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Informal Advocacy as a Way to Deeper Learning of Adult Development and Aging Processes, Part 1

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Abstract

To enhance engagement and deepen learning in undergraduate courses that focus on adult development and aging, two informal advocacy classroom activities were created and surveyed. The surveys were brief empirical assessments of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) activities and contained closed- and open-ended questions. This study investigated a PBL activity that addressed public policy and health care issues encountered by older adults and their families and required students to create a detailed advocacy position supporting either the perspective of college students and young adults, or of a special group of older adults (e.g., cognitively impaired or chronically ill). Results suggested that in comparison to the advocacy perspective of young adults, adopting the advocacy perspective of older adults significantly moderated survey ratings of awareness, insight, and gaining of knowledge, and led to deeper learning.

Comprehension and understanding of subject matter have long been the primary educational goals of undergraduate courses in adult development and aging (cf. Tompkins & Rosen, 2007). One Problem-Based Learning (PBL) teaching strategy suggested to significantly broaden comprehension and deepen understanding is informal advocacy (cf. Beacham & Shambaugh, 2007; Massengale, Childers-McKee, & Benovides, 2014; Spacks, 1996). Conceptually, informal advocacy may be defined as expressing concern and care, or by taking very practical actions to meet the everyday needs of a family member or friend (Bigby, 1997; Petronio, Sargent, Andea, Reganis, & Cichocki, 2004). While lacking the legal authority to act on behalf of a person or group of people as found in formal advocacy, informal advocacy characteristically involves the provision of social support (e.g., social contact, moral support, and practical assistance) as well as the casual backing and

promotion of special interests of an individual or a group. In a practical way, these latter aspects of informal advocacy extend into the undergraduate classroom and may be used as a technique to promote student engagement and broaden learning experience. Indeed, when considering the curricula needs of undergraduate courses that include gerontological topics (e.g., Gilje, Lacey, & Moore, 2007; Kropf, Schneider, & Stahlman, 1993; Tompkins & Rosen, 2007), realizing ways in which students may be effectively engaged in the classroom (e.g., Kivunja, 2015; Trilling & Fadel, 2009) and how awareness and understanding may be enhanced through advocacy (e.g., Asterhan & Schwarz, 2016; Beacham & Shambaugh, 2007; Burant & Rios, 2010; Rios, Trent, & Castaneda, 2004) arise as important pedagogical questions to address. Thus, this research explores how PBL activities incorporating informal advocacy may enhance and deepen learning in

undergraduate courses teaching about adult development and aging.

Informal Advocacy as a Way to Deep Learning

Similar to how problem-solving activities lead students to learn and think in new ways (cf. Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010), informal advocacy may also afford students a path to greater understanding and deeper learning (e.g., Beacham & Shambough, 2007; Berke, Boyd-Soisson, Voorhees, & Reininga, 2010; Massengale et al., 2014). Indeed, as the philosopher Immanuel Kant suggests in *The Critique of Judgment* (1952), understanding may be conceptualized as occurring along a continuum ranging from very narrow to very extensive, and where deeper learning is characterized by the general development of empathic concern, ethical reflection, and advocacy. As Kant proposes, understanding at the most superficial level of thought is characterized by heteronomy of reason and egocentrism. At this level, the student's learning and perspective taking may be characterized as extremely narrow, passive, and self-focused, without consideration or care for other people and their experiences. At deeper levels of thought, however, a detachment from subjective personal conditions is suggested to occur, where the individual addresses and considers topics and issues from a broader, universal perspective. Thus at moderate depths of understanding, a more integrated and expanded learning is reflected in the student's contemplation of different points of view, as well as an inspection of one's position from the standpoint of others. Further yet, at very deep levels, a grasping and weighing of different viewpoints, and a more comprehensive learning is suggested to occur. Leading the student to develop empathic understanding, consider decisions in conjunction with ethical principles, and adopt and espouse a position of advocacy.

This Kantian formulation of graduated levels of understanding while illuminating processes of learning is also reflected in contemporary educational theory. For example, the broader and more active consideration of ideas and concerns that are descriptive of the deeper levels of understanding suggested by Kant (1952) are also characteristic of the emergent insight and awareness proposed in constructivism theory, where the individual's understanding and formation of knowledge is suggested to be constructed from active learning experiences (cf. Bruner, 1996; Fer, 2016; Hung, Jonassen, & Liu, 2008; Grennon Brooks & Brooks, 1999; Windschitl, 2002). Indeed, the various taxonomies of contemporary educational objectives (cf. Bloom, 1956; Fink, 2013; Marzano & Kendall, 2007) posit a hierarchy of learning behaviors, where beyond the basic goals of comprehension and understanding lay the very individually oriented and active learning processes of knowledge synthesis, problem solving and application of solutions. Moreover, Kant's deeper levels of understanding are also described as educational goals in various constructivist-oriented models of teaching and learning (e.g., Entwistle, 1987, 2000, 2007; Fink, 2013). For example as proposed in Entwistle's (2000) pedagogical model, individuals learn at both surface and deep levels. As Entwistle (2000) describes, surface level learning is reproductive in orientation, and characterized by students' disjointed listing of information and imitative descriptions. Whereas deep level learning reflects a dynamic transformation of understanding that is directed by and further established in explanations that are logically argued, based on empirical evidence, and described using personalized conceptualizations. Further, similar to models of course design that aim to provide the most effective and significant learning

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experiences for students (e.g., Biggs & Tang, 2007; Kumar & Refaei, 2013; O'Brien, Millis, & Cohen, 2009; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998), Entwistle (2000, 2007) suggests that teachers may promote students' movement from surface level learning to deep level learning through effective course design that incorporates active learning tasks. Thus, of central importance in helping students advance beyond a superficial level of knowing is the creation of learning tasks that situates the person within collaborative learning contexts that optimally affords pathways to critical reflection, enhanced knowledge construction, skill mastery, and deep learning (cf. Fink, 2013; Huberman, Bitter, Anthony, & O'Day, 2014; Reiser & Tablak, 2014).

An allied constructivist-oriented approach is the backward-design method of Fink (2013). In this method, Fink (2013) proposes that significant and deep learning occurs when students link basic knowledge and problem solving, to personal understandings and the human experiences of caring and learning how to learn. Fink's (2013) approach underscores that significant and deep learning occurs when conceptual knowledge is understood in broader social terms, and when individuals learn about themselves and their interaction with and relation to others. An initial and key concern of this approach is first the identification of the essential objectives that the teacher wants students to learn. Then secondarily, the creation of active learning tasks that progressively aid students in discovering and applying new knowledge to real-world problems. Taken as a whole, the formulation put-forth by Kant (1952) and contemporary constructivist-oriented theories of teaching and learning (e.g., Entwistle, 1987, 2000, 2007; Entwistle, McCune, & Hounsell, 2002; Fink, 2013) lend insight into processes of transformative and deep learning. The coordination of Kant's levels of

understanding with constructivist-oriented theories also gives rise to the central question that compels this research: How might advocacy, suggested to be a very elaborated and in-depth level of understanding (Kant, 1952), be used in the classroom so as to afford students opportunity to integrate new information with previous understandings see the importance of this new knowledge for themselves and others, and thus lead students to significant and deeper learning?

Research Overview

Embracing constructivism theory (cf. Bruner 1996; Fer 2016; Grennon, Brooks & Grennon 1999; Windschitl, 2002), and seeking transformational and significant learning outcomes (cf. Entwistle 2000, 2007; Fink, 2013), the two survey studies reported below ask how situating students in the role of informal advocates may promote significant and deep learning. The overarching hypothesis set forth across survey investigations is that a Problem-Based Learning (PBL) activity incorporating informal advocacy will moderate student ratings and narrative expressions of learning experience so as to indicate enhanced understanding and deeper learning. Using backward-design techniques (Fink 2013), two PBL cooperative learning activities (cf. Hung et al., 2008; Smith, 2000) were created to immerse students in perspective taking and evaluation of key concerns of older adults as they played the role of informal advocates. The first PBL activity was designed for an Adulthood and Aging course and required students to create and discuss a possible forensic argument that would outline support for a public policy issue or health concern often faced by older adults and their families. The second PBL activity was designed for an Introduction to Human Development course, and required students to discuss and create a public service announcement poster that would teach about an important concern of

older adults. Following both classroom activities, students completed a brief survey containing both closed- and open-ended questions that asked about their learning experience. Survey results were analyzed using parametric and non-parametric procedures. The latter procedure involved a directed content analysis and development of a learning taxonomy based on the theoretical descriptions of shallow- and deep-learning provided by Kant (1952), Entwistle (2000), and Fink (2013). Further description of the investigation hypotheses, methods, PBL activities incorporating informal advocacy, and results of statistical analyses are reported below.

As posited by Fink (2013; see also Entwistle, 2007; Hattie, 2015; Jarvela & Renninger, 2014), effective course design engages students in active learning tasks that lead to significant learning outcomes. Significant learning outcomes include the development of greater foundational knowledge, an integration and application of this new knowledge to other topics and problems, and discovery of the deeper personal and social implications of what is learned. Further, as suggested by Fink (2013), small-group work and discussion is very effective in creating active learning experiences that lead to significant learning outcomes. Indeed, small-group discussion is noted to afford students opportunity to gain mastery, express their individuality, and find connection through their collaboration (Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2014; Millis, 2012; Nash, 1984). Small-group discussion is also recognized as an especially effective method for facilitating a synthesis and integration of knowledge that promotes deep learning (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999; Millis, 2012; Persky & Pollock, 2010; Terenzini, Cabrera, Colbeck, Parente, & Bjorklund, 2001). Further, with concern for informal advocacy as a mechanism to promote significant learning, research suggests that

discussion where advocacy is promoted deepens learning experience (Beacham & Shambaugh, 2007; Massengale et al., 2014). However, the deep learning effects associated with advocacy may vary as a function of student engagement with the topic (Beacham & Shambaugh, 2007) and is suggested to be strongest when the advocacy extends beyond self-concerns and takes into consideration the needs and experiences of others (Berke et al., 2010; Massengale et al., 2014). Thus, following the assumptions of Fink's (2013) backward-design approach, it was hypothesized that in comparison to students' voicing advocacy concerns proximate to their developmental cohort, i.e., college-students and young adults, students advocating for older adults would report increased awareness and deeper understanding of important issues and concerns of older adults.

Methods

This investigation was conducted in an Adulthood and Aging course at a small regional public University in the mid-western United States, and approved by its Institutional Review Board (IRB). Immediately following completion of the learning activity, the opportunity to participate in a brief survey was announced by a research assistant who administered the survey. An informed consent statement was contained within the survey introduction, and indicated that the purpose of the research was to understand the usefulness of the classroom activity in assisting student learning, and that participation was voluntary and anonymous. The consent statement also indicated that no grade or other remuneration would be given for participating and that the individual would give consent to participate by completing the survey and returning it to the survey center.

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Sample

The survey sample was comprised of 68 participants and represented 76% of the students enrolled in the course. Participants were predominantly female (79%) and Caucasian (91%; Asian or Pacific Islander, 3%; Hispanic, 1.5%; and Native American, 1.5%), with a mean age of 22.6 years ($SD = 5.4$; ranged 19 to 52). The Adulthood and Aging course is a requirement for majors in the Human Development Program and an upper-level elective for students majoring in business, education, fine arts, human biology, psychology, and social work. Participants held the undergraduate class-standing of sophomore (13%), junior (55%), senior (30%), and without designation (2%).

Informal Advocacy Activity

This discussion activity accompanied the curricular topic of public policy issues and health concerns encountered by older adults and their families. In the classroom, students were conveniently arranged into small-groups (3-4 students) and randomly assigned an advocacy group to consider during their collaborative discussion. The different advocacy groups assigned included those of college students, young adults, and young adults with mental health challenges (i.e., the advocacy perspective of young adults) as well as the following groups of older adults: cognitively impaired elderly, institutionalized elderly, chronically ill elderly, economically disadvantaged elderly, mentally ill elderly, family caregivers of older adults, administrators of care institutions for the elderly, widowed elderly, healthy elderly, and economically affluent elderly (i.e., the advocacy perspective of older adults). Students were then given open-ended direction to create a persuasive argument in support of their advocacy group that would address an important public policy issue or health concern often faced by younger adults or older adults and their

families. These activity instructions embraced a PBL model of cooperative learning (cf. Hung et al., 2008; Smith, 2000) and a constructivist orientation (e.g., Bruner, 1996; Fer, 2016; Windschitl, 2002), and were intended to promote deep levels of analysis, perspective taking and involvement. Thus, students were directed to consider any particular policy issue or health concern and to use any logical tact in developing their advocacy position. Further, in accord with constructivism theory, participants' formation of persuasive arguments and characterization of young and older advocacy groups were expected to be free-ranging and varied, reflecting each individual's personal and unique background of experience, knowledge structures, interpretations, and understandings. The small-group discussion lasted approximately 40 minutes and was followed by a broader classroom discussion lasting approximately 20 minutes where each advocacy group shared ideas and perspectives.

Survey

The survey was administered at the end of the class by a research assistant. To facilitate responding, the survey was brief and contained both closed- and open-ended questions (e.g., Borrego, Douglas, & Amelink, 2007). The survey items asked empirical questions similar to those items used in other research inquiring into students' classroom learning experience (e.g., Biggs, Kember, & Leung, 2001; Entwistle et al., 2002; Terenzini et al., 2001; VonDras & Lor-Vang, 2004). The first set of closed-ended questions asked: (a) "How much did the informal advocacy discussion increase your insight?", (b) "How much did the informal advocacy discussion lead to new awareness?", (c) "How much did the informal advocacy discussion enhance your understanding?", and (d) "How much did the informal advocacy discussion aid you in

gaining new knowledge?” Response scales for these items ranged from *Not at all* (1) to *Very much* (10).

Another set of questions asked participants to identify the particular advocacy position, and also asked: (a) “How much did holding your particular advocacy position help in realizing important concerns of older adults?”, (b) “How much did holding your particular advocacy position help in finding insights into problems encountered by older adults?”, and (c) “How much did holding your particular advocacy position help in gaining understanding of issues faced by older adults?” Response scales for these later items ranged from *Not at all* (1) to *Very much* (10).

The survey concluded by asking an open-ended question that required brief narrative response. This question asked, “How does learning occur in the advocacy discussion?” Following Berke et al. (2010), participants’ narrative responses were treated as a collective whole so as to provide a description of learning processes and to permit a directed content analysis (cf. Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) assessing depth-of-learning.

Results

Preliminary statistical investigation indicated no effects due to gender, age, ethnicity, or class-standing on assignment to advocacy groups or on any dependent variable measure; thus, these variables were excluded from further analyses. Statistical analyses included One-Way ANOVA tests of mean differences on the closed-ended rating scale measures, content analysis of the narrative responses, and nonparametric analysis of the content analysis data. The One-Way ANOVA procedure treated assignment to either the advocacy perspective of young adults or the advocacy perspective of older adults as the independent

variable, and participants’ closed-ended rating scale measures as dependent variables. Due to missing data (i.e., where no information or response is provided by the participant for a particular survey item), degrees of freedom vary.

The means and standard deviations of the closed-ended rating scale measures for participant’s advocating for young adults ($n = 26$) and participants advocating for older adults ($n = 42$) in the PBL activity are shown in the Table 1. Of particular remark in Table 1 are the One-Way ANOVA results indicating significant mean differences between young and old advocacy groups in rating how the advocacy discussion increased insight, $F(1, 66) = 5.57, p < .02, d = .58$; and in rating how the advocacy discussion aided in gaining new knowledge, $F(1, 67) = 6.51, p < .01, d = .64$. The ANOVA results also indicated mean differences between young and old advocacy groups in rating how these respective advocacy positions helped in realizing the important concerns of older adults, $F(1, 66) = 4.61, p < .04, d = .52$; helped in finding insights into problems of the elderly, $F(1,66) = 5.94, p < .02, d = .60$; and helped in gaining understanding of issues important to older adults, $F(1, 66) = 6.46, p < .01, d = .62$. In support of hypothesis, these findings suggest informal advocacy for older adults in the small-group discussion may broaden participants’ awareness and lead to deeper understanding about older adults and their concerns. Further, following Cohen’s (1988) interpretation of effect-size (d), the statistically significant effects reported here range beyond the medium effect-size parameter of .50, and within the zone of desired educational effects ($d > .40$) suggested by Hattie (2008, 2015).

A directed content analysis was conducted to examine the depth-of-learning reported in participants’ brief narrative responses to the open-ended question asking

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Table 1

Survey Item Means, Standard Deviations, and F and p values of Discussion Groups Advocating for Young Adults (n = 26) and Older Adults (n = 42).

Item	Young Adults	Older Adults	F	d
	M (SD)	M (SD)		
Advocacy Discussion				
Increased insight	6.69 (1.74)	7.62 (1.46)	5.57*	.58
Led to new awareness	7.04 (1.48)	7.71 (1.44)	3.47	.46
Enhanced understanding	7.00 (1.44)	7.55 (1.56)	2.08	.36
Aided in gaining new knowledge	6.73 (1.61)	7.74 (1.56)	6.51**	.64
Advocacy Perspective				
Helped to realize important concerns of older adults	6.50 (2.02)	7.48 (1.68)	4.61*	.52
Helped to find insight into problems encountered by older adults	6.23 (1.94)	7.36 (1.79)	5.94*	.60
Helped to gain understanding of issues faced by older adults	6.35 (2.10)	7.50 (1.62)	6.46**	.62

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

how learning occurs in the advocacy discussion. In accord with Hsieh and Shannon (2005), a depth-of-learning classification taxonomy was developed based on Kant (1952), Entwistle (2000), and Fink's (2013) respective descriptions of deep understanding and significant learning. This taxonomy ranged along an ordinal continuum from shallow-learning (i.e., a rather narrow, passive, or self-focused response) to intermediate depth-of-learning (i.e., a response that links knowledge and problem-solving to personal understandings, and the human experience of caring and learning how to learn) to moderately deep-learning (i.e., a response that describes a grasping and weighing of different viewpoints, and an inspection of one's position from the viewpoints of others) to very deep-learning (i.e., a response that conveys empathic concern for another person or a group to whom one may provide assistance, or an expression of empathic understanding that espouses a sense of responsibility). Participants' narrative responses were extracted from the survey and sorted by two independent and case-blind raters. Rater disagreements were resolved through discussion. Examination of rater's concordance in classifying participants' narrative responses, in accord with Viera and Garrett's (2005) interpretive rubric, indicated high inter-rater agreement, Cohen's kappa = .79, $p < .001$, with rater's classification demonstrating high ordinal scale consistency, Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$. A sampling of responses within shallow-learning and intermediate depth-of-learning are displayed in Table 2, and a sampling of responses within moderately deep-learning and very deep-learning categories are shown in Table 3.

Examination of the distribution of narrative responses across the depth-of-learning taxonomy indicated intermediate-depth-of-learning to be the modal classification: shallow-learning (8%),

Table 2

Sampling of Student Narrative Responses to the Question “In What Way Did You Learn in the Advocacy Discussion?”

<u>Shallow-Learning</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Reinforcement going over the topic again, yet I found this to be hard with this topic.” ▪ “By reading and discussing the material.” ▪ “To think outside the box.”
<u>Intermediate Depth-of-Learning</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Problem solving and open communication of new ideas.” ▪ “Talk about different options.” ▪ “Get classmate’s perspectives on the same topics.” ▪ “It helps with understanding the issues on a more personal level.”

intermediate depth-of-learning (42%), moderately deep-learning (32%), very deep-learning (18%). A goodness-of-fit analysis indicated significant difference between the observed depth-of-learning classifications and what would be expected by chance, $\chi^2(3, N = 60) = 15.467, p < .0015$. Examination of effect-size using Cramer’s formula for non-parametric data suggests a large effect, $V = .29$, and following the conversion to Cohen’s d ($d = .61$) is within the desired zone of educational effects ($d > .40$) noted by Hattie (2008, 2015). Moreover, considering the ordinal nature of the classification taxonomy, it is noted that one-half of the samples’ narrative responses are beyond the cumulative modal frequency of intermediate depth-of-learning, offering further support for the educational efficacy of informal advocacy to deepen learning.

A Somers’ d test of association was conducted to further examine the influence of being assigned to the young adult- or older

Table 3

Sampling of Student Narrative Responses to the Question “In What Way Did You Learn in the Advocacy Discussion?”

<u>Moderately Deep-Learning</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Able to hear other people’s perspective which in turn may challenge your own perspectives.” ▪ “I learn by hearing all the sides of the debate. It is never one-sided, there are many opinions and voices to be heard.” ▪ “Helps us learn from other people’s real life experience and apply our own to help them, also helps us know how in line our thought can be with others.” ▪ “Get to see different views from different positions. This just allows for a more open perspective in daily life.”
<u>Very Deep-Learning</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “A. works at a nursing home, so her stories really show current concerns in the nursing home, such as workers not treating residents as people.” ▪ “Many people have different ways of looking at the same topic, the group discussion allowed us to look at our topic through different vantage points. Also giving us a unique group helps us think of various people who may be affected by the topic.” ▪ “Mentally ill elderly probably don’t know a lot about what is happening, so the more we can help them and their families the less confused they will be.” ▪ “I think it helped to take a stance. It requires me to stand up for what I believe in.”

adult-advocacy advocacy groups on narrative response. Results suggest narrative responses indicative of deeper learning to be

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significantly associated with assignment to the older adult-advocacy group, $d = .356$, $p < .005$. Follow-up Sign-test analyses revealed significant differences between the proportion of young and older adult-advocacy groups classification of very deep learning, $Z = 2.41$, $p < .01$, but not for shallow, intermediate, or moderately deep-learning classifications, $Z_s < .93$, $p_s > .05$. A graphic representation of this effect, showing the percentage of participant's holding young or older adult advocacy perspectives at the shallow, intermediate, moderate, and very deep-level-of-learning is shown in Figure 1.

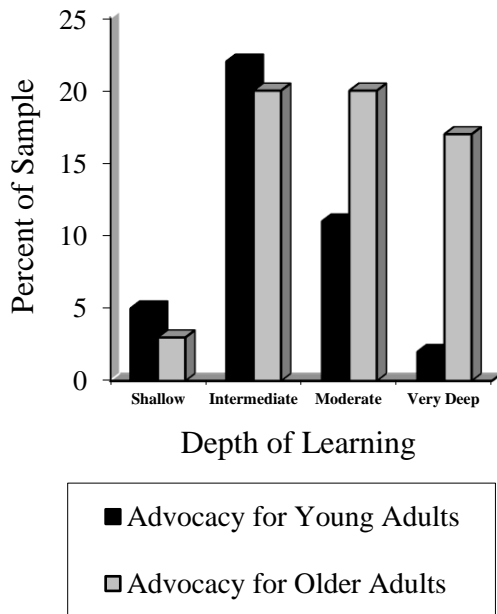


Figure 1. Percentage of Participant's in Study 1 Holding a Young or Older Adult Advocacy Perspective, and Their Classification of Learning at Shallow, Intermediate, Moderate, and Very Deep Levels.

In general, participants' ratings and narrative responses offer support for hypothesis, and suggest that adopting the informal advocacy perspective of older adults aided in increasing insight and gaining new knowledge, and helped to facilitate a deeper learning where students became actively

involved in expressing concern for various groups of older people, discussed personal experiences they have had with older adults, and considered ways in which one may make a difference outside the classroom.

Discussion

As these brief survey findings suggest, PBL activities addressing adult development and aging processes that incorporate informal advocacy for older adults may broaden understanding and promote deeper learning. However, in support of the hypothesis, and in accord with other research (Beacham & Shambaugh, 2007; Berke et al., 2010; Massengale et al., 2014), the depth of learning experienced and acquired in the informal advocacy activity may vary as a function of the student's ability to go beyond their self-concerns and take into consideration the needs and experiences of older adults.

Importantly, it should be recognized that beyond traditional classroom-lecture formats, PBL activities offer a rich teaching resource that promotes deeper analysis and learning by students (e.g., Ferreri & O'Connor, 2103; Lake, 2001; Parrott & Cherry, 2011; Tiwari, Lai, So, & Yeun, 2006). For example, post-hoc comparative analyses of the rating-scale responses made by participants in the older adult advocacy group, with allied research exploring the contrast between lecture-based and small-group discussion activities (Webb & Grib, 1967), showed the 99% Confidence Intervals (*C.I.*) of mean ratings for increased insight (*C.I.* = 7.01 – 8.22), gaining new knowledge (*C.I.* = 7.08 – 8.22), and gaining understanding (*C.I.* = 6.82 – 8.18), to contain the overall mean rating ($M = 8.11$) reported by Webb and Grib (1967, Table 9) of students' rated gain in knowledge, enhanced comprehension, and critical thinking that occurred in the student-led small-group discussion. Suggesting the informal

advocacy activity to produce effects similar to those effects of other PBL activities that have shown enhancement in student learning beyond that of regular classroom-lecture routines (Webb & Grib, 1967).

The results from this study inspired a subsequent learning activity and study for an Introductory Lifespan Development course. In the next issue of Perspectives in Learning, this second study will be described, and both studies on problem-based learning will be discussed.

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