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Cindy Brown

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Carolyn Turturro

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Creating Opportunities: Gerontological Service Learning in a Community Practice Project

Cindy Brown

Rosalie Otters

Carolyn Turturro

University of Arkansas at Little Rock

Ten graduate gerontology students volunteered for a service learning project, My Life: Connect with Me, which was developed, supervised and evaluated by a graduate social work intern in a community practice internship. The social work intern trained volunteers in interviewing skills at a continuing care retirement community. Student volunteers' self-reported confidence in interviewing older adults was measured by a questionnaire created by the social work intern, using Likert scaling and short qualitative responses, as well as journaling. All student volunteers reported increases from pre to posttest, and the social work intern successfully completed all community internship competencies (Council on Social Work Education, 2008). The stakeholders have moved toward a broader implementation of this project.

Keywords: gerontology, service learning, life story, interviewing, community practice

Since January 2011 Baby Boomers have started to reach age 65. In fewer than twenty years (2030) almost one in five Americans will be age 65 or older (Vincent & Velkoff, 2010). Research attention needs to be focused on these older adults, who will, on average not only live longer but also have more quality-of-life concerns. The likelihood of health challenges increases with age, especially chronic and terminal diseases as well as other limitations to independence (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). Other concerns for older adults may be losses of family and friends, depleted financial resources and a need for increased socialization and sense of purpose in the midst of change.

Though opportunities are increasing for professionals to work in the aging community, the gap is widening between the increasing number of older adults and the small number of professionals. At least for the near future, too few gerontologists, social workers or other allied professionals have shown the interest, knowledge, or skills for working with older adults (Clark, Golden, Kane, & Rosen, 2010; Hooyman & Unetzer, 2010; Rosowsky, 2004).

Our university social work/gerontology program, in a midsize southern city, has sought to encourage intergenerational learning through service learning projects. Service learning is an excellent way to develop students' interest and abilities for working with older adults, combining not only structured learning through the student learning project, but also valuable service to others in the community (Gutheil & Chernesky, 2006; Hegeman, Horowitz, Tepper, Pillemer, & Schultz, 2002). My Life: Connect with Me is a service learning project developed by a second year student in the masters of social work, management of community practice (MCP) concentration that prepares students for macro level practice. This internship site, a disability program in a medical university, encourages participation in the larger community. Since this project is a collaboration which includes two separate universities, they will be distinguished by University One (social work/gerontology program) and University Two (disability program).

Research Overview

Butler (1963) introduced life review and reminiscence therapy, using older adults' own resources to enrich their life perspectives through developing personal life evaluations for review and possible resolution of past conflicts. Life story study comes out of this interest in understanding one's unique life, both for oneself and for others, also commonly seen in biographies, autobiographies, memoirs and other reflections on individual lives. Possible personal benefits may include a better quality of life through raised self esteem, improved coping skills, increased mental alert

ness, and translation of the life story into care interactions. (Butler, 2011; Haight & Webster, 2002).

The present life stories research project measures the efficacy of a three-hour training session. We are reporting on Stage One, a pilot study with graduate gerontology students interviewing residents about their life stories. The interviewing site is a non-profit continuing care retirement community (CCRC) which includes several levels of care. These residents come from campus cottage living, independent living, and residential care (assisted care).

For Stage One of this pilot study, implemented in Spring 2011, gerontology graduate students were assessed on their confidence in interviewing older adults. Ten graduate gerontology students in a Biology and Psychology of Aging class took part in this project for class credit. There was also an alternative assignment for those not wanting to take this opportunity. Two students also decided to interview other older adults rather than the CCRC residents. Though both graduate student interviewers and older adult interviewees could decide at any time to discontinue the interviews, the project had a 100% retention rate.

The research question asked: Does the life story interview training adequately prepare gerontology students to effectively interview aging residents? Students participated in a three-hour training session on life story interviewing with aging adults. This training included a tour of the CCRC facility, a general interviewing lesson and role play, a guide for My Life: Connect with Me interviews (adapted with permission from The Benevolent Society, 2005), and an introductory visit with a selected older adult. Each student then interviewed their older adult from three to nine times on their own for about forty-five minute visits.

IRB approval had been previously obtained from University One. Student data was de-identified and kept in a locked file separately from the consent forms which had been processed with each student. Student progress was measured by six self-reported ratings of confidence in interviewing older adults (Likert scale, five responses from strongly disagree to strongly agree) as well as a short qualitative question at the end of each pretest/posttest. The social work intern, who was also the IRB primary investigator, administered both the pre and posttests in the gerontology class. In addition, SOAP notes (a brief assessment plan) and a short journaling form were completed after each interview session to monitor student experiences throughout the project; regular class visit follow-ups were also made for verbal progress reports.

Results

Self-reported student confidence in interviewing older adults increased substantially from pre to posttests (Table 1). The group of ten students showed a favorable double digit delta percentage change of average score between pretest and posttest on all six questions. ($\Delta\% = 100(\text{Post-Pre})/\text{Pre}$.) The questions asked: Feeling prepared to conduct an interview with aging adults (18% increase); Confidence in interviewing skills (18% increase); Knowing what to do to calm an upset resident during the interview (26% increase); Knowing what questions to use during an interview (41% increase); Being comfortable interviewing aging adults (18% increase); Feeling less fearful of interviewing aging adults (23% decrease).

Seven students (70%) had never worked directly with older adults. One student felt that the service learning project "prepared them [gerontology students] to work with aging adults and complemented traditional classroom learning." Another student reflected: "I learned that our feelings don't age like our bodies. They can become cooped up, isolated and sad, but they are still sensitive and alive. No matter our age, we are all people and in the end our similarities are much greater than our differences."

At the end of the gerontology class students offered a visual or oral presentation of their older adult's life story. Students shared poster boards, short life theme summaries and even a cook book. Five older adult resident interviewees also attended, coming to the class in the continuing care retirement community van with the CEO of the facility. In addition, another graduate class and professor attended the

class presentation. Residents reported that they enjoyed being interviewed since it made them feel “alive” and “useful.” As one resident commented, “Who doesn’t like to talk about themselves!” Staff and caregivers previously commented that they too had learned more about residents’ life stories, even though some had spent years caring for them. There has been such a positive response to this project that the CCRC is now working with both University One (social work/gerontology program) and the disability program at University Two, to move into Stage Two, training Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) interviewers who work with residents at the skilled nursing care level. The information shared will be used to personalize and improve the quality of care for each resident. Also, the social work intern in community practice has grown in her skill development through this project in her concentration year internship. Her internship project competency goals and outcomes are listed in the Appendix.

Conclusion

This pilot study is an exploratory one with a small convenience sample. As we evaluate this life story project, we find that three outcomes merit further collaboration with stakeholders (the CCRC staff and residents, the social work/gerontology program at University One and the disability program in University Two). First, student interviewees have increased their self-reported confidence in interviewing older adults through service learning. Second, the social work intern has been successful in developing her community practice competencies and has now graduated from the MSW program (May 2011). She continues to maintain her interest in a Stage Two of the project. Third, we have discovered the great desire of both the residents and caregiving staff at the CCRC to be part of a larger community experience. Based on the success of this interviewing intervention, these stakeholders are now developing Stage Two, seeking a training grant.

Each story in the larger community is unique. We are all story tellers and learning about one another’s life story can help us better appreciate not only others but also ourselves. “From one generation to the next, people find meaning and connection within a web of storymaking, storytelling, and storyliving. Through lifestories, human beings help to create the world they live in at the same time that it is creating them.” (McAdams, 1996, p. 148) Community practice development in gerontology requires the ability to both tell stories and understand them. This Stage One report is our story.

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Table 1
My Life: Connect with Me Student Outcomes (N=10)

	Question # 1	Question # 2	Question # 3	Question # 4	Question # 5	Question # 6	Row Total
Pre Test Average	3.9	3.8	3.4	3.2	3.8	(Post) 1.7	19.8
Post Test Average	4.6	4.5	4.3	4.5	4.5	(Pre) 2.2	24.6
Change	0.7	0.7	0.9	1.3	0.7	0.5	4.8
Percent Change	18%	18%	26%	41%	18%	23%	24%

Question 1	I feel prepared to conduct an interview with aging adults.
Question 2	I am confident in my interviewing skills.
Question 3	I know what to do during an interview to calm someone who is upset.
Question 4	I know what questions to use during an interview.
Question 5	I am comfortable interviewing aging adults.
Question 6	I am a little fearful of interviewing aging adults.

APPENDIX: SPRING 2011 GRADUATE MCP STUDENT COMPETENCIES/OUTCOMES*

Advanced Competencies

Masters Social Work, Management and Community Practice (MCP) Track

The following are Advanced Competencies used for Service Learning Project:

- Advanced Competency #1: Identifies as a professional social worker and conducts herself accordingly.
- Advanced Competency #2: Applies social work ethical principles to guide professional practice.
- Advanced Competency #3: Applies critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgments.
- Advanced Competency #4: Engages diversity and difference in practice.
- Advanced Competency #5: Advances human rights and social and economic justice.
- Advanced Competency #6: Engages in research-informed practice and practice informed research.
- Advanced Competency #7: Applies knowledge of human behavior and the social environment
- Advanced Competency #8: Omitted.
- Advanced Competency #9: Responds to contexts that shape practice.
- Advanced Competency #10: Engages, assesses, intervenes, and evaluates with individuals, groups, organizations, and communities.

MCP 1.1 Identifies opportunities for social workers to initiate and guide change

efforts in organizations and communities: Assess current agency programs for aging adults with disabilities and identify a potential long term project to address any gaps by January 21, 2011.

MCP 2.1 Applies ethical decision-making skills to those issues specific to macro-

practice situations and settings: Create confidentiality processes for at risk group (aging adults) and students by January 30, 2011.

MCP 3.1 With client systems, evaluates, selects, and uses appropriate tools for

assessment, intervention, and evaluation: Conduct lit review to inform and design intervention tool (interview training manual, SOAP notes, journal questions, and pre and post tests by January 30, 2011.

<p>MCP 3.1 With client systems, evaluates, selects, and uses appropriate tools for assessment, intervention, and evaluation: Conduct lit review to inform and design intervention tool (interview training manual, SOAP notes, journal questions, and pre and post tests by January 30, 2011).</p>
<p>MCP 3.2 Communicates effectively through multiple mediums with a diverse range of stakeholders, partners, and collaborators: Use the framework of inter-organizational theory to coordinate a service learning project with a diverse interdisciplinary team from three institutions including students and professors from University Two, project directors from University Two; and the director, director of nursing, activities coordinator and chaplain of the Continuing Care Retirement Community.</p>
<p>MCP 4.1. Works with macro level client systems to help them recognize and engage diversity and difference in ways that further organizational missions and community goals: Develop and implement a multigenerational service learning project to teach gerontology students interviewing skills for interviewing aging adults with disabilities and/or dementia (January 6, 2011 – May 19, 2011).</p>
<p>MCP 5.1. Works with macro level client systems to help them recognize and challenge the manifestations of systemic oppression, discrimination, and disempowerment: Develop a pilot program that can be replicated by certified nursing aides to create opportunities for professional development, growth, and empowerment (January 6, 2011 – May 19, 2011).</p>
<p>MCP 6.1. Uses appropriate theories, models, and research methods to support their approaches to initial assessment, intervention, and evaluation: Apply theories, models, and research methods to effectively develop a training program to teach life story and reminiscence therapy interview skills to students for use in a service learning project with aging adults by February 15, 2011.</p>
<p>MCP 6.2. Works with client systems to clarify and deepen program logic models and to incorporate meaningful evaluation in their ongoing activities: Develop pre and post tests to measure the efficacy of the My Story: Connect with Me program by January 30, 2011.</p>
<p>MCP 7.2. Uses theoretical models and frameworks to understand and intervene in organizations and communities: Design an intervention based on life story and reminiscence therapy models for residents in a Continuing Care Retirement Community by January 30, 2011.</p>
<p>MCP 9.1 Helps macro level client systems observe, critically assess, and respond to changes, or need for changes, in the political, economic, social, technological, and cultural systems that affect them: Assist a Continuing Care Retirement Community determine opportunities for change to meet growing needs of disabled aging populations (January 6, 2011 – May 19, 2011).</p>

MCP 10.1 Substantively and affectively prepares for action with individuals, groups, organizations, and communities: Prepare a training class for graduate students to prepare them to intervene with older disabled residents by February 15, 2011.
MCP 10.2 Uses empathic responding and other interpersonal skills: Incorporate empathic responding and interpersonal communication skills into student training and practice these skills during follow up sessions with the students throughout the project (January 6, 2011 – May 19, 2011).
MCP 10.3 Develops with one's client systems a mutually agreed-on focus of work and desired outcomes: Develop and clarify project objectives with participants in the life stories project including University One Social Work/Gerontology Program and University Two Disability Program (where student interns), and the Continuing Care Retirement Community by January 30, 2011.
Assessment:
MCP 10.4. Collects, organizes, and interprets client-system data: Collect, organize, and interpret evaluation pre and post test data for student service learning project (January 6, 2011 – May 19, 2011).
MCP 10.5. Assesses client systems' strengths and limitations: Assess students' current experience and confidence levels in working with older adults and address gaps in training by February 15, 2011.
MCP 10.6. Develops clear and mutually agreed-on goals and objectives of interventions: Submit request to internal review board including research project goals, objectives, and interventions by January 21, 2011.
MCP 10.7. Selects appropriate intervention strategies: Research literature to determine appropriate intervention strategy for life stories project and document in weekly journal by March 31, 2011.
Intervention:
MCP 10.8. Initiates actions to achieve group, organizational, and community goals, helping client systems to resolve problems and capitalize on opportunities: Initiate meeting with people from University One Social Work/Gerontology Program and University Two Disability Program who are interested in developing an intervention program based on person-centered care and document in weekly journal by February 15, 2011.
MCP 10.9. Increases client systems' own capacities to accomplish their goals: Develop a service learning activity that is sustainable over the long term to compliment classroom learning in the University One Gerontology Program (January 6, 2011 – May 19, 2011).
Evaluates:
MCP 10.10. Critically analyzes, monitors, and evaluates one's own practice interventions: Regularly monitor and evaluate the progress and impact of the service learning project including the training for students and the quality of student interaction with residents (January 6, 2011 – May 19, 2011).

MCP 10.11. Critically analyzes, monitors, and evaluates the effectiveness of social welfare programs: Complete data collection and evaluation of student learning project from pre and posttest results and from qualitative interviews by May 19, 2011.

MCP 10.12. Applies the findings of evaluation to make modifications in their own behaviors and choices, and in program design and implementation: Improve study design based on feedback from students and residents to be incorporated into step two of the project by May 19, 2011.

* Council on Social Work Education (2008). Educational policy and accreditation standards. Retrieved from <http://www.cswe.org/Accreditation/2008EPAS>

Cindy Brown is working towards a Masters in Gerontology, applying her skills from both a successful business career with Xerox and the competencies learned in a community practice MSW program to design and implement an ongoing service learning project with a continuing care retirement community.

Dr. Otters teaches in both the first year MSW social work program and the gerontology program (Graduate Certificate and MA). Social work courses: Foundations I (Individuals) and II (families and groups). Social work and gerontology courses: Aging and Social Policy I (Social Security and Retirement), Aging and Social Policy II (Medicare/Medicaid), Social and Emotional Implications of Illness and Disability, and Social Aspects of Death and Dying.

Dr. Carolyn Turturro is the coordinator of the Graduate Gerontology Program which offers a Graduate Certificate in Gerontology and a Master of Arts in Gerontology. The interdisciplinary program is housed in the School of Social Work. Dr. Turturro teaches coursework in the gerontology and graduate and undergraduate social work programs. Courses taught include Research Methods, Statistics, Evaluation Research, Biology & Psychology of Aging.