

Intergenerational dance: Changing perceptions of student teachers through teaching older adults

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Abstract

In Canada, dance activities are often primarily available to a younger population, ranging from preschoolers to professional dancers; there are limited opportunities for older adults to participate in dance classes and for new instructors to experience the difference in working with an older population. Limited information is available on teaching older adults, and young teachers often begin teaching with little knowledge or understanding of this clientele. This paper investigates the benefits to young student teachers who are teaching within a two-year pilot program, funded by the Ontario Ministry of Health (Canada), to provide dance instruction in 10 community centres for older adults, including active seniors, frail seniors, stroke survivors, and those experiencing memory loss.

The research uses qualitative methods (questionnaires for both older adults and student teachers, interviews with student teachers, seniors and community centre staff, and observation of individual classes) to determine the benefits to the student teachers, and to investigate if their perception of seniors changes during the instruction period. Initial observations and dialogue indicate that the student teachers are developing increased sensitivity to individuals through their teaching practice, greater versatility in designing classes for a wide range of levels, increased flexibility in modifying a class in progress, and the ability to adapt core movement concepts to offer instruction to a diverse population. This presentation will concentrate on how the project has changed the perception of student teachers towards older adults, and will make recommendations for teaching an older population that may benefit other young teachers, so that as dance moves into community centres, it meets the needs of all age groups.

Keywords: dance, intergenerational, student teachers, elderly

In Canada, dance activities are often available to a younger population, ranging from preschoolers to professional dancers, and there are few opportunities for older adults to participate in dance classes and for new instructors to experience the difference in working with an older population. Limited information is available on teaching older adults; therefore, young teachers often begin teaching with little knowledge or understanding of this age group, a growing area for teaching opportunities.

This paper reports on the benefits teaching an older generation has on student teachers; it was a part of a two-year pilot program funded by the Ontario Ministry of Health Promotion and Sport (Canada) through their Healthy Communities Fund. The Canadian government is focusing on health prevention to keep older adults out of hospitals and long-term care facilities. The project, spearheaded by April Nakaima and the author, is carried out through the Dance Department at York University in Toronto, using undergraduate students as instructors. This paper concentrates on how the project has changed the perception of student teachers towards older adults, and

makes recommendations for teaching an older population that may benefit young teachers as dance moves into community centres to meet the needs of all ages.

We received notification of the grant in June 2011 and had to move quickly to put the project in place. The student teachers would come from a pedagogy class that did not actually begin meeting until January 2012. We began by contacting community centres mostly in the northwest part of Toronto, an area traditionally underserviced. Many people living there could not afford the cost of classes or transportation, but the grant paid for bus tickets and for healthy snacks after each class. By September, we had identified 10 centres, but as word spread, the numbers grew to 15 by January. Approximately 350 older adults participated in weekly dance classes.

Since the pedagogy course was scheduled for winter term and the “older adult” program began in mid-September, we gave students the option of beginning their practicum early, where they would be closely supervised and guided by April Nakaima, who visited the teaching sites on a regular basis. My role was more focused on providing theoretical and practical knowledge in a classroom setting. Students beginning in the fall were required to attend three classes with me for a short intensive course before they began their placement. During these sessions, students were given basic information about working with older adults. They were encouraged to do a substantial and fairly rigorous warm-up to energize the participants at the beginning of the class, and to keep the material simple since many non-dancers have difficulty differentiating between a step with transfer of weight and a touch. They were instructed to avoid running and jumping, as well as activities that required class members to go down to the floor. Exercises could be done sitting on a chair or standing, depending on the participants. The student instructors were also encouraged to include some balance work, since this skill becomes increasingly challenging for older adults.

In January, the remainder of the students enrolled in the pedagogy course began. Usually, this course focuses on teaching ballet, modern, and jazz in a recreational or studio setting. Because the course had an increased focus on older adults (to match the grant), the curriculum was adjusted so that each concept was examined from various viewpoints. For example, students considered how jazz might be taught to teenagers, young children, and older adults.

We have specific goals for the project. Over a two-year time span, we want to determine the short-term benefits that a dance program can have on older adults (55 years and over), with the hope that dance can be offered to more in future. We chose not to focus on long-term benefits at this time, given the short time span of our project. In addition, The Bronx Aging Study, involving subjects 75-85 years of age, has already demonstrated that dancing is the only physical activity associated with a lower risk of dementia (Vergheese, 2003, p. 2508).

We hoped that participants would benefit both physically and mentally from the activities provided. The physical activity was designed to assist older adults in becoming more mobile by increasing their strength, flexibility, endurance, and balance. A key component of the program was helping older adults avoid injuries by giving them greater control over their movement, and by helping them understand safe ways of moving so that they could prevent injuries, especially falls. Each student instructor regularly referred to proper ways of moving and showed participants exercises that could be done at home. The social component was intertwined into the

actual movement activities, with older adults often dancing in a circle to give a sense of community, sometimes with a partner, or creating movement as a group. Most instructors ended their class with a "thank you" activity that promoted community and respect for one another.

Although we gave the student teachers some general information on the needs of older adults and their capabilities and limitations, each student teacher designed their own class based on their own expertise and the perceived needs of the class. This meant that they had to tap into their own creativity to design a class. Some of our undergraduate students already teach in private dance studios, so they were generally able to design a suitable class; however, these placements pushed them to be more flexible in their approach.

April observed as many classes as she could and gently provided guidance and suggestions. The student teachers were encouraged to be sensitive to ethnicity. One class had a large group of Vietnamese participants, including a substantial number of men. Other dominating ethnicities were Korean, Latin American, Caribbean, Sri Lankan, Italian, and Portuguese. Music selection was important. Some instructors invited class members to bring in music that they liked, others chose an eclectic mix, but usually the class began with "upbeat" music that encouraged participants to move.

As previously mentioned, the student teachers were encouraged to do a substantial warm-up that included the torso so that the participants would have a good cardio workout. This component was especially important given that many of the participants were inactive and often arthritic. Some teachers chose to do the opening portion of the class in a circle using a "follow the teacher" model. The older adults preferred this formation. Some instructors did the warm-up seated in chairs and others remained standing. Everyone found this aspect of the class easy to do and it helped energize the class. The balancing sequence was introduced after the cardio warm-up. Most instructors gave a water break after the warm-up because the participants weren't used to moving and needed hydration and a little rest.

Good walking patterns were stressed so that participants could move in all directions with increased mobility. Simple combinations were given using walks, step touch, and the grapevine. For some, even these simple steps were very challenging and took weeks to master while others got them quickly. The class preferred that the instructor face them rather than demonstrating with their back to them. The student teachers quickly learned patience and dug deep for images and explanations that would help the older adults master new steps and combinations.

Most teachers, at our suggestion, introduced some simple ballroom dances, such as the cha-cha and Salsa. We spent one class going over the steps for various Latin dances with the student teachers so that they felt comfortable with this unfamiliar material. A few introduced some improvisational work once the participants became more comfortable moving and gained confidence in their movement skills. Mirroring the instructor, then a partner, and later passing the leadership on to each participant brought out the creativity in each class member and became a highlight of the hour. Classes ended with a good cool-down.

Although most teachers did some sequences that related to developmental patterns, we were not systematic about training the instructors because the course had to accommodate students who

were more focused on studio technique teaching. In the future, we plan to focus more on these important patterns based on the work of Irmgard Barteneff, called “Fundamentals.” Anne Green Gilbert has built on this work to develop sequences that stimulate the brain to develop “Brain Dance,” which involves eight patterns: breathing, tactile touching, core-distal, head-tail, upper-lower, body-side, cross-lateral, and vestibular (2006, p. 34-64). These sequences help us rediscover movement patterns to improve movement efficiency. Instructors, who incorporated some of this work, focused mostly on breathing, touching, use of the upper and lower body, and cross lateral patterns in which the arms and legs cross the centre line of the body.

Once the older adult classes were underway, we began our actual research to determine the benefits of the program to both the student teachers and the older adults. The research uses qualitative methods, including questionnaires for both older adults and student teachers; interviews with student teachers, seniors, and community centre staff; summary papers by the student interviewees; and participant observations of individual classes to determine the benefits to the older adults who took part in the classes.

We submitted an interim report in May 2012 to find out how the project’s objectives were being achieved and what impact the classes were having on both the participants and the student teachers. Pre-survey questionnaires were distributed at the start of classes in the fall; several focus groups with participants and 22 face-to-face interviews with individual participants were conducted toward the end of the first term. Several interviews with staff coordinators were carried out at various times throughout the year. Write-in post-surveys were distributed to participants in most groups after both the first and second terms. Written evaluations were submitted by student teachers upon completion of training. In addition, there was considerable anecdotal evidence as participants shared their thoughts each week.

Based on the post-surveys and interviews, plus anecdotal comments, the program has been very successful. Most older adults participating in the classes have reported feeling more energized, happier, and less bound in their bodies, with increased flexibility and freer movement. Some have reported weight loss and smaller waistlines, lower blood pressure, and improved control of diabetes. Many reported a lifting of depression, sleeping better, and feeling like part of a family. Those with joint pain (due to arthritis and tendinitis) have reported feeling less pain overall.

At best, we had hoped for improved attitudes toward exercise and physical exertion in the first year, and did not expect to see actual health improvements early on in the project; participants started reporting health improvements after only 8-10 weeks. The most surprising result has been the vast majority of participants saying that they feel energized and happy as a result of dancing. The mental health benefits of the project have been tremendously encouraging.

Although the project was designed to service older adults, the student teachers also benefited from their placements in many ways. Some of the students were highly experienced instructors who taught in dance studios in the Toronto area. However, their teaching was often limited to syllabus work that featured constant repetition with very little requirement for thoughtful preparation. The student teachers who decided to do an “older adult placement” found that the experience expanded their vision and understanding of teaching. They had to shape their classes differently, broaden their awareness of musical styles, and develop a more collegial approach.

Several students, who had little or no prior experience, were quite nervous at the beginning of their placement, but April was able to provide substantial support. The main challenge was to simplify material, especially step patterns, since many participants had difficulty differentiating between a full transfer of weight and a step touch. Students needed assistance in selecting suitable music for each individual group depending on the ethnicity of the class.

Once the student teachers had settled into their placements, they had very positive experiences and looked forward to teaching their older adult group. Many gained confidence because class members were always ready to give praise to the student instructor when something went well. However, the older adults could tell when something was not working and would make tactful suggestions. For example, one student teacher began by teaching a tap class, but she and the class soon changed the content because both parties realized there was an insufficient full body workout.

Generally, the student teachers developed patience, an increased sensitivity to individuals, a greater versatility in designing classes for a wide range of levels, an increased flexibility in modifying a class in progress, and the ability to adapt core movement concepts to offer instruction to a diverse population. Because the older adult classes had a wide range of abilities and interests, the instructors were encouraged to design a class that was appropriate to their own group; they had to use their own creativity to make the sessions meaningful, and did not rely on April or me to provide a template. Some began with a gentle massage of the face, hands, and arms to awaken the senses, while others sat on chairs, doing relatively vigorous movement, such as reaching down to the floor, in the opposite direction, above their heads, twisting gently from side to side, and some chose to begin standing in a circle warming up individual body parts.

Most classes then moved to a more intensive cardio workout, either seated or moving through the space. This section usually featured some basic dance steps such as walks, step close, step touch, and even waltz steps. Many of the participants had done some social dance when they were younger, so we gave our student teachers a quick class in the various Latin dances. Everyone enjoyed doing the Salsa, cha-cha, and other social dances. These types of dances were particularly effective because a couple could keep the steps very basic or they could do a more advanced version. When experienced and less experienced dancers were paired, the stronger partner was always incredibly patient in helping their partner. Latin dances were always a time of laughter, giggling, and plenty of hip movement. Bollywood steps and music were very popular with most of the South Asian groups.

After several weeks, most of the instructors gradually introduced a creative component once they felt good rapport with their class. This action seemed to give the older adults increased confidence because they did not have to struggle with steps, and they had an opportunity to express their own creativity. This was another satisfying moment for the student teachers as they saw class members become expressive as they interpreted the music and shared their own movement qualities with other class members.

Although some participants continued to have difficulty learning specific steps, the student instructors were outstanding in adjusting their expectations to meet the needs of the majority of

the participants. They were patient and supportive, and tried to find new ways of clarifying an expectation. They developed the skill to quietly assist those having difficulty learning a combination, while encouraging those with greater skills to work on their presentation (e.g. taking longer strides on walks, using the arms to complement the action, and striving for greater rhythmical clarity). Because the instructors found ways to challenge the more advanced members of the class, they were satisfied with the content and were comfortable with the pace of the class. For them, the camaraderie of the class was sufficient.

Initially, the student teachers were surprised by the very positive attitude of the participants, expecting them to be more dour and resistant to exercise. Some of their perceptions were simply wrong. The majority of participants took the class seriously, with most attending regularly. If the class or an individual made a mistake, the individual normally demonstrated a good sense of humor over the misstep but immediately took steps to improve their execution of the material. Rather than focusing on their limitations, the instructors soon began to see their older students as individuals with unique skills of their own.

After class, the older adults and student teachers had an opportunity to dine together, since each community centre received funding from the grant project to provide healthy snacks for the participants. Several student instructors became quite close to certain older adults – almost a grandparent-grandchild relationship. This link was quite important to student teachers without immediate family, because the older adults were nearly always willing to listen and help problem solve.

At the end of the scheduled sessions, the participants and community centres wanted the dance classes to continue. We notified the centres that they would have to begin paying a salary for a dance instructor, since our student teachers had completed their course. Several student teachers agreed to continue teaching once their community centre found a pocket of funding for them. Most of the student teachers came to realize that it makes sense to learn how to teach all ages and abilities because this approach will make them more marketable. They now realize that teaching older adults can be a fun, satisfying career.

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