-related changes experienced by older adults, but also seemed gain a better understanding of generational differences that might influence future intergenerational experiences. This was suggested by three of the five college students, who focused at least one of their comments on, “learning about different generations” and learning about “different generational perspectives. Concerning learning styles, all of the college students commented on generational differences in interests and learning styles. For example, one college student in the Service Learning in French course wrote, “I learned a lot about how different ages learn in different ways. The actions of the senior citizen took us by surprise. I was expecting them to be all about learning, but they also wanted to have fun learning.”

Finding 4. Both younger and older adults said they would participate in another intergenerational interaction experience and that they would use the experience in several different ways depending upon personal goals. In fact, all participants, younger and older adults, gave a positive response to the question, “Based on this experience, would you participate in another interaction across generations? What are your reasons for participation or participation?” Including, the following examples from each age group:

Absolutely, yes. It was a very pleasant experience. Being around younger people (and especially having younger friends) is a great benefit to older people (older adult, Introduction to French).

I am already trying to get more involved. I love the interaction between generations and getting to be familiar between the generations (college student, Service Learning in French).

Finding 5. Finally, both younger and older participants shared additional benefits gained from the intergenerational experience, including the following that were expressed across various reflective survey responses: 1) Learning and practicing organizing and planning skills for a future career; 2) Helping with research in a major area of study; 3) Using

communication skills in a future career as well as everyday interactions; 4) Increased comfort when speaking in groups and increased comfort with individuals from different age-groups; 5) Enhanced future travel experiences and exercised my brain.

Discussion of the Findings

The purpose of this case study was to complete a qualitative review of the possible benefits of an intergenerational service-learning project *inside* the college classroom. There was a special focus on creating an encouraging atmosphere for learning and exploring the French language and French culture, while increasing understanding and mutual respect between younger and older adults. Generally, reflective measures suggested that both younger participants in the Service Learning in French and older participants in the Introduction to French furthered their French language skills and understanding of French culture. Moreover, students teaching the Introduction to French course seemed to gain additional benefits from the intergenerational interactions. These students had experience with the French language and therefore were able to observe and reflect upon how different age groups learn language and how strategies and learning styles may change over the course of a lifetime. This reflection process would not normally occur in a traditional language class, as the college students in traditional classes are primarily concerned with their own learning styles and strategies. By observing how older adult learners apply different techniques to learning French, the college students who were teaching French were able to make comparisons to their own learning techniques and think more deeply about the learning process itself, which is consistent with findings by Nelson and Scott (2008).

College students and older adults also seemed to gain a mutual understanding and respect for each other. These findings suggested the in-class intergenerational service-learning format offered a way to engage individuals from both age groups with the course material in a more meaningful way than could be accomplished by means of a traditional language-learning program. Additional findings suggested that participants enjoyed their experience, looked forward to a future intergenerational activity, and that participants planned to use their intergenerational experience in the future. Finally, this study supports the notion that college students gained awareness for the need to adapt their teaching strategies to normative age-related changes experienced by older adults and appeared

to gain a better understanding of generational differences that might influence future intergenerational encounters.

Limitations of this Study

There are limitations to this study that may have influenced interpretation of the results. First, this is a case study with a small sample size, which limits its power and generalizability. Repetition of the study with a larger number of participants may produce somewhat different results. Therefore, this case study should be used as a guide, perhaps to generate hypotheses for further research with a larger number of participants. Second, although this case study found both age groups gained mutual respect for each other, younger participants still displayed some evidence of age-related stereotyping. This is supported in several end of course survey comments, including one student who was "... surprised that older adults were interested in new technologies," while another student wrote older adults are, "... still willing to learn, but may not know how to learn." For these reasons, a more in-depth approach to developing respect and reducing age related stereotyping is recommended. One idea would be to design an intergenerational project in conjunction with a more specific aging focus. For example, younger adults may benefit from having OLLI members attend several weeks of an Adulthood and Aging developmental psychology course, where older adults are encouraged to share values, interests, and life stories with college students, while younger students share their interests and their knowledge of current technologies with older adults who seem eager for this information.

Concerning the service learning in French program, several challenges became apparent during the eight-week Introduction to French class. First, as discussed previously, many of the older adults came to the class with advanced proficiency in the French language, which made the college students uncomfortable in the teacher role, perhaps because they felt unqualified to teach these advanced learners. In addition, students were personally affected when the class size became smaller each week due to OLLI member dropout. This was indicated by one student comment, who answered "yes" to participating in future intergenerational interactions, but added, "...but I have reservations with working with seniors again because there was too much pressure on me each week to make sure they were getting what they expected" (college student, Service Learning in French).

Although many of the students' concerns diminished over the course of the intergenerational interactions and as the students bonded with the OLLI members who remained in the class, and who were giving them very positive and encouraging feedback, a revised iteration of the Introduction to French class was in order. The revised class, which has been offered during subsequent semesters, included French culture and language related to the cultural topics. In addition, based on student suggestions, the updated class duration has been reduced from eight weeks to two weeks, which helps to make students feel more comfortable. The shortened format also allows the intergenerational interactions to become more of mutual sharing of experiences and language practice rather than a formal teacher-student relationship.

Conclusions

In closing, outcomes for this in-class intergenerational service-learning project were consistent with results from previous service-learning projects completed outside of the college classroom (see Natvig, 2007; Pine, 1997). The in-class service-learning format appeared to engage learners, both young and old, helping them to acquire new perspectives about each other's lives. Findings from the current study are also consistent with prior language studies of service learning projects completed outside of a traditional classroom where students engage in experiential language activities to reinforce their academic curriculum (see Carter, 2005; Cooper, 2007; Jay, 2008). Thus, altering the service-learning project format by inviting older adults into the college classroom and to accommodating the student schedules did not seem to have affected the benefits gained by the participants from the experiential learning process. Instead, this in-class format may offer additional benefits to college students by making some service-learning projects more flexible for younger learners, while benefiting the growing adult population who are often healthier, more mobile, and more interested in pursuing meaningful activities that also contribute to the development of today's youth and future generations.

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Personal Biography

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