

Special Issue: Pedagogy in Reminiscence and Life Review

Introduction to the Special Issue on Pedagogy in Reminiscence and Life Review

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Educators have begun to recognize the value of techniques and experiences encountered in Reminiscence and Life Review (RLR) for students in higher education as well as the older adults with whom they work (Merriam, 1990; Shellman, 2007; Yancura, 2013). Yet, there is very little recent published work on the scope and purpose of RLR work in pedagogical settings. With this special issue, we begin to explore how RLR has been used in university courses for students in a wide variety of academic disciplines, from the obvious fields of Nursing and Gerontology, to unanticipated ones such as Fashion Design. All of the authors contributing to this special issue have used techniques common in Reminiscence and Life Review work in their courses—for many purposes and in a variety of forms. We hope that this collection will encourage others to use these methods in higher education settings. This introduction discusses cross-cutting themes among the topics covered in this issue from student- and participant-centered perspectives.

Student-Centered Issues

Faculty are teaching students reminiscence techniques in a variety of ways; however, a central theme of this pedagogy involves practical application of reminiscence techniques, typically through field work with participants. Students have had the opportunity to engage with cognitively-impaired older adults in nursing homes (Kris, Henkel, & Roberto, this issue), with older adults in community settings (Bishop, Pearson-Little Thunder, Finchum, & Beach, this issue; Yancura, Reilly, & Bahng, this issue), and with Holocaust survivors (Mines, Sackville, & Homel, this issue). These populations often present unique ethical issues that require instruction beyond an education in reminiscence itself.

Ensuring the ethical conduct of reminiscence in the field by students, has led to the development of a variety

of educational approaches and curricula. Among the considerations that are important to consider include: teaching elements of informed consent, ensuring participants feel that they can withdraw at any time, mitigating any risks associated with reminiscence (feelings of sadness), and how to engage with participants who may sometimes bring up strong emotions while reminiscing (Pierce, Steele, Flood, & Elliott, this issue). In addition, students need to develop an understanding of topics like confidentiality, autonomy, and beneficence.

Students can be taught that engaging in reminiscence is not entirely without risk. Reminiscence can bring up feelings of sadness and loss (Eisma, Schut, Stroebe, Voerman, van den Bout, Stroebe, & Boelen, 2015). In populations where baseline levels of depression are high (nursing home populations, for example), additional protections can be put into place to ensure the protection of participants. Some researchers use tools like the Geriatric Depression Scale to screen for baseline depression; however, in the context of class-based projects, all instructors asking students to work with older adults need to ensure that there is a plan in place to work with participants who become upset while reminiscing. Drawing students' attention to the ethical principle of respect for autonomy, as pointed out by Pierce, et al. (this issue), would help students to understand that they can tell participants that they may choose to continue or not. In addition, students engaging in reminiscence in a nursing home can ensure the safety of participants by drawing on the nurses working in those facilities.

Because reminiscence is an applied science, methods used to teach students these techniques are necessarily interactive. The use of an actor playing the role of a cognitively impaired older adult, for example, has been used to allow students to not only learn techniques for reminiscence, but to learn how to handle a variety of ethical considerations. Using patient actors allows students to apply what they have learned about ethics when engaging with a patient actor who can then role play a variety of care scenarios, such as giving consent, handling confusion, ensuring autonomy etc. By running through these scenarios in a learning lab first, students and faculty alike can more confidently approach fieldwork knowing that students have demonstrated competence in a variety of participant scenarios.

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In addition to teaching students a variety of techniques related to reminiscence techniques and ethical principles, using reminiscence gives students an opportunity to reflect on complex issues with participants and deepen their understanding of historical events. For example, students have had the opportunity to engage with Holocaust survivors in powerful and transformative ways (Mines, Sackville, & Homel, this issue). Yancura et al. (this issue) also described how students observed historical theories come to life through the use of reminiscence.

Reminiscence, therefore, gives students an opportunity to engage deeply and meaningfully with complex material in a way that far exceeds a traditional textbook and PowerPoint content-driven approach. As one student wrote, "I cannot express how grateful I am to have had the opportunity to meet these survivors, document their stories, and ensure that their experiences will never be forgotten" (Mines, Sackville, & Homel, this issue).

Participant-Centered Issues

Although this special issue is focused on pedagogy, which naturally places student learning at the forefront, many of the articles discuss participant-centered issues. These are notable not only for the fact that participant outcomes are an important concern in the RLR literature (Pinquart & Forstmeier, 2012) but also because the majority of our students will go into the helping professions. Educating students on the importance of client-centered outcomes should occur hand in hand with their scholarly learning. Collectively, the articles address: the importance of companionship for many older adults, how older reminiscence participants may gain experience and/or skills through engagement in this process, and tangible products that may have value to students and professionals as well as participants and their families.

Relationships between students and older adult participants were described as beneficial to the reminiscence process in three of the articles. For the life-history project described by Mines, Sackville, & Homel (this issue), this process of forming and maintaining relationships between students and participants was a formal one. Students were tasked with responsibility for cultivating this relationship, which culminated in a public ceremony where students presented participants with formal copies of their memoirs. Ligon, Ehlman, and Moriello (this issue) also emphasized the importance of the ongoing relationship between the student and an older adult participants, describing it as a 'touch-point' throughout the course. Sellers (this issue) did not emphasize the formal relationship process, but noted that students often extended relationships with their older reminiscence partners by extending their interviews or returning "just to visit."

The reminiscence techniques and processes described in this issue also resulted in the attainment of various experiences and skills for many other individuals beyond the students for whom they were originally designed to

benefit, ranging from those intimately involved in the process to an entire community. Two articles noted that older adults engaged in these reminiscence activities found them to be highly enjoyable and might experience increases in generativity and life satisfaction through their participation (Ligon et al., this issue; Yancura, et al., this issue). The participants in Garthwait's study (this issue) learned about the personal importance of ethical wills, while Kris et al.'s (this issue) procedure gave student-actors a chance to hone their improvisation skills. Participants in Mines, Sackville, & Homel's (this issue) project for Holocaust survivors were honored at an "emotional" event attended by older-adult participants, faculty, administrators, project partners, and media representatives.

A third potentially valuable benefit of reminiscence work in pedagogical settings involves creative products resulting from the project. At this point, it is important to note that products are simply one outcome of the process, as compared to Life History Work, which is typically focused on process over product (Haight & Webster, 1995). Student classroom presentations recounted in Ligon et al.'s (this issue) study included a variety of outcomes from the reminiscence process such as original songs, videos, short skits, and websites (Digital Legacies). Classroom products have also included documentary-style movies, posters, and storyboards (Yancura, et al., this issue). As previously mentioned, Mines, Sackville, & Homel's (this issue) products of reminiscence with Holocaust survivors were written memoirs of students' interpretations of survivors' experience. Although not among the central goals of these pedagogical products, if done in an ethical and respectful manner (Pierce et al., this issue), these creative outputs can be of great value to participants as well as to their families and communities.

Conclusion

Reminiscence has been shown to be beneficial for student learning and the learning of others. Teaching reminiscence is not only about teaching an applied scientific technique, it is a powerful tool to teach ethics, explore historical content and theory, and gain a broader understanding of politics through a different lens.

While students have clearly commented that they appreciate this type of engagement, and have spoken to the impact of reminiscence projects in teaching evaluations, the impact of reminiscence goes beyond the students to have a broader positive impact on the community at large. In short, expanding the use of these techniques is sound pedagogy, which can be a transformative experience for students and community members alike.

References

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