

Developing Allophilia through Service Learning: A Case Study of Nursing Students at a University's Regional Campus

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Allophilia, the love for others who differ from oneself, developed among students who took service-learning courses working with elders with dementia and/or physical limitations. At the beginning of the course, students expressed negative emotions including apprehension, fear, and dread. While working with the elders, students exhibited all of the components of the allophilia framework: affection, engagement, kinship, comfort, enthusiasm, and creativity. By the end of the course, students communicated positive emotions such as empathy, meaningful, and "life-changing." Moreover, students' self-evaluations showed high levels of learning as a result of the service-learning approach used. This article discusses the course approach, planning, and design. Additionally, the author conveys the evidence of allophilia and its impact on students and their learning. Finally, the article explores potential future research and implications for professional practice in diverse career paths.

Foundationally, caring for all persons is an imperative in many professions, including nursing (Watson, 2009). However, many college students feel intolerance toward others due to such factors as differing race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and age (Alvosed, Long, & Voller, 2009). As a result, educators must incorporate professional values such as caring and compassion into the teaching-learning experience to engender and develop these ideals (Cook & Cullen, 2003). The end result may erase prejudice and stigma while producing professionals who exhibit a genuine love for others: allophilia.

Allophilia literally translates to "love of other" (Pittinsky, 2009; Pittinsky, Bacon, & Gary, 2007; Pittinsky, Rosenthal, & Montoya, 2011). The term "allophilia" goes beyond caring and compassion to include feelings of affection and love. In today's diverse society, allophilia means more than the absence of prejudice or hatred; it indicates a genuine liking for or persons who differ from oneself (outgroups) and includes the behavior that manifests itself as a result (Pittinsky, Rosenthal, & Montoya, 2011). In short,

positive attitudes lead to positive behaviors (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001). Indeed, charitable actions become more evident among people who have positive outlooks toward outgroups than when there is intolerance for the other group; these altruistic actions, elicited as a result of allophilia, extend beyond compassion and are the essence of nursing and many other professions (Pittinsky, Bacon, & Gary, 2007). The end result of developing allophilia may be the realization that we belong to one, large group (Positive prejudice, 2007).

The concept of allophilia can be applied to a variety of outgroups, including older adults and those with cognitive and/or physical limitations. In today's society, ageism is widespread and can negatively influence the health of older adults (Boswell, 2012). Furthermore, stigma exists for those experiencing dementia and cognitive decline (O'Sullivan, Hocking, & Spence, 2014). However, positive experiences with the elder-outgroup may improve attitudes toward this population (Schwartz & Simmons, 2001). Additionally, increased knowledge of aging and higher levels of compassion can be correlated with reduced ageism (Boswell, 2012). Therefore, determining methods to promote the development of allophilia for elders with cognitive or physical limitations may, in turn, promote enhanced relationships, improved health, and heightened quality of life.

In this case study, a class of nursing students began with negative attitudes toward elders, especially those with dementia; however these same students exhibited allophilia for the elders by the end of the semester. During the course, students' attitudes transitioned through the phases outlined by Pittinsky (2009) for the development of allophilia: affection, engagement, kinship, comfort, and enthusiasm. According to Pittinsky (2009), affection often occurs as an outcome of close friendships among people who may be different from one another. Next, learning about the experiences and culture of a group who seems dissimilar to one's own may lead to a higher level of engagement with its members (Pittinsky, 2009). Furthermore, determining common sources of inspiration and belonging can bring about feelings of kinship; a deepening of this kinship to feel at ease with dissimilar group members may result in the component of comfort (Pittinsky, 2009). Last, Pittinsky, et al. (2007) found that enthusiasm occurs when groups bridge different cultures; this enthusiasm results in creativity and energy.

The service-learning course described in this article served as the framework for expanding classroom learning and increasing critical thinking

skills. Additionally, documented benefits to service-learning courses include increased motivation, deepened character assets, and enhanced leadership skills; these benefits are all vital for baccalaureate educated professionals (McDonald & Dominguez, 2015). Finally, the course exposed students to an unfamiliar outgroup: elders with dementia and/or physical limitations.

The Service-Learning Course and Its Impact

In developing a service-learning course for nursing students, I collaborated with community partners who provided residential and nursing services to serve the needs of older adults with dementia. In this instance, nursing course requirements included student planning and leadership of evidence-based activities designed to promote the cognitive, psychosocial, and physical health of the residents. Additionally, each student was paired, one-on-one, with a resident with whom a relationship could be developed during the fifteen week semester. Although all residents were able, with assistive devices, to move from the semi-private rooms to the living area of the locked unit, cognitive and functional abilities differed. Some residents could converse with minor difficulty; a few spoke with word-salad: a jumbling of the words and thoughts, and others were unable to verbalize an entire word.

During each session, students engaged in pre- and post-conferences to discuss and deepen learning. Moreover, reflective journals offered a means of delving into emotions, experiences, the interconnections with didactic learning, and implications for future professional practice.

Beginning Attitudes

On the first day of class, some students expressed fear, intolerance, and a desire to avoid taking the course, stating, "I don't want to be here. I have had bad experiences with people who have dementia. Can I switch to a different course section that doesn't go to a dementia unit?" Moreover, many students expressed fear they would feel depressed in this environment and that the clinical learning experience would be boring. Although I expressed empathy for these fears, students were not permitted to change sections and were expected to complete all course requirements.

Affection and Engagement

Student-led activities provided a vehicle for interacting with the residents while enhancing the elders' cognitive, physical, and psychosocial

well-being. When the students arrived, many of the residents participated in the activities, thereby building mutual affection among the students and elders. These activities included art, music, dance, chair exercises, games, pet therapy, and storytelling. Additionally, individual conversations allowed the students to better understand residents' memories, personalities, and culture, thereby leading to higher levels of engagement with the older adults. When an individual resident was unable to converse, the student offered a quiet presence and the relationship deepened through this therapeutic communication technique. Connections developed and, frequently, students linked the attitudes and experiences of the residents to their own aging loved-ones to better understand the resident. For example, one student remembered his dog's success in working with residents at his grandmother's nursing home and, as a result, frequently brought his dog to interact with the residents in the dementia unit (following organizational protocol). In the end, affection developed quickly, through the student-resident pairings and the weekly immersion of students into the residents' living area. At least one student noted loving this population almost immediately after meeting them.

Kinship and Comfort

These feelings of interconnectedness and belonging created a kinship and deepened the students' affection for their residents. Indeed, by mid-semester, each student referred to the individual as "my" resident. Additionally, although some residents did not recognize close family members, students reported deeply positive feelings when these elders stated that they didn't know the students' name, but knew the student "belonged" to them. By then, the students began to feel completely comfortable with the elders and recognized the feelings of kinship with "their" resident. At this point, the comfort level of the students began transitioning to the next component of allophilia: enthusiasm.

Enthusiasm and Creativity

Students exhibited enthusiasm in a number of ways. First, as nursing students, each noted any changes in the residents' health and functional status. Several students began expressing worry about their resident dying since several had hospice care; these students requested emotional support from faculty, should this transition occur. Next, students planned extra activities and made individual donations to the organization

when they saw the need. For example, two students purchased a set of compact discs (CDs) for the weekly sing-along; they also copied the songbooks provided with the CDs.

In addition to course requirements, when the organization requested that the students lead a staff in-service on communication techniques with memory-impaired persons, the class responded enthusiastically. Students developed a brochure, based on current evidence, for staff members to keep as a reference. One student obtained a donation of a graphic designer-printer who produced the professional quality brochures. Next, the students planned and implemented an interactive in-service event to offer information on best-practices in caring for persons with dementia. Attendees' evaluations of the in-service indicated effectiveness of the instruction.

Near the end of the semester, students expressed distress that the residents would not have the students' presence during the school break. Moreover, students wondered how this lack of interactions would affect the people for whom they now felt fondness and love. Normally, the last day of the class was reserved for conducting student performance evaluations, one-at-a-time, in a conference room that was not on the residential unit. However, when students requested one extra day with "their" people, I agreed to conduct evaluations in a storage closet on the unit so students could spend more time with their elders. On this day, the students and residents worked together to decorate the unit's Christmas tree.

Finally, the students wanted to leave a legacy. Realizing the effectiveness of the pet therapy and reminiscing opportunities that were created via the use of baby dolls, the group approached the University's Student Nurses' Association (SNA) to request funds from a bake sale be utilized to purchase a stuffed animal or baby doll for each resident. The SNA agreed and students shopped, choosing the appropriate gift for each of the elders. The students wrapped the gifts and left them under the tree for Christmas morning. For some residents, this was the only gift received that day. Photos from Christmas morning indicated joy on the residents' faces as they opened the gifts. One of the service learning sites was so impressed that they arranged for the local newspaper to write a story about the connections between students and elders (McBride, 2013).

Measures of Learning

In addition to the service provided, student learning was a critical element in the course design. To this end, students' anonymous course evaluations included a mean score in the category of "student learning" of 3.95 on a 4.0 scale for their perceived learning related to older adults as a result of the experience. Moreover, comments on course evaluations indicated high levels of learning. One student reported that, during a job interview, the interviewer asked about the most meaningful experience of the student's baccalaureate educational period. The student responded that developing a relationship with a memory-impaired elder who desired no conversation, but enjoyed the silent companionship of the student, led to the deepest learning for future practice.

Implications for Future Practice

In the end, the term that best describes the transition in student attitudes from the first day to the last is "allophilia." Students identified learning that everyone has something to offer, even those with dementia, declining cognitive status, or physical limitations. Moreover, the students indicated empathy regarding the high levels of strain family caregivers may experience, resulting in a loved one's move to a residential facility. Additionally, these future nurses commented that people with limitations can often do more than a nurse anticipates and should be allowed maximum independence, based on functional ability. Next, students realized the importance of client advocacy for future practice. Finally, the experience offered an opportunity to practice holistically as evidenced by the reflection that the course truly helped students to look at patients as a whole person and not just their medical history; an older person "was not a collection of age-related changes and pathologies, this person was a being that had emotions, needs, wants, experiences, memories, goals, and hope." These changed attitudes towards elders are likely to translate into improved, holistic client care in the practice setting. For example, one student reflected that the client, "will forever hold a special place in my heart, and I will take her with me as I practice in the future." Ultimately, students summed up the service-learning course as a life changing experience that will always influence future practice.

Future Research

Resulting from the insight into the development of allophilia through service-learning, additional research may offer a direct, quantitative, measure of student learning due to these positive attitudinal changes. Additionally, students' perceptions of how the attitudinal changes took place can lead to a framework for developing service-learning course curricula to intentionally include the steps necessary for the development of allophilia. Moreover, measurement of various aspects of allophilia may illuminate methods, approaches, or populations which lead to the greatest impact on the students. Additionally, future research may broaden the types and numbers of groups served. Although this article focused on nursing courses, students from a variety of college majors or career development pathways can participate in service-learning, thereby broadening the student base and increasing the variety of viewpoints students embrace. Finally, longitudinal studies might offer evidence of the impact of such service-learning courses on students' career trajectories.

Conclusion

In addition to the documented benefits of service learning, academically-structured, community-based experiences offer an opportunity for student exposure to groups of people who differ from themselves. As a result of this type of learning experience, allophilia may develop, beginning with affection and engagement. These initial feelings can lead to kinship, comfort, and, finally, enthusiasm for the population. The development of allophilia has implications for improving relationships and quality of life within our diverse society. Moreover, professionals who exhibit allophilia may enhance their own chosen career path. Regardless of the chosen profession, learning to love and appreciate persons who differ from oneself can lead to improved interactions with colleagues, customers, and other stakeholders. Ultimately, when allophilia engenders enthusiasm and creativity, the profession will advance as a result of the inspired and innovative efforts of those involved.

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Personal Biography

Karen Brown is an Assistant Professor of Nursing at Miami University, Middletown. Prior to becoming a nurse educator, Brown's career included high-risk obstetrical, postpartum, and newborn nursing, outpatient and community women's health, and nursing management. As a nurse educator, Brown's focus is on gerontological nursing. In addition to the faculty role, Brown is working toward a doctoral degree in Gerontology. Brown is interested in studying the impact of service-learning on students as well as on the populations served. In addition, Brown's interests include the impact of the arts and other activities in improving the quality of life of elders and persons with dementia.