Intergenerational Connections Through Book Discussion Groups

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ABSTRACT. Learning about intergenerational programming prepares health care professionals to be more competent and compassionate in working with a changing society. A unique teaching approach using intergenerational book discussion groups helps students learn about elders and provides a mutually beneficial experience. Assumptions, myths and biases held by each generation are often dispelled. Values and beliefs are clarified as members from differing generations learn about similarities and honor differences. The assignment becomes more than a technical learning situation and becomes one where friendships evolve and a deep respect for others develops. This article discusses how to plan and implement an intergenerational book discussion group for application within a variety of settings.

KEYWORDS. Intergenerational programming, book discussion group, relationships
Planned intergenerational book discussion groups can bridge boundaries between the young and old. Societal changes such as increased job mobility and the fragmentation of many families (Creating Intergenerational Coalitions, 1995) have resulted in a disintegration of regular intergenerational connections. Implications of these societal changes are segregation of age cohorts and stereotyping of the different generations (Archstone Foundation, 1999). These trends suggest new program opportunities.

Intergenerational book discussion groups in community settings are unique programs that address trends for cross-generational experiences. This paper discusses how to organize a successful intergenerational book discussion group as an educational method.

**INTERGENERATIONAL BOOK DISCUSSION GROUPS**

Intergenerational book discussion groups were inspired by programs that began in the 1960s, such as the Foster Grandparent Program (McGuire & Hawkins, 1998). Since then there have been several large initiatives for intergenerational programming from universities and aging coalitions (McGuire & Hawkins, 1998). In recent years, intergenerational activities have moved into the health science arena.

Health science educators recognize the benefit of providing students meaningful contact with the elder population. For health science students, such contact with elders is beneficial in their professional development because they may be working with elders in their future practice (Goldstein, Vasquez, Runyon, Lohman, & Gabriel, 1991). Examples include programs with animal assisted therapy (Lapp, 1991), interaction with elders in long-term care facilities (Pine, 1997) and a variety of intergenerational course activities with occupational therapy students and elders (Goldstein, Vasquez, Runyon, Lohman, & Gabriel, 1991).

Intergenerational programs are of mutual benefit to both students and elders. Such activities help dispel myths or ageist attitudes (Adelman, Hainer, Butler, & Chalmers, 1988; Pine, 1997), and provide “opportunities to transfer culture, knowledge, skills, and values to the next generation” (Dychtwald, 1999, p. 224). Enrichment specifically from book discussions are evident. Participants in book discussion groups often discover their own questions, concerns and feelings through explaining and comparing positions (Fogler, 1989; Sholley, 1986). Participants also use their personal experiences and perceptions to enhance self-understanding (Lapp, 1991; Nichols & Monard, 2001; Pine, 1997; Unger,
Book discussion groups help to develop rapport, facilitate relationships with elders, and increase mutual learning between the generations (Lohman, Griffiths, Coppard & Cota, 2003).

**Inspiration for Book Discussion Groups**

An instructor of a geriatrics course for occupational therapy students who enrolled in an entry-level professional doctoral program at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, developed the idea for book discussion groups from a needs assessment of elders at an independent living facility. Elders expressed the desire to have such groups. The instructor suggested that the groups be intergenerational.

**LOGISTICS OF BOOK DISCUSSION GROUPS**

**Selecting Participants**

Initially, elders from three assisted living and independent living facilities were invited by the course instructor to participate in the book discussion groups. The recreational therapists and activity directors who knew the residents helped identify participants. The criteria for recruitment of the residents included: (a) adequate cognition to participate in book discussions, (b) interest in interacting with young people, (c) verbal ability and (d) a desire for intellectual stimulation (Personal communication, Linda Cota, February 17, 2003). Some elders were reluctant to volunteer because of physical concerns. Therefore, it was important for the student leaders to enhance participation for all interested elders by making appropriate adaptations.

Sixty occupational therapy students participated in the book discussion groups. Each discussion group consisted of approximately four elders and four students. The number of total participants in each book discussion group was kept below 10 to facilitate richer discussions. Prior to the first session, the instructor randomly assigned students to groups. The activity director assigned elders who worked well together to the same group.

**Reading Selection**

The selected readings focused on the objective of enhancing intergenerational understanding. The readings included chapters from *Age
Wave (Dychtwald, 1990), Age Power (Dychtwald, 1999), New Passages (Sheehy, 1995), and Generations Apart (Thau & Heflin, 1997). The instructor selected readings based on the course objectives.

**Group Planning and Facilitation**

Once objectives were established, the participants were oriented on how to lead groups more effectively. An introductory ice-breaker session was used to build rapport and to prepare participants for the upcoming book discussion groups. This ice-breaker session created an atmosphere for sharing.

Student group leaders were provided with a packet that included suggestions to help organize the book discussion. In examining how book discussion groups were implemented in previous courses, different issues related to facilitating book discussion groups were identified. The students problem-solved issues pertaining to leading groups. For example, some students expressed difficulties in asserting themselves with dominating group members during the groups. Students then generated ideas on how to redirect dominating group members so that all participants had a chance to speak. The instructor and students brainstormed graceful methods to keep the discussions on track.

Having well-organized expectations helped the groups run smoothly. Students were responsible for the group set-up and activities to accompany the book discussion topics. Students assumed the responsibility for calling elder participants to remind them about the groups. The course instructor distributed the readings to the elders one month prior to the group. Student group leaders developed discussion questions and distributed these to the elders and student group members.

Each group started with an activity. For example, participants were asked to bring a meaningful object or picture to the group to discuss meaning and related memories. Following each activity, participants responded to book discussion questions. Each session concluded with reflection about the group process.

To increase participation in book discussion groups, preexisting medical conditions of the elders were considered. For example, those who had low vision wore glasses when attending groups. Large-print publications or tape-recorded versions of the readings were provided to those with low vision.

Those elders who were hearing impaired wore their hearing aids when attending group. A microphone during the book discussions was provided so all could hear. Prior to the book discussions, the students were
instructed on ways to better communicate with persons who have hearing impairments.

Some elders fatigued easily. Appropriate seating, including chairs with armrests, was provided to facilitate safe standing and sitting and made the group time more comfortable. Discussions did not last longer than 60 minutes. Elders seemed to tolerate the time better when breaks were provided during the sessions.

The environment was set up to allow elders who used walkers or wheelchairs to safely maneuver in the room. The table dimensions and room size were ample enough to accommodate people with walkers or wheelchairs. Some assistance to elders using mobility aids was required.

The impact of medication side effects on participants was considered. Groups were scheduled in the mornings to avoid times when elders were commonly reported to be drowsy. Water was provided for those who experienced dry mouth from medication effects. Some elders were at risk for falls due to medication side effects. Such side effects included dizziness and changes in blood pressure. Thus, the elders were carefully monitored when walking to and from the book discussion groups.

**Terminating the Book Discussion Groups**

Efforts were made to keep the groups at the same facilities from year to year for the purpose of consistency. Although new students participated each year, many of the elders chose to continue their involvement. At the end of the semester, the participants found it difficult to end the book discussion groups because of the strong relationships that developed. Therefore, students organized a party that facilitated closure. At the party, the students expressed their appreciation to the elder volunteers and the facility personnel and all participants acknowledged the richness of the experience.

**EVALUATION AND OUTCOME**

Evaluation of the book discussion groups included two focus groups: one with the elders and one with the students (Lohman, Griffiths, Coppard & Cota, 2003). The three themes that emerged from the data analysis included: (a) developing rapport and relational links, (b) expanding perspective (learning), and (c) suggestions for improvement. As a result of the book discussion groups, students and elders developed relation-
ships with each other through sharing stories, asking questions, and discuss- ing readings. Reciprocal learning resulted among students and elders. Discussions changed or affirmed their beliefs about each other. All the participants learned from one another’s values, experiences, beliefs, interests and roles.

**DISCUSSION**

*Application of Intergenerational Book Discussions*

Although the intergenerational group was implemented with occupational therapy students and elders, this idea could be generalized to many other types of groups such as younger students or high school service clubs. The younger participants do not necessarily need to be students in the health sciences. The key for a successful group is appropriate organization, facility support (if held at an institution), interested participants, and willingness to make adaptations for aging changes to allow for optimal participation.

In addition to assisted living and independent living facilities, intergenerational book discussion groups could take place in a variety of community facilities that service elders, such as churches and adult day care facilities. Mobile community-dwelling elders could go to facilities where younger generations are located, such as schools, libraries, bookstores and coffee houses.

Readings and discussion topics may vary according to intended objectives. Examples of additional ideas for group topics include: public policies and aging, community accessibility issues, comparison and contrasts of values and roles, grandparenting roles, cultural issues, generational myths, aging gender issues and aging trends. Bookstore owners and librarians are great resources for pointing out appropriate book titles.

Although the occupational therapy students completed course work addressing group dynamics, persons who lead book discussion groups should be competent in group facilitation. Instructors utilizing intergenerational book discussions within their courses should prepare students on group leadership, structure, development, and process. One particularly important aspect of group dynamics for this program exemplar is knowing how to effectively terminate the book discussion groups and disengage the elders and students. Both students and elders form strong relationships as a result of the group process.
CONCLUSION

Societal trends suggest a strong need for intergenerational programming. Intergenerational book discussion groups are a unique approach to bridging the generational gap. Learning in this manner is synergistic and powerful. Elders and students enjoy the interaction and stimulation from their shared experiences. Students also gain valuable hands-on skills about working with the older generation as well as group dynamics and group co-leadership. These benefits are convincing reasons for the establishment of intergenerational book discussion groups in many settings.

REFERENCES


Received: 5/10/03
Reviewed: 1/21/04
Accepted: 2/15/04