

1993

# Evaluation of an Intergenerational Service-Learning Project for Undergraduates

Robert G. Bringle  
*Purdue University*

John F. Kremer  
*Purdue University*

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## Recommended Citation

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## EVALUATION OF AN INTERGENERATIONAL SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECT FOR UNDERGRADUATES

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National Information Center  
for Service Learning  
1954 Buford Ave, Room R290  
St. Paul, MN 55108-6197

Robert G. Bringle  
John F. Kremer  
Purdue University at Indianapolis

*An appropriate objective within a liberal arts approach to education is enhancing students' awareness of attitudes toward their own aging. A combined intervention of intergenerational experience and didactic instruction had a favorable effect on students' attitudes toward older adults in general and on students' view of their own later lives. Additional positive consequences are discussed, and suggestions for running similar curricular components are presented.*

### INTRODUCTION

Interventions to change negative attitudes of college students toward older persons principally have provided information through didactic instruction, provided intergenerational experiences, or used a combination of these two approaches. Interventions that emphasize the positive aspects of aging (e.g., how older persons successfully meet the challenges of aging, how they continue to thrive) would be expected to produce a positive effect on attitudes and stereotypes. Instructional and informational components that have presented predominantly positive information (e.g., Gordon & Hallauer, 1976; Gunter, 1971; Kremer, 1988; Trent, Glass, & Crockett, 1979), predominantly positive intergenerational experiences (e.g., Murphy-Russell, Die, & Walker, 1986; Trent et al., 1979), and combined instruction and intergenerational experiential learning (e.g., Allen, 1981; Gordon & Hallauer, 1976; Murphy-Russell et al., 1986; Trent et al., 1979) have all had positive consequences on college students' attitudes toward older adults.

However, interventions that present positive or mixed information and experiences do not necessarily result in positive change (e.g., Baggett, 1981; Couper, Sheehan, & Thomas, 1991; Gordon & Hallauer,

This research was supported in part by a grant from the National Council on Aging to Robert G. Bringle. We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Patti Renner in data collection. Address correspondence to Robert G. Bringle, Department of Psychology, Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis, 402 North Blackford Street, Indianapolis, IN 46202-3275.

1976). Attitude-discrepant information may fail to produce changes in stereotypes when it triggers a review of past evidence that originally supported the stereotype, a dismissal of the discrepant information as idiosyncratic, or a renewed confirmation of the stereotype (e.g., O'Sullivan & Durso, 1984).

Furthermore, interventions that provide negative information in a course (e.g., descriptions of physical changes, discussion of loss of income) or through actual contact with older persons (e.g., visiting frail older persons in a hospital or nursing home) would also be expected to confirm stereotypes and perpetuate or intensify negative attitudes. Kremer (1988) varied the qualitative nature of information about older persons and found that negative financial information had no effect on the mildly negative attitudes of college students toward older adults. However, when negative information was followed by an overview of facts about aging, attitudes toward older adults improved.

Thus, didactic instruction and instruction combined with experiential learning have produced consistently positive effects on college students' attitudes toward older persons. Providing only experiential learning has produced mixed effects on attitudes, and providing only negative information has had no effect on negative attitudes.

### Evaluating the Outcomes of Interventions

Peterson and Wendt (1990) outline a paradigm for gerontology instruction that examines how the knowledge base on aging (procedures, facts, concepts, and principles) interacts with different instructional orientations (liberal arts education, scientific gerontology, and professional gerontology) to produce three models of gerontology instruction (liberal arts model, professional model, and scientific model). According to Peterson and Wendt (1990), the liberal arts model of gerontology instruction has the goal of conveying "a global understanding of aging, basic vocabulary, and *awareness of the aging process in themselves* [italics added] and members of their family" (p. 362). This view emphasizes that, in addition to general attitudes toward aging (which has been the modal-dependent variable in past research), an equally interesting and important educational objective of intervention is students' attitudes toward their own aging.

Kremer (1988) demonstrated the importance of differentiating attitudes toward aging and older persons in general and attitudes toward one's own future life as an older adult. In that study, although providing positive and negative information to students had an ameliorative effect on negative attitudes toward older adults, it had little effect on attitudes toward one's own future life as an older person. In contrast,

providing only negative financial information about aging significantly lowered optimistic attitudes toward one's own future life as an older person.

### Current Study

The current research evaluated an intervention that coupled didactic instruction with intergenerational experiential learning. The project provided both positive and negative information and experiences concerning aging and older adults. In addition, the research examined objectives consistent with Peterson and Wendt's (1990) liberal arts model of gerontology instruction by evaluating the effects of the intervention on the attitudes of young adults toward several aspects of aging, including their attitudes toward their own aging.

## METHOD

### Overview of the Groups

The following three groups of students were studied: (1) Students in the Intergenerational Service-Learning Program who received training and instruction and made weekly visits during an 8-week period (IGSL group). Student visitation involved accompanying a participant in the Senior Companion Program who was currently visiting a homebound older person. (2) Students who were enrolled in a Seminar on Adulthood and Aging (SAA group), for which a course requirement was that students meet at least twice with an older person for at least 3 hours at each visit. (3) Students who were enrolled in an upper-level social psychology class and who were not exposed to course content on aging, training, or visitation experiences (comparison group).

### Student Participants

Student participants for the IGSL group were solicited through upper-level psychology courses and through an article in the school newspaper. Fourteen students started and completed the Intergenerational Service-Learning Program.\* Of these 14 students, 12 were women and

\*Twenty-two students began training for the program. Of these, two dropped out for personal reasons and three selected themselves out because they were not available during the weekdays for visitation. Seventeen students were matched with senior companions following completion of the training. Of these, one student dropped out for personal reasons and two others were unable to be matched because of conflicts with course schedules.

2 were men. The range of ages was from 20 to 50; the average age was 31. Eight students were majoring in psychology, 2 each in social work and allied health, and 1 each in business and forensic studies.

Ten students were part of the Seminar on Adulthood and Aging, and 20 students completed questionnaires in the upper-level social psychology class.

### **Nature of the Course and Visitation of the IGSL and SAA Groups**

Students in the IGSL group received training through one of two modes: (1) Students could attend morning and afternoon training sessions that were being provided to new senior companions. This training dealt with communication skills, community resources, and an introduction to the Senior Companion Program. Although none of the students worked with these particular senior companions during the subsequent project activities, these training sessions provided their own intergenerational experiences. The staff of the Senior Companion Program provided this training. Fourteen students attended at least one of these sessions. (2) Training was available to students as part of the Seminar on Adulthood and Aging. Four 1-hour sessions dealt with similar issues (communications, resources, and the Senior Companion Program). Two films were used in these training sessions with students: *Power of Listening* and *Portrait of Grandpa Doc*. Students also viewed a slide presentation on vision and hearing changes that occur with aging. Some students attended both types of training. Students participating in the IGSL group were given the opportunity to enroll in the seminar. Four students took the course. All but one student participated in one of the two types of training.

Students in the SAA group took the course, including the four sessions described above. In addition, these students were required to visit with an older person twice for 3 hours.

### **Supervision**

Because it was so important to the success of the project and may be of benefit to others considering similar intergenerational projects, a brief summary of the program's administration is provided. During the 8-week period of visitation students were required to mail weekly reports (even if a visit was not made). These reports provided summaries of activities, high points, problems encountered, things to be done in between visits, and ratings of visits. These reports proved invaluable as a mechanism for the project staff to stay in touch with the students

and their activities. It also allowed the staff to respond quickly to any interpersonal or programmatic problems that surfaced.

Six weeks into the program and 2 weeks prior to completion, two additional training/debriefing sessions were held. Students verbally described the senior companions and clients with whom they had been associated, the relationships that had developed, and the impact of the program on themselves. Most of the students had a sense of fulfillment and completion about the program and enjoyed talking about the experience. Three of the 14 students had unresolved issues with which they needed help. Issues related to saying good-bye were discussed during the last session.

To mark the end of the project, the students had a party for the senior companions with whom they worked. Students and companions expressed their enthusiasm for the program and the benefits that they received.

### **Evaluation Measures**

In order to measure attitudes, semantic differential scales were used. Thirteen bipolar scales (e.g., awful-nice, powerful-powerless, familiar-unfamiliar) were paired with the following concepts: nursing homes for the elderly, the elderly, home support services for the elderly, you at age 25, and you at age 70. A second section of the questionnaire asked participants to evaluate changes for others their age and themselves between their current age and when they are 65. The 21 items included a variety of content domains (e.g., happiness, financial security, participation in family affairs, and ability to learn). An overall score was obtained by summing across these items. Finally, Palmore's (1977) Facts on Aging Quiz (with Miller-Dodder revisions) was given. These questionnaires were given to all three groups at the beginning and end of the project.

## **RESULTS**

### **Overview of Analyses**

To determine how attitudes were affected by the experience of training and visitation, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), which controlled for initial group differences, was used. Because of the small number of participants in the IGSL and SAA groups, these two groups were combined. This is defensible because both groups received training on aging and participated in visitation, although the emphasis in the two groups was somewhat different. The assumption that the two groups

could be pooled was also supported by the finding that when an ANCOVA was conducted comparing the IGSL group to the SAA group there were no differences on any of the dependent variables at the conclusion of the project when their scores at the beginning of the project were used as the covariate.

### Evaluation of Student Outcomes

No significant differences were found between the IGSL and SAA groups and the comparison group on their attitudes toward "nursing homes," "social support systems for elderly persons," and "you at age 25." There was a significant difference between the two intervention groups and the comparison group on "elderly,"  $F(1, 37) = 5.41, p < .05$ . The means indicated a more positive attitude toward "elderly" among those students exposed to the training and visitation ( $M = 63.3$ ) than in the comparison group ( $M = 56.5$ ), after controlling for initial differences in attitudes.

There was a significant main effect for "you at age 70,"  $F(1, 35) = 5.00, p < .05$ . Again, the means indicated a more positive attitude for respondents in the intervention groups ( $M = 65.6$ ) than the comparison group ( $M = 60.9$ ).

The ANCOVA also indicated that students in the training and visitation groups expected more out of various aspects of their lives (e.g., happiness, health, family affairs, sports, and friends) at age 65 ( $M = 71.42$ ) than did students in the comparison group ( $M = 60.58$ ),  $F(1, 35) = 8.53, p < .05$ .

After correcting for initial differences, there was no difference between the intervention groups and the comparison group on knowledge of aging.

### Evaluation of Senior Companion and Elderly Client Outcomes

In addition to student outcomes, it was equally important to evaluate the impact of the service-learning project on the senior companions and clients associated with the project. A telephone interview asked these persons to characterize their impressions. In general, their reactions were overwhelmingly positive. Both groups described the visits that included the students as being "relaxed," "close," "satisfying," "valuable," "active," and "comfortable." Virtually all of the senior companions and clients characterized the students as being "pleasant," "strong," "active," and "cooperative." Eighty-five percent of the senior companions reported the students as being helpful during visits in suggesting

community resources that might be available to the client. None of the senior companions and only one of the clients felt that the students' attitudes or values presented a frequent problem during the visits. With the exception of one client, all of the senior companions and clients felt that the students' presence did not significantly disrupt the companion-client relationship. And, 90% of those responding indicated that they "might be interested" or "would definitely be interested" in having another student participant accompany them in the future.

From the students' perspective, the primary purpose of the project was educational. From the clients' point of view, the primary purpose was to provide intergenerational social support. Because of the relatively short time period during which the students had contact with the older clients, it was unlikely that acute health needs for which the students could provide immediate help would surface. In addition, although the clients had chronic needs of various types, they are persons who have immense experience in coping with their needs. Therefore, from a service perspective, there were only isolated instances in which students helped solve a particular medical or social problem. However, because the students were familiar with the clients and their environment, they were sensitive to the various social and medical needs. Weekly reports indicated that students would discuss these problems with the client (e.g., a wheelchair that was too small, failing eyesight, the need for a hearing aid, back pain, or applying for Medicaid), follow up the discussion on subsequent visits to determine what the client had been able to accomplish, provide social support to the client for attempting to solve the problem, encourage the client's efforts, and, on occasion, make contact with an agency to obtain the needed help (e.g., attempts were made to obtain needed nursing services).

### DISCUSSION

Peterson and Wendt (1990) illustrate how gerontology instruction can be tailored to meet different students' needs. One goal of instruction ignored in most research on changing attitudes toward older persons is students' attitudes toward their own aging, an objective consistent with Peterson and Wendt's liberal arts model of education. The current research found that experiential and didactic instruction that presented a mixed view of the positive and negative aspects of aging and the lives of older persons had an ameliorative effect on some general attitudes toward older persons and on the participants' view of their own later lives.

This finding is important because, in contrast to the reliable positive effects of didactic information on general attitudes toward older adults (e.g., Gordon & Hallauer, 1976; Gunter, 1971; Kremer, 1988; Trent et

al., 1979), Kremer (1988) found that offering positive and negative information through the didactic mode had no effect on students' attitudes toward their own aging. Thus, the opportunity for experiential learning may be critical to enhancing students' attitudes toward their own aging. Furthermore, offering only intergenerational experiences has had mixed effects on general attitudes toward older adults (e.g., Couper et al., 1991; Gordon & Hallauer, 1976; Murphy-Russell et al., 1986; Trent et al., 1979). This suggests that combining some didactic instruction with intergenerational experiences is important to producing reliable positive effects on general attitudes toward older adults.

The formal evaluation, staff impressions, and anecdotal information revealed that there were a number of additional positive student outcomes that resulted from the intergenerational experience. All students expressed repeatedly that they gained a new understanding of older adults and of persons of different racial and cultural heritage (the majority of the students were white, whereas all of the senior companions and clients were black). Students who were jointly taking the Seminar on Adulthood and Aging indicated that the academic classroom material came "alive" as a result of their participation. It was our impression that attitudes and values were more significantly affected by this program than by traditional classroom material alone. It is clear from the evaluations that the students' perceptions of their own life course and aging were influenced.

Furthermore, several students strongly expressed the importance of taking a course in adulthood and aging along with the visitation experience, and some students who were not taking the course indicated that they wished that they had. On the other hand, students rarely indicated on the weekly summary reports that they had inadequate knowledge about the developmental processes of adulthood and aging.

As additional evidence of the program's impact, several students indicated that the experiential component influenced their choice of a career. One student had planned previously to be a social worker and after this project decided to focus his career plans further by working with older adults. Two additional students from the IGSL group mentioned they participated in the program for the specific purpose of deciding about a career. This outcome is important because it suggests that the domain of educational objectives can be expanded beyond attitudes to include behavioral intentions (e.g., Couper et al., 1991), career planning, long-term goals, and values.

Although the students did not spontaneously state it, we saw evidence that they were more knowledgeable about community resources and human service systems. This was apparent from the weekly summaries of the students' attempts to fulfill clients' unmet needs.

Finally, an additional benefit of an intergenerational project of this nature is that students were part of a program in which the academic institution successfully worked with the community. This type of cooperation could have secondary benefits to students. Traditionally, colleges and universities have maintained a barrier between themselves and the communities in which they operate. This program was a model for relating academic material and knowledge to real situations that exist in the community. The mutual cooperation that is required between agency and university highlights the need for agency personnel to be flexible and receptive and for university instructors to expand traditional approaches to learning to include well-structured and meaningful experiential components.

From an administrative point of view, the following four items seemed particularly important to the program's success:

1. Because, in our evaluation, the staff of the Senior Companion Program was excellent in the critical areas of cooperation, knowledge, and sensitivity, we recommend that others undertake an intergenerational project only if the climate is similarly favorable.
2. Select a sensitive and capable person (upper-level undergraduate or graduate student) to manage the program. The importance of the visits between the students and older adults requires the attention of a person who has the time and ability to monitor and work with the feelings of the students.
3. Have some mechanism to receive communication weekly from the students. In this program, the mailed weekly summary reports were satisfactory and time efficient.
4. After students are making visits, additional sessions would be helpful at the middle and end to enable students to deal with issues that are important to them. We found that talking in a group did not inhibit the expression of important items.

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## THE READING ABILITIES AND PRACTICES OF OLDER ADULTS

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M. Cecil Smith

Northern Illinois University

*Despite increased attention to understanding reading among adults, the reading processes and activities of older (i.e., elderly) adults remain relatively unknown. There are several existing research needs regarding older adults' reading skills and activities. These include understanding the characteristics of avid older adult readers and how changes in cognitive skills associated with aging affect reading activities. Also, assessment issues related to the development of appropriate measures of adults' reading skills, interests, and attitudes are discussed. Finally, issues regarding the treatment effects of interventions aimed at enhancing the reading activities of older adults are discussed with regard to developing optimal learning environments. This article also discusses why it is important to understand older adults' reading skills, examines recent relevant research, and considers implications for research and practice regarding older adults' reading skills and everyday activities.*

Understanding the reading skills and behaviors of adults has received increased interest, as reflected in recent volumes examining adults' reading and discourse practices (Beach & Hynds, 1991; Yussen & Smith, 1993), memory for text information (Meyer, Young, & Bartlett, 1989), and competence as readers (e.g., Kirsch & Jungeblat, 1986; Pressley, Beard, & Brown, 1990). The research has encompassed several areas of interest and derives from a number of diverse disciplines, such as experimental and educational psychology, adult education, curriculum and instruction, and gerontology, among others.

Despite this increased attention to understanding reading among adults, the reading processes and activities of older (i.e., elderly) adults continues to be relatively unknown (Gentile, Haase, & Robinson, 1985). Robinson and Maring (1976) developed an extensive list describing 16 areas in which research on older adults' reading skills and behaviors had not been conducted. These can be grouped into the following four categories: attitudes and interests, cognitive skills, assessment issues, and effects of interventions.

Over 15 years later, only a few of these topic areas have begun to be adequately addressed. The purposes of this article are to summarize the reasons why it is important to understand the nature of older adults' reading skills and activities and to review examples of the

Address correspondence to Cecil Smith, PhD, Northern Illinois University, College of Education, DeKalb, IL 60115-2854.