

# **Intergenerational Learning through Service with the Elderly**

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## **Abstract**

Meaningful opportunities abound when university students and older adults are linked in carefully designed intergenerational service learning programmes. An example of such is a co-curricular course named “Intergenerational learning through service with the elderly”, which is a collaborative effort between a university academic, the student services officer and three community elderly centres. By integrating intergenerational service learning into the course, students were provided with an opportunity to link cognitive and experiential knowledge in a meaningful way, and elders with an opportunity to interact and learn from the younger generation, resulting in relationships that are mutually beneficial.

## **Keywords**

Intergenerational learning, service learning, elderly, co-curricular curriculum, community service

## **The intergenerational service learning course**

This paper shares the experience of the implementation of intergenerational service learning in the undergraduate curriculum of the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIED), a government-funded higher education institution dedicated to the advancement of teaching and learning, through a diverse offering of academic and research programmes on teacher education and complementary social sciences and humanities disciplines.

A new course, Intergenerational Learning through Service with the Elderly, was implemented during the first semester 2011 as a pilot of the HKIED's co-curricular course offerings, which aim at providing opportunities for links between cognitive and experiential knowledge in a meaningful way. One important feature of the co-curricular curriculum is undergraduate students' active engagement in serving the community through involvement in service learning projects or activities that address community needs.

As one of the co-curricular courses piloted in the 2011-2012 academic year, the course in question was developed to involve the sharing of skills, knowledge, and experience between old and young to result in relationships that are mutually beneficial, highly interactive, and on-going. It is through service learning that first-year undergraduate students engage in activities that address human and community needs, together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Service learning is regarded as a method whereby students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in, and meets the needs of, communities (Jacoby 1996:5).

In the course, students first received three 3-hour lectures on the theoretical concepts of elder learning, including pedagogy, reasons and needs for elders to engage in late-life learning. This was followed by 54 contact hours of community service in elderly community centres where they engage in teaching and learning activities or courses that involved the participation of elders. Through the coordination of the Student Affairs Office and the elderly community centre staff as Field Instructors, our students were arranged to teach a small group of elders on a topic or subject that they have knowledge about and was needed by the elders in the community centre. Examples included teaching the elders computer usage, basic English/Putonghua communication, health-promoting physical exercise, dancing, singing, pop and youth culture, etc.

For assessment, students were required to develop and present an individual Teaching

Portfolio about the learning activity/course that they had provided for the elders. Contents of the portfolio included the course planning process through needs identification and assessment, the course outline, objectives and content, lesson plans and, most importantly, their reflections on the development and teaching of the course as they responded and reacted to the needs and interests of the elders.

As a pilot-run of the co-curricular initiative, the intergenerational service learning course requires an evaluative component which includes the feedback and experience of young undergraduate students in the provision of service to the elderly, as well as the response and reactions of the elderly to the service rendered by the younger generation. The purpose of the evaluation is to make sure that intergenerational learning is taking place and is resulted to fulfill the primary objective of integrating service with learning. A report on the evaluative findings and feedback was presented in this paper to conclude the experience of piloting this course as a way to promote mutual understanding between the younger and older generations, as well as to establish the links between academic study and the practical experience of community service.

### **Evaluation of outcomes**

I assessed the impact of the intergenerational service experience on both the students and the elders by way of two different questionnaires for the two groups to complete separately towards the end of the service period. All 22 students enrolled in the course completed and returned the questionnaire, resulting in a hundred percent participation rate. With respect to the elders, a total of 25 completed questionnaires were collected and eventually processed for data input and analysis. It is not quite possible to calculate the return rate for the elders group because they participated in the service or activity organized by the students at the community centre on a voluntary basis. Attendance was not compulsory and they could just come and go subject to their personal circumstances and interests.

The evaluative findings revealed several themes that offer useful feedback for course review and future planning.

### Feedback from the elderly

- Overall, elders reported a particularly high level of satisfaction with the intergenerational encounter. Most felt that the greatest reward they received from the experience was the relationship they established with the students. The majority expressed gratitude for being involved in the project and requested to participate in it again in future.
- Elders were keen to learn as they believed that learning can help broaden horizons,

become more knowledgeable in an area/subject of interest, and stay connected with people and the world around them.

- Elders were very satisfied with the service rendered by the students. They rated most highly the usefulness, enjoyment, learning motivation, and the learning outcomes of the course or activity organized by the students for them.
- They also commended highly the students' teaching quality and effectiveness, which have increased their interest and understanding of the subject matter.
- They generally believed that intergenerational learning has been achieved with the course/activity designed to suit their level and interest.
- However, they were less positive about the length of the activity/course and not sure if it has achieved its aims and objectives.
- When prompted to give additional qualitative comments on the service provided by the students, many of them said they wanted more and longer lessons, better facilities, especially in the case of computer workshops.

#### Feedback from the students

- Students were very positive about their service experience. They felt that their lives and learning were enriched because of the time they spent with the elders.
- Students rated most highly those statements related to the relationship-based benefits (Loewen 1996), which were the results of their interactions with the elderly, learning from the elderly, and a better understanding of them, including the way they learn.
- Students also reported positive curriculum-based benefits (Loewen 1996) although to a lesser extent.
- They thought the aims and objectives of the course were achieved as their service was considered useful to the elderly.
- The direct contact with elders has helped make the material covered in class more concrete and relevant for the students. They became more aware of the learning needs and styles of the elderly and more sensitive to the diversity of older people's experiences when teaching or interacting with them.
- In their qualitative comments, many students thought the best part of their service experience was the part interacting with the elderly.

*"When they shared their experiences, I have learned a lot from them."*

*"I have enjoyed knowing the elderly and making friends with them."*

*"The elderly are just like family to me. I have come to know and understand them better after doing the service."*

*"I am glad to see so much enthusiasm and liveliness in the elders when they are taking part in the activities we organized for them."*

*“I have enjoyed playing games with the elderly and taking them out to an outing.”*

- Students further reported the curriculum-based benefits in their qualitative comments:

*“Their active participation has helped to boost my confidence in teaching.”*

*“The elders are learning fast and doing well during the computer lessons I organized for them.”*

*“I know the aims and objectives of my course were achieved when I saw improvements in them, especially in the use of ICT.”*

*“Learning is mutual between us and the elderly. As a result, intergenerational learning was achieved.”*

- The second qualitative question was about the worst part of their service experience. The majority of the comments were related to the length of the service period. Many of them thought the service period was too short and that they have found time management difficult to fit in the service commitment with their very busy class timetable.
- They also reported that facilities and support from the elderly community centres were inadequate to support effective teaching and learning.
- A few students experienced anxiety about teaching elders for the first time. They worried that elders did not understand or feel interested in their teaching.

### **Conclusion and implications**

- The findings from the quantitative and qualitative data provide evidence that participating in service learning experiences has been beneficial to both the students and the elders involved.
- Both students and elders reported benefits that were relationship-based. All of them have enjoyed the interactions and learned from each other, resulting in intergenerational learning.
- Students also reported curriculum-based benefits, including the integration of academic content with real-life service experience.
- For future improvements both elders and students suggested extending the service period to build in more flexibility for scheduling and deeper learning.
- Facilities and support from the community centres need to be beefed up so as to make it more conducive to effective teaching and learning for both the elders and students.
- To enhance the curriculum-based benefits for students, we need to help students

integrate more the academic content with their service experience.

- By having a few lectures at the beginning of the course before the service period is not sufficient to equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge in teaching elders and interacting with them.
- Particular effort should be given to providing an orientation session for students before they start their service work.
- It is also desirable to bring them back in the middle of the service period for one class session to help dispel fears related to working in social service organizations and with older adults.

Through the pilot run of the course for one semester in an academic year, we observed that students and the elders were learning collaboratively and happily together, resulting in intergenerational learning. In conclusion, intergenerational service learning is proven to be an effective way to engage the young and old generations in an experience that is mutually beneficial to all involved.

## **References**

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