Sensitising Undergraduate Students to Positive Attitudes Toward Older Adults

HONG Song-Iee
Department of Social Work, National University of Singapore
Block AS3, Level 4, 3 Arts Link, Singapore 117570

Corresponding Author’s E-mail: swkhs@nus.edu.sg

Keywords: Experiential Learning; Ageing Simulation Game; Technology; Active Learning.

Extended Abstract

Background and Aims of the Study
Given the demographic shift in Singapore due to the rapid growth of the country’s ageing population, it is becoming more critical to ensure a sufficient number of social and health service providers to assist older adults. However, societal ageism has exerted a negative influence on our undergraduate students’ attitudes toward older adults. Such students have often jeopardised the quantity and quality of social work graduates and ultimately professionals within the gerontological practice. As such, it is an imperative that gerontological educators help undergraduate students overcome the negative stigma and misconceptions they might harbour on issues related to ageing. The simulation-related experiential learning technique discussed in this abstract emphasises students’ own experiences in learning about ageing. This simulation technique has led to students showing much higher levels of enthusiasm for and satisfaction with ageing courses that provide experiential learning opportunities (Pacala, Boult & Hepburn, 2006). This study tests whether the ageing simulation-based experiential learning activity is beneficial in increasing students’ interest in working with older adults after graduation, positive attitudes toward older adults, gerontological knowledge, and in decreasing their anxieties towards ageing.

Methods
Sample. The third- or fourth-year social work students who take the elective module “Social Gerontology” were invited to participate in the study. A total of 39 students participated in this study.

Measures. Students’ interest in working with older adults after graduation was measured with a single item (Snyder et al., 2008). The following scales, the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Geriatrics Attitudes Scale and the Ageing Semantic Differential Scale, were used to assess attitudes toward older adults. Gerontological knowledge was measured by the Facts on Aging Quizzes I and II. The anxiety scale was adopted from Lasher and Faulkenrder’s (1993) study on the measurement of ageing anxiety.
**Ageing Simulation Games.** During the activity, the class will break up into teams, with three students (Students A, B, & C) forming one team. Student A within each team will wear the specially designed equipment, and Student B will facilitate Student A to safely experience the games. Student A basically play the role of the older adult. Meanwhile, Student C would record their observations and provide narrative descriptions of Student A’s behaviours through the role-play exercise. The ageing simulation games consisted of three sessions.

**Session I**  
Detailed instructions on the daily situations a typical elderly adult would encounter were given to all teams so that students could have firsthand experience for one hour of older adults’ changes in sight, hearing, touch, dexterity, and grip strength in the classroom.

**Session II**  
Each team went out to a public area (outside of the classroom) in order to experience the changes in mobility and balance through daily activities such as climbing the stairs, walking on the street, crossing the road, going to school canteens, and searching for information in the library, and so on. Student B supervised Student A to ensure Student A’s safety in these settings. Student C would observe and record Student A’s ageing-simulation process for one hour outside of the classroom.

**Session III**  
Students shared their reflections on experiencing the ageing simulation games inside and outside of the classroom and then they had to complete the post-test survey. An assignment was given to students to complete, in which they had to write a short essay while reviewing their records with their fellow team members at home.

**Data Collection.** The four outcomes were measured three times: During Week 1, Week 5, and Week 12 respectively. Approval was also obtained from the NUS Institutional Review Board (NUS-IRB).

**Statistical Analysis Plan.** The paired t-tests were employed to examine statistical differences in outcome measures across three waves.

**Results**  
This study verified that incorporating ageing simulation games in the module “Social Gerontology” was effective at enhancing students’ gerontological knowledge as well as their interest, positive attitudes toward older adults. The module also decreased students’ anxieties on ageing. In particular, the ageing simulation games offered in this module were found to be effective teaching mechanisms for young students to develop their experiential learning on issues related to ageing.

**Implications**  
Given the unprecedented growth in the ageing population and the lack of gerontology education in Singapore, the study demonstrated the effectiveness of gerontology education combined with an innovative experiential learning activity such as ageing simulation games in ensuring that the learning outcomes on gerontology for young students were fulfilled.
Acknowledgement
I would like to thank the Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning, National University of Singapore for their financial support through the Teaching Enhancement Grant.

References
