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## The Oklahoma 100 Year Life Project as an Instructional Tool to Transform Student Engagement and Pedagogy in Gerontological Education

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The purpose of this manuscript was to explore use of a hybrid instructional method to enhance transformative learning among undergraduate college students. Using oral history transcripts collected from centenarians, a total of 11 undergraduate students enrolled in a gerontology course completed a series of five module activities used to explore underlying autobiographical memories and life story narratives. Activities were facilitated by a lead faculty member in gerontology and two additional faculty members representing an oral history research program. Together, faculty implemented an integrated pedagogy application consisting of ethnodrama and transformative learning approaches. Thematic analysis of a purposeful and reflective writing exercise completed by students revealed three transformative outcomes in learning. These outcomes were consistent with developmental attributes common to gerotranscendence in human longevity. Identified themes included a heightened sense of altruism, the endorsement of life acceptance, and meaningful feelings of emancipation. Results further indicate that the combined use of ethnodrama and transformative learning techniques contributed to an age-embodied learning process whereby student-learners holistically embraced the oral histories, recalled stories, and shared memories of living a 100-year life.

Lived experience is essential for guiding student-learners through the aging process (Gaugler, 2017). When exposed to experiential learning activities, student-learners report fewer negative stereotypes, increased empathy, and greater awareness of old age potentials (Augustin & Freshman, 2015; Friedman & Goldaun, 2016; Ramsey, Mendoza, & Weil, 2014;). Experiential learning is a pedagogical standard for gerontological instruction (Baker, Kruger, & Karasik, 2018; Bergman, Erickson, & Simons, 2014). However, such methods are only effective when the student-learner is allowed to contemplate his or her experience through oral dialogue or written

remembrance (Brown & Schmidt, 2016; Hegeman, Horowitz, Tepper, Pillemer, & Schultz, 2002; Rodin, Brown, & Shedlock, 2013). This has implications for gerontological educators who seek hybrid strategies that foster transformative learning. Therefore, the aim of this study was to devise an integrative instructional method to transform student learning regarding the experience of human longevity.

### Mezirow's Model for Transformative Learning

In devising his Model for Transformative Learning, Mezirow (1991; 1996) emphasized three strategies to help student-learners critically reflect upon their own situation relative to the experience of others. First, students should be given a tool of discourse for transforming thoughts, beliefs, feelings, or attitudes into action. Such tools may include group projects that involve role-playing, case analysis of oral history, and simulation exercises. Second, students should be given ample time to openly dialogue and reflect upon different perspectives or opposing points of view that emerge during in-class exercises. Third, students should be encouraged to reflect upon the content (i.e., what was learned), process (i.e., what contributed to learning), and premise (i.e. what new meaning was learned). Mezirow (1991) posited that the experiential impact of shared interaction, oral dialogue, and reflective writing in response to disorienting dilemmas or

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experiences not coinciding with one's present worldview would result in a "perspective transformation" (pg. 167).

Ethnodrama is a non-conventional but useful mode for transforming oral life narratives into analysis, interpretation, and presentation (Saldaña, 2005). Ethnodrama is a particularly useful strategy for bringing storylines of oral interviews to life (Eaton, 2015; Eaton & Donaldson, 2016). Referred to as "dramatizing the data" (p. 233; Saldaña, 2003), ethnodrama entails a written adaptation of qualitatively-derived research data, such as an oral history narrative or autobiographical interview transcript, into a dramatic playscript to be read, staged, or performed. Ethnodrama relies on various presentational approaches to transform thoughts, feelings, and experiences into those of the analyzed or portrayed character (Saldaña, 2003; 2005). In particular, ethnodrama has proven effective in altering student-learner attitudes regarding late-life potentials (Eaton, 2015; Eaton & Donaldson, 2016; Sheets & Kaback, 2010).

### Operationalizing Transformative Theater

Theater as an instructional tool has become commonplace in gerontological education (Black & Lipscomb, 2017; Lipscomb, 2012; Lipscomb, 2016). Operationalized as a Theater of the Oppressed, Boal (1985) posited transformative theater as a "rehearsal for life" (p.154). Boal (1985) viewed the stage as a platform for exposing and reversing stereotypes, power relationships, and inequalities that marginalize vulnerable populations. Therefore, Boal (1995) devised transformative theater into a form of interactive role-playing in which novice spectators are placed into varying character roles and elements of a play performance. Boal (1985) theorized that human consciousness is transformed into higher-order learning.

### Transformative Theater in Gerontological Education

Transformative theater can serve as a useful technique in difficult classroom dialogues involving human aging. In fact, transformative theater has been used to improve medical student communication of age-associated terminal diagnoses (Skye, Wagenschutz, Steiger, & Kumagai, 2014), raise awareness of aging services for lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) older adults (Hughes, Luz, Hall, Gardner, Hennessey, & Lammers, 2016), explore intimacy and sexuality in old age (Hafford-Letchfield, Couchman, Webster, & Avery, 2010), educate college-aged students about end-of-life decision-making (Sheets & Kaback, 2010), and infuse gerontological course curriculum and instruction with the ability to expose ageism (Reynolds, Bernard, Rezzano, & Rickett, 2016). Application of transformative theater has much to offer student-learners relative to the study of human longevity, yet limited efforts have been made to explore the 100-year life.

### Developmental Attributes in Centenarian Life

Hazan (1994; 2011) proposed that reaching the 100<sup>th</sup> year of life represents a "rite of passage" (Hazan, 1994; 2011). Society approaches the lives of centenarians with curiosity. In some cases, the general public is advised to "live like a centenarian" for health, happiness, and prosperity. However, Sherman (2010) noted that society overlooks the fact that long-lived adults age contemplatively. In other words, centenarian life is not about "doing." Centenarians may feel powerless against social demand for productivity. Instead, Sherman (2010) proposed that living a century demands the individual learn "to be" (Sherman, 2010). According to Tornstam (2005), this developmental process in human longevity encompasses three gerotranscendent qualities: (1) reinterpretation, reconciliation, and acceptance of past shortcomings and wrongdoings; (2) a shift in life-perspective from self-serving to empathetic; (3) emancipation from needless social conventions, meaningless roles, or superficial relations.

The goal of the present study was to determine what types of transformative student-learning outcomes would emerge from the integration of ethnodrama and transformative learning pedagogies based on use of centenarian oral history transcripts. We hypothesized that students would develop a more embodied and transformed perspective of aging by which to think, act, and be (Mezirow, 1991; 1996).

### Method and Procedure

This study involved a total of  $N = 11$  ( $n = 2$  males;  $n = 9$  females) traditional upper-division junior and senior level undergraduate students enrolled in a gerontology course titled, *Concepts and Controversies in Aging*. This course focused on difficult dialogues and opposing opinions surrounding human aging, such as longevity and life extension, dying and death, caregiving and health rationing, and social policies for older adults. Among students completing the course  $n = 9$  were majoring in Human Development and Family Science,  $n = 1$  was majoring in Psychology, and  $n = 1$  was an international exchange student majoring in University Studies. Racial/ethnic composition of enrolled students included  $n = 8$  White/Caucasian,  $n = 2$  African-American, and  $n = 1$  Asian-American. To arrive at a staged reading performance, we combined ethnodramatic and transformative learning pedagogies into five activities. At the conclusion of this process, students were required to engage in a final reflective and purposeful writing assignment. This paper involved a self-examination. In particular, students were asked to contemplate the question: What does it mean to age and grow old?

Our team consisted of a lead gerontology instructor and two oral history faculty members from the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program (OOHRP) at OSU. The gerontology instructor served as the facilitator of in-class

discussion, one OOHRP faculty member functioned as a guided interviewer, and the other OOHRP faculty assumed the role as playwright. Faculty engaged students in a series of five bi-weekly activity modules over a 16-week period to meet two objectives: (1) encourage student reading and in-class dialogue pertaining to digitally transcribed oral history interviews, and (2) observe the interpretation of oral history transcripts as represented through integrative role-playing.

We used oral history transcripts from the Oklahoma 100 Year Life Project, a collection of  $N = 111$  digitally archived autobiographical and life narrative transcripts through the Oklahoma State University Edmon Low Library. Transcripts were selected by the faculty instructors and individually assigned to students. Students were first asked to read and then reflect upon the transcript they had been given. Students were then guided by faculty through five separate in-class module exercises designed as disorienting dilemmas or interactive experiences to challenge student beliefs about human aging and longevity.

The first module included an overview of oral history as a field of study and methodology, including highlighting performative aspects of the personal interview and importance of context in interpreting narrators' stories. Exercises used to expose pre-conceptions about aging were introduced. A word association game was played on the topic of becoming old from which themes of independence, health, memory, and death emerged. This was followed with experiential explorations of normative age-associated loss, including simulated exercises to increase mindfulness of hearing and vision decline and of mobility decrements. Meanwhile, the gerontology instructor guided students through a dialogue concerning their personal and emotional feelings.

The second module exercise involved student reminiscence of stories and memories of aging family members. Students then broke into groups and engaged in an interactive sculpting exercise Boal (2002) called "Image Theater" (p. 174). A sculptor was designated, silently positioning other students (i.e., the material) to create a tableau of an aging experience. The other students were asked to guess what was portrayed. Students worked as a team to tell a story as well as learned about meta-communication, specifically how attitude and emotion are expressed nonverbally through movement, facial expression, stance, and positioning. Again, the gerontology faculty member unified activities by facilitating shared student dialogue about the experience.

The third module exercise involved drafting a playwriting script that incorporated student insights from previous modules. Initially, the plan was to use the students as characters and a framework for tying together the oral interviews, but this was abandoned due to time constraints. Although students may not have directly contributed to lines or characters for the script, their exploratory work did influence the writer's process, particularly with regard to observed movements, gestures, and other non-vocal behaviors.

The fourth activity involved a script reading. All students were asked to read aloud a first draft of the script while sitting in a circle. Five students were then asked to volunteer for roles. Those who preferred not to act were assigned to help with production elements including props, music and programs. Student actor participants were tasked with becoming familiar with their centenarian's story and to think about how to truthfully represent their narrator. Students not selected for roles were asked to read and review the five primary oral history transcripts being portrayed by the actor participants. Two additional reading rehearsals were conducted to expose representational and interpretive aspects of doing justice to the centenarians' stories, taken word for word from the transcripts.

The fifth module activity involved a final staged reading. This stage reading took place before a select audience of faculty, staff, and other undergraduate majors in human development and family science. The gerontology faculty member engaged the audience and student-actors in a feed-back session immediately after the reading.

## Results

Only  $n = 7$  of students ( $n = 1$  male;  $n = 6$  female) enrolled in the course granted final consent for thematic content analysis of their written paper. Four students ( $n = 1$  male;  $n = 3$  female) voluntarily elected not to grant consent. Students not granting consent included one international exchange student and three domestic students. These students did not specify a reason for not consenting. Results of this analysis are summarized in Table 1. Three main findings emerged. First, student self-reports indicated the presence of altruistic attitudes. One student wrote that the course resulted in a new perspective that contributed to "a sense of respect, understanding, compassion, and sympathy for older adults." However, another student indicated that growing old means being "surrounded by the people one loves." Second, three students indicated a perspective conforming to life acceptance. One student wrote that being old means ". . . just being genuinely happy," whereas the another student implied that aging entails unique pathways whereby very old persons choose ". . . to do what they love, share life stories, and continue impacting others around them." A final student wrote that aging is dependent upon family relations, specifically suggesting that ". . .if one has a good family this can lead to a happy life, and God-willing, that happy life and good family leads to a long life." Finally, two students viewed aging as a source of emancipation. One student suggested that they learned "There is a distinct difference between what society attributes as meaningful... and what a person finds meaningful in their own life." Another student simply perceived aging as an evolving "sense of freedom and liberation."

Regarding student-learner perspectives, the combined application of ethnodramatic and transformative learning pedagogies produced a transpersonal learning experience.

Table 1  
*Transformative learning themes from student-learner reflective papers*

Excerpts from Reflective Paper	Transformative Learning Theme(s)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Doing this paper and multiple other assignments in this class has completely changed my perspective. It has established a sense of respect, understanding, compassion and sympathy for older adults that I have never had before.</li> <li>Growing old does not mean you have to be surrounded by many. . . just constantly surrounded by the people one loves.</li> </ul>	Altruism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I truly think that growing old means to live your life to the fullest; just being genuinely happy, living the “good life” basically.</li> <li>Aging means taking a unique pathway towards the final years of your life. These individuals chose to do what they love, share life stories, and continue impacting others around them.</li> <li>. . .if you have a good family, this can lead to a happy life, and God-willing, that happy life and good family leads to a long life.</li> </ul>	Life acceptance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is a distinct difference between what society attributes as meaningful. . . and what a person finds meaningful in their own life</li> <li>Aging is a sense of freedom and liberation.</li> </ul>	Emancipation

Transpersonal learning incorporates the use of life experiences, memories, storytelling, or other applications in a way that helps student learners better retain what is taught, as well as to subjectively and objectively experience positive change in individual beliefs, motivations, and behavior (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). The application of instructional tools including oral history interviews, role-playing/improvisation, scripting, and performance reading used in this reported classroom exercise further resulted in “age-embodied” student learning (see Figure 1). Students came to acknowledge the physical and mental realities of living a long time, while endorsing a sense of altruism, acceptance, and emancipation in the aftermath of the learning experience.

### Conclusion

Results from this exploratory examination demonstrated utility in methodologically combining ethnodramatic and transformative pedagogies to enhance student engagement and the learning experience. Of particular relevance was using ethnodrama and

transformative learning techniques to engage students in an analysis of lived experiences and memories of centenarians. In turn, this resulted in a written playscript for a staged reading performance. Students were then able to adopt a more altruistic, accepting, and emancipated view of self based on centenarian narratives.

Our findings support usefulness of oral history narratives as an experiential platform for teaching aging concepts. Oral history methods employed in the classroom have traditionally required students to conduct face-to-face interviews (Ames & Diepstra, 2006; Murty, Ingram, & Evans, 2003; Ligon, Ehlman, Moriello, & Welleford, 2011). Student-learners involved in the present study were required to engage in a reflective and translational process. In particular, student-learners were asked to read, review, and interpret previously recorded digital oral history transcripts. This procedure reflected an “inside-out” rather than an “outside-in” acting approach (Moore, 1984). In other words, student-learning was centered around an experience of interpretation, dialogue, and reflection within the classroom. These internal activities were then used to create and produce a learning experience before an outside audience. Thus, the cross-blending of transformative and ethnodrama pedagogies allowed for experiential learning to take shape within the classroom environment and to be transformed into a creative expression of embodiment through behavioral action.

The connection between animated movement or action, perception, and self-discovery in learning has more recently been labeled as “embodied cognition” (Black, 2010; Kontra et al., 2012; Zhu, 2017). Embodiment is considered an experiential source of action that transforms perception of complex processes into critical thought regarding one’s self (Kontra, Goldin-Meadow, & Beilock, 2012). Zhu (2017) reported that embodied cognition stems from organically derived pedagogical methods that require translation of information into some type of deliberate experience and reflective practice. Procedures of this study required students to engage together in activity modules designed to encourage deliberate physical movement, while simultaneously and purposefully requiring students to reflect upon the origins, process, and premise of their actions. Thus, embodiment played a role in evolving

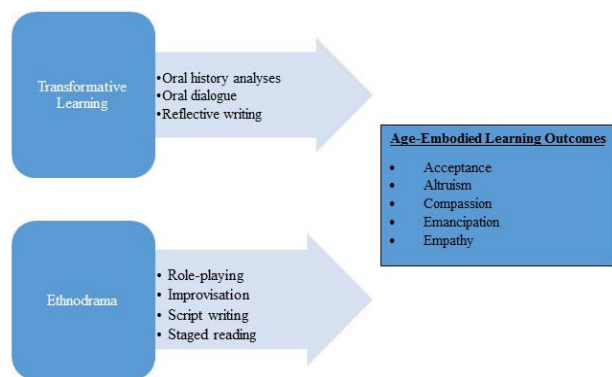


Figure 1. Model of age-embodied learning

student-learner perspectives and translations regarding centenarian life.

Furthermore, results demonstrate the value of using a blended pedagogical approach to instruct students about development in human longevity. Heinz, Cone, da Rosa, Bishop & Finchum (2017) reported that the oral history narratives of centenarians confirm a gerotranscendent developmental process. The self-reflective writings of student-learners in this examination lend support to this finding. In particular, students identified perspectives consistent with developmental markers in longevity including empathy, acceptance, emancipation.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be noted. First, results stem from the thematic analysis of one written reflection. The addition of preliminary and post writing exercises might have allowed for detection of long-term effects. Second, methodological procedures were used with a small number of students. Caution should be used relative to replicating procedures in a larger class size. Finally, staged reading performances require adequate planning, rehearsal time, and acting talent. Our team happened to have faculty with both a gerontology and oral history background, as well as connections to theater faculty. However, students enrolled in the course had no previous acting or performance experience. Any replication should account for potential resource-related factors involving rehearsal time and staged-reading experience.

### Implications and Future Directions

Despite potential limitations, results have implications relative to how gerontological and life-long educators can use oral history narratives within hybrid pedagogies to engage student learning across the curriculum. Future investigations should determine the long-term effectiveness of such pedagogy relative to the transformative learning perspectives of gerontology or drama students, adult practitioners working with old-old adults, or old-old participants in life-long learning programs.

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