Special Issue: Pedagogy in Reminiscence and Life Review

Ethical Wills: Pedagogy, Transformation, and Service

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Service-learning pedagogy, used in combination with holistic and transformational learning theories, can prepare students to engage older adults in life review with mutually growth-producing results. One form of service-learning is to teach students to engage in life review with older adults and to compile the information shared in life review conversations into written Ethical Wills. This is a way of distilling and sharing older adults' values, insights, life lessons, wisdom, and personal legacy into a document to share with family and friends, and it also teaches students about the merits of both life review and ethical wills to older adults.

Key Words: Service-learning, Life Review, Ethical Will, Transformational Learning

Teaching in higher education offers challenges and opportunities for professors motivated to provide effective, relevant, stimulating, theory-based, and research-supported learning experiences. Those teaching courses in aging have great opportunities to provide such learning experiences to students through service-learning activities that match students with older adults for the purpose engaging in life review and writing an Ethical Will for an older adult. Educators have utilized service-learning experiences that go beyond didactic learning by placing students in community-based settings in which they can provide service to actual individuals and go beyond providing didactic academic knowledge

A service learning course is defined (Clayton, Bringle, & Hattler, 2013) as:

> … a course or competency-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in mutually identified service activities that benefit the community, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility (pp. 114-115).

Considered a high impact pedagogy (Kuh, 2008), service -learning can impact all parties, including students, community members, and faculty because of its ability to connect theory with practice, bring classroom content to life, and actually impact the lives of community members being served. Brandenberger (2013) describes the benefits of service-learning to students, including assuming responsibility for one's own learning, identifying ethical issues, achieving purpose and agency, transforming one's perspective, developing morally, and acquiring leadership. A pedagogy that results in learning that lasts (Fitch, Steinke, and Hudson, 2013), service-learning can promote thinking and skill-building that prepares students for professional practice. Effective service-learning courses can increase civic engagement among students while they are in school and beyond and also promote significant personal growth that puts transformation in perspective (Battistoni, 2013; Clayton, Bringle, & Hatther, 2013; Fitch, Steinke, & Hudson, 2013; Jacoby, 2009; Kolb, 1984; Levesque-Bristol, Knapp, & Fisher, 2010).

This article describes service-learning as a pedagogical method used to teach students how to conduct life review with older adults and compile shared information and insights into written ethical wills that capture older adults' life lessons and values. It also ties together the important concepts of holistic learning and adult learning. Baines (2006) describes ethical wills, also called legacy letters, as "a way to share your values, blessings, life's lessons, hopes and dreams for the future, love, and forgiveness with your family, friends, and community" (p. 1). Ethical Wills are neither financial nor living wills, and they are not legal documents. Rather, they are a written summary of the individual's deepest held values, the reasons they have been adopted, and guidance and wishes for family and friends. People who consider writing about their lives often do not actually complete such a project, but the opportunity to work with another person trained to write such a document can make the difference between one's life lessons being documented or not.

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Theories of Holistic Teaching and Learning

Professors interested in truly impactful education understand that teaching and learning are both multi-dimensional and holistic, resulting not only in knowledge acquisition but also in students fully engaged in their own education. Holistic education has been described as addressing the connections among student cognition, emotion, skills, social interaction, meaning, and per-spective on life (Eberhardt, 2015, Lauricella & MacAskill, 2015, Pinquart, 2012). Experience in teaching and in the use of service-learning has led this professor to identify the following vital aspects of holistic learning that lend themselves to teaching students to engage in life review with older adults.

Didactic learning describes the ways that students acquire a basic knowledge of subject matter, and didactic teaching can be used to present the general concepts of life review and the structure and content of Ethical Wills. This method, described as the knowledge dimension of learning (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), helps students acquire a general cognitive understanding of course topics as well as theoretical and research underpinnings of that content. In the courses in which this professor taught life review, didactic content included a developmental perspective on aging which suggests that life review is a normal and valuable part of aging (Birren & Svensson, 2013; Westerhoof & Bohlmeijer, 2014). Students also develop an understanding of the ways in which early life experiences impact individuals and how socio-historical context shapes people over time.

The didactic level of knowledge does not require students to apply or analyze their knowledge, which are seen by teachers as higher cognitive processes of learning which encourage additional reflection that can lead to the ability to apply, analyze and evaluate one's own learning. *Skills acquisition and application* requires students to apply their learning and to reflect upon these experiences (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Students in courses taught by the instructor learned to connect classroom and real-life experiences by actually interviewing an older adult and completing their ethical will. This experience prepared them for actual practice in their respective disciplines such as social work, psychology, medicine, nursing, health promotion, pharmacy, and physical therapy, all of which require the ability to understand and work with older adults who may be engaging in life review that impacts their overall health and well-being. Students learned how to communicate with people very different from themselves in terms of age and about both positive and negative times of their lives. They also gained skills in writing that required them to integrate theory and practice in a meaningful way.

Affective learning includes the emotional and personal impact of learning experiences on students, which in this case helped students confront their own stereotypes about aging and learn how to separate their own affective experiences from their work. The students who inter-viewed older adults experienced such feelings as empathy, sadness, appreciation for being allowed to hear very personal stories, and joy when they interacted with individuals who were very appreciative of the opportunity to move from life review to an actual Ethical Will. Older adults displayed both positive and negative emotions while speaking with the students, and students were trained to support these emotions and manage their own emotional responses in a professional and empathic manner.

Relevance, meaning, and perspective refers to the ways in which learning brings reflection and purpose to students, and it helps to shift attitudes and perspectives based on insights and experience. These courses allowed for student reflection on their learning and its connections to meaning in life for both students and elders. Older adults who expressed regrets about life, for example, stimulated students to think about how one makes meaning and finds purpose in life. Older adults who expressed satisfaction with their lives, on the other hand, stimulated students to consider the importance of lifelong personal growth as a key to successful aging and life review. They also provided students the opportunity to consider their own commitment to further learning and professional growth because of the examples they saw in the older adults they interviewed.

Transformational Learning

Transformational learning is "learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, disorienting, reflective, open and emotionally able to change" (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58). Positioning students in direct contact with individuals very different from themselves in terms of age offered the possibility of transformation because students faced preconceived ideas, possible stereotypes, and uncomfortable emotions associated with aging. As reported below, students reported many personal changes that transformed their views and perspectives.

Adult Learning Theory

Adult learning theory (Freire, 1970; Jameson, Clayton, & Jaeger, 2011) involves faculty members and students becoming partners in examining ideas and evidence, asking questions, and co-creating knowledge, all of which fit well in the courses described below. Service-learning experiences and reflections upon them are ripe for such adult learning, moving students into an active role in their own education as they move from consumers of education to assuming responsibility for their own learning. Students in these courses assumed responsibility for their learning and came to see that there are many sources of knowledge and skills.

Methodology of Teaching Life Review and Ethical Wills

Teaching students to conduct life review and write Ethical Wills was incorporated into two undergraduate social work courses (Social Gerontology and Human Behavior and the Social Environment) and one graduate social work course (Practice with Individuals and Families) over the course of twelve years. Because effective service-learning offers both knowledge acquisition and skill development through the intentional tying of course objectives to the service-learning experiences, two or three course objectives in each course were tied to the service-learning experience. The instructor placed the advertisements about the possibility of working with a student to complete an Ethical Will and, as a result, identified older adults 65 years and older who were living in the community and willing to be interviewed, engage in life review, and have an Ethical Will written. The older adults responded to advertisements for participation within the community, including through social services organizations and faith communities. The university's Institutional Review Board considered this exercise to be exempt from the human subjects review process because a) the Ethical Wills would not be published, b) the older adults were not considered to be a vulnerable population, and c) the outcome was not program evaluation or research data but rather an Ethical Will that became the property of the older adult. The instructor discussed the process with each older adult, explaining the process and answering questions. The instructor made the matches between students and older adults based on student preferences. These included student wishes to interview and learn from someone very different than themselves based on age, some wishing to interview those in their 60's or 70's, and others wishing to interview those in their 80's and 90's. Some students preferred to interview someone of their own gender, while others wanted the experience of interviewing an older adult of another gender. Other variables, such as race, religion, or socio-economic status, were not identified prior to the actual interviews. They learned how to engage older adults in personal conversations about their lives. They rehearsed interviews, read sample ethical wills, prepared life review questions from a list provided by the instructor, and discussed how first and subsequent meetings with their subjects went. Students and older adults generally met two or three times to complete the life review depending on how long older adults wished to meet and how much information they shared. The students and their interviewees made decisions about how many times to meet and how best to use their time together to complete the Ethical Wills.

Student Preparation

Students were educated about **developmental stages of life**, including older adults' tendency to engage informally in life review and the purposes it serves.

Students learned about developmental theories of aging such as the **life span theory** (Erikson, 1986; Peck, 1956), which suggest that somewhat universal stages of psychosocial development occur over the life span. Students also learned about **life course theories** (Elder, 1985; Harenen, 1996) which posit that psychosocial development is greatly influenced by the socio-historical context of individual lives, including world and local events, societal attitudes, and social policies. Students learned about **life review theory** and research, including the work of life review pioneers (Birren & Schroots, 2006; Butler, 1963; Butler, 1973) who tied the process of life review to adult psychosocial development theories. Theories describing the potential benefits of the life review process were presented, such as the **interpretive perspective on aging** (Marshall, Martin-Matthews & McMullin, 2016), which suggests that people make sense and meaning of their lives as they are lived, perhaps not only when they reach older adulthood and engage in life review. A number of foundational readings were used in all courses, and in courses where there were students from a variety of disciplines, readings that were inclusive of all disciplines were identified and assigned. Graduate students in social work were required to tie the course information to other social work courses they were taking, such as Human Behavior and the Social Environment, to show that they could bring various sources of knowledge to bear.

In addition, students studied **trauma theory** (van der Kolk, McFarlane & Weisaeth, 1996) and the related theories of **resiliency** (Bandura, 2001) and **positive psychology** (Stirling, 2010) in order to understand the impact of trauma on older adults' lives and the reasons that some individuals develop resilience and others do not over time. Students learned about theories of **post-traumatic growth** (Calhoun and Tedeshi, 2014; Janoff-Bilman, 2004) which attempt to explain why some people experience personal growth following trauma and others do not.

In addition to life review questions designed to stimulate reminiscence and potential insights, students were given a tool developed by the instructor called **A Century in Review** which listed major world and national events of each decade from 1900 to 2000, and which was designed to help students gain a view of the socio-historical context of their older adult interviewee's life events. The tool also included photographs of well-known people, places, and events that represented various decades and served as "reminiscentia," (Sherman, 1991) which are memorabilia used to stimulate memories and meanings associated with them.

Students completed required readings about ethical wills and reviewed sample Ethical Wills (Baines, 2004). They were given resources that provided potential categories common to ethical wills. Students learned to guide the participant's thinking about what to include, why or why not, how to present their overall life values, the best ways to write about their lives, and how to share the final product with family and friends. They were provided samples of Ethical Wills, but they were not required to use any particular format which allowed for the interviewees

to determine the format. Students provided drafts of their Ethical Wills to the older adults and the instructor for their review and editing, and they compiled those into a final Ethical Will.

Student Reflection

Students were engaged by the instructor in classroom reflection, a hallmark of sound service-learning pedagogy (Ryan, 2015; Bain, Ballantyne, Mills & Lester, 2002; Jameson, Clayton, & Jaeger, 2011), on the entire experience as it proceeded. They engaged in "phenomenological reflection," (van Manen, 1990, 77) during which they explored their subjective experiences, satisfaction with the experience, changes in perspective on the world, development of professional skills, increases in critical thinking, ability to integrate theory and practice, sense of empowerment to make a difference, and a sense of responsibility to their community and those living in it. Ethical Wills themselves were not given a grade, but students were graded on their classroom discussion of their learning, verbal description of the skills and insights they gained through the experience, discussion of professional growth, and how well they achieved course learning objectives.

Benefits and Evaluation

Instructor benefits in these courses over time were many, including the satisfaction of providing a learning environment conducive to holistic learning. The instructor was gratified to see students take advantage of the experiential learning offered to build their skills, engage in affective learning, and acquire the ability to apply learning in a real-life situation. Course objectives were met through service-learning, and students reported being more motivated to learn what they needed to practice professionally in other courses or experiences. The instructor was gratified by providing a learning environment that promoted growth through opportunity and high expectations. Confirmation of holistic learning theory, transformational learning theory, adult learning theory, and service-learning as effective pedagogies was another significant benefit to the instructor. These were measured by the ways in which student descriptions of the experience addressed specific course objectives such as understanding theories of adult development and aging and developing communication skills with older adults.

Student benefits showed themselves in a multitude of ways as well. Holistic teaching and learning showed students the importance of multiple ways of learning, and how they all mutually inform each other—all confirmed in classroom discussions. In classroom discussions and course evaluations, students expressed deep levels of satisfaction with and appreciation for the experience. They learned the importance of challenging themselves by delving into potentially uncomfortable situations. Transformational learning occurred through values

clarification, insight into issues of aging, dealing with their own beliefs and stereotypes, and understanding the importance of taking responsibility for their own professional learning.

Students were able to put their subjects into historical and family context as the interviews proceeded through guided life review, an important insight for professionals working with older adults. They reported finding satisfaction by helping an individual complete an ethical will that probably would not have been done otherwise. They came to understand the importance of leaving and receiving a legacy of a life well lived, and some reported that this was the most significant learning experience they had had in college or graduate school. Some students committed themselves to ongoing contact with their participants. They came to understand the ways in which challenges in life impact people positively and negatively, that regret and forgiveness change lives, and that individual psycho-social-spiritual development continues over the entire lifespan. Students learned the importance of managing their own emotions when listening to the recounting of sad memories.

Benefits to the older adults included positive experiences in terms of both process and outcome. They received a written Ethical Will descriptive of their values legacy to their family and friends, and they discussed with their student partner the ways that this product could be shared. Older adults reported great benefits from discussions that allowed them to engage proactively in life review in ways that promoted reminiscence, making meaning of life events, finding ways to accept their lives, making decisions about offering and accepting forgiveness, and integrating the elements and themes of their lives. Many noted that they appreciated participating in this project because they might never have otherwise completed an ethical will without student help or have given significant thought to the meaning of their lives as a whole. Some families were involved in encouraging their parents to complete an Ethical Will, and during the process expressed appreciation for how completing an ethical will provided insights about their parents' values, life lessons, and personal growth.

Recommendations

Service-learning is an exciting and yet challenging way to teach and, over time, the research on what is called civic engagement in the classroom has led to a set of best practices in service-learning (Dolgon, Mitchell, & Eatman, 2017). Knowing and using such recommended practices as guided student reflection, tying experiences to course objectives, and identifying ways to measure impact can help instructors build courses and experiences that promote professional education effectively. Engaging in service-learning best practices is essential to the success of experiential learning, so it is extremely helpful for instructors to connect with service-learning and civic engagement specialists in campus settings. Campus

Compact specialists, both on campuses and through the National Campus Compact office, have many resources to help instructors learn how to integrate service learning into their courses, and they can help connect faculty colleagues utilizing service learning to gain support when adopting this challenging pedagogy.

Tying the experience closely to course objectives is important so that didactic learning is reinforced, and it helps students connect their experience with professional knowledge and skills. Instructors need to be able to show students how this experience will inform their practice and enhance future career competency and satisfaction. Projects such as this require guided discussion and reflection in the classroom so that student questions can be answered, problems solved, and students can articulate what they are learning. Professors must be open to student discomfort and able to help them deal with uncomfortable emotions related to the experience. Loss, regret, family dysfunction, failures, and even suicide may emerge in life review sessions, and students need to be prepared to listen supportively to the older adults. Instructors must be able to help students manage their own emotional reactions to uncomfortable content and conversations by helping them anticipate potential emotional reactions and providing classroom training and practice in how to respond.

Professors using service learning in which students are engaged in personal discussion such as that described here should be aware of the "risks of caring" (Perry, 1970; Stoecker, 2016) which refer to the complexity of human interaction, the unpredictability of discussions about one's life, and the possibility of emotional reactions. Students may encounter this complexity and challenge for the first time through this experience, but instructors can help students to see that those dynamics can also enhance the richness of their learning. Instructors need to be able to help students process any confusion or emotional reactions experienced, helping them view them as part of the human experience.

Instructors wishing to use the experience for research purposes can also receive guidance in translating learning into reportable research. Those who wish to measure the impact of service-learning on students and older adults have many resources to help them engage in such research. Tools and instruments exist that measure attitudinal shifts in students, level of civic engagement before and after service-learning, critical thinking, ethical awareness, appreciation for diversity, leadership, and satisfaction of participants such as older adults (Steinberg, Hatcher & Bringle, 2011; Jacoby, 2015). Campus Compact offices, both campus-based and national, have a wealth of research upon which to build, and will provide consultation for professors wishing to devise learning strategies, methods of evaluation, and ways to use the results for scholarship. They also have numerous resources regarding specific facets of service learning that can be of immense help, such as reflection models and guidelines, suggestions for building community partnerships that will provide learning experiences for students, and instructions for using service learning for faculty development and advancement through engaged scholarship, which refers to research emanating from service-learning experiences matching students and community needs.

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.

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