ABSTRACT

This course description lists a sequence of units focusing on how aging affects an individual's ability to communicate. Besides general information about the course organization, specific information is provided on four short papers, in which students defend their views on critical issues of communication and aging, and on seven units of study. Topics for the units of study include (1) the centrality of communication (images of elders and the aging process), (2) physiological changes that mitigate effective communication, (3) social service programs that facilitate human interaction, (4) interpersonal communication and aging, (5) family communication and aging, (6) the taboo topics of death and sexuality, and (7) mass communication and aging. The descriptions of the units of study all contain brief overviews and lists of instructional materials (readings and audiovisual aids). A list of five general resources on communication and aging are appended. (RL)
PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNICATION AND AGING*

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Course Name: Speech 6006 Communicative Aspects of Aging
Course-Level and Credit: four quarter hours of graduate credit

Course Description:

The course focuses on elders' use of mass media and interpersonal channels of communication. Major theories of aging are reviewed. Physiological changes that influence the individual's ability to communicate effectively are discussed. Social service programs that facilitate interaction are examined.

Units of Study:

1½ weeks Unit One: The Centrality of Communication: Images of Elders and the Aging Process
1 week Unit Two: Physiological Changes that Mitigate Effective Communication
2 weeks Unit Three: Social Service Programs that Facilitate Human Interaction
2 weeks Unit Four: Interpersonal Communication and Aging
1 week Unit Five: Family Communication and Aging
1 week Unit Six: The Taboo Topics of Death and Sexuality
1½ weeks Unit Seven: Mass Communication and Aging

Assignments:

two examinations covering readings, films, lectures, and class discussions.
four short papers in which the student defends his/her views on critical communication and aging issues. (See pages 2 and 3 for details.)

Think Paper One

Develop your own theory of aging. What are the essential elements or steps in the aging process? How do they relate to communication patterns? What constitutes normal aging? What constitutes healthy aging? Ideally, how should an elder behave? What part, if any, does society play in the aging process? What part, if any, do significant others play? What part does the individual play? You may develop your own theory or combine published theories. Base your arguments on readings, lectures, films, class discussions, and personal experience. Please describe your theory and defend your choice(s).

Think Paper Two

Various social service-agencies name the following as need area of the aged:

- financial services
- health services
- legal services
- housing
- transportation
- nutrition and diet
- emergency food and shelter
- recreation
- educational programs
- counseling services

Design and describe an ideal social service program to meet at least one of these areas. Address the following concerns in your paper:

- Are elders' needs in this area different from other persons? How so?
- How will your program address these special needs? How will your program provide options for elders who experience varying degrees of need? How will your program provide easy linkages to other social services?
- How will your program provide opportunities for elders to maintain independence? Will your program provide opportunities for elders to be productive? How so?
- How will your program provide opportunities for varying degrees of social interaction? How will the program facilitate interaction between elders? What steps will be taken to arouse community support for the program? How could elders and young people be involved in this process?

Think Paper Three

Should you change your interpersonal communication style when interacting with (1) older relatives and (2) other elders? Why or why not? If so, how? Cite relevant material from readings, lectures, etc. as you discuss and defend your answer.
Think Paper Four

Should mass media change programs to either (1) present a more realistic view of aging and/or (2) accommodate the programming needs and desires of elders? Why or why not? If so, how? Cite relevant material from readings, lectures, etc. Both rational and ethical concerns should be addressed in your answer.

Unit One: The Centrality of Communication: Images of Elders and Aging

This unit introduces the interface between communication and gerontology. Major theories of aging are presented and their focus on communication is discussed. Common myths and stereotypes of aging are explored in light of their ability to detrimentally affect the communication process. Students complete Oberleader's Attitude Toward Aging Scale and responses are discussed in class.


Janoff, Clifford, prod. To A Good Long Life. BFA Educational Media, 1976. (Film: three elders, presented as positive models of aging, discuss their lifestyles.)


Unit Two: Physiological Changes that Mitigate Effective Communication

Various physiological changes that accompany normal maturation influence the individual's ability to receive and process messages. Unit two focuses on four such changes: loss of hearing, eye sight, and mobility as well as the need for increased information-processing time. Modes of compensation and/or adaption by the sender and receiver are discussed. Professors of speech pathology and audiology provide guest lectures.


Unit Three: Social Service Programs that Facilitate Human Interaction

The unit begins with an examination of various philosophical orientations to service delivery. Outstanding local, state, and national programs that facilitate interaction are contrasted to programs that fail to do so. Total-service packages and methods of service linking are emphasized. Field trips and guest lecturers highlight the unit.


Unit Four: Interpersonal Communication and Aging

Research findings related to the friending process are reviewed in unit four. Major theories of interpersonal communication are used to identify and understand difficulties in client-service provider interactions. The myth of the "generation gap" is explored.


Martin, William C. "Activity and Disengagement: Life Satisfaction of In-Movers into a Retirement Community." The Gerontologist, 13 (Summer 1973), 224-227.

Rinck, Christine M., Frank N. Willis, Jr., and Larry M. Dean. "Interpersonal Touch Among Residents of Homes for the Elderly." Journal of Communication, 30 (Spring 1980), 44-47.


Unit Five: Family Communication and Aging

Unit five reviews research findings related to both marital communication and intergenerational family communication. Solutions to typical family problems are proposed. Models of effective marital and family communication are discussed.


Unit Six: The Taboo Topics of Death and Sexuality

Unit six explores communication surrounding the two culturally taboo topics of death and sexuality. The sexual act is viewed as an intimate communication. Factual studies concerning sexual behavior in later life are reviewed. Messages that influence sexual functioning are discussed. The unit also surveys theory and research on counseling the dying. Special emphasis is placed on communication issues involved in the dying process. Topics include rules that govern discussion of death, the use of euphemisms, and the interpretation of symbolic language.

CBS News, prod. Sex After Sixty. CBS Distributors, 1974. (Film of elders candidly discuss sexuality.)

Collette-Pratt, Clara. "Attitudinal Predictors of Devaluation of Old Age in a Multigenerational Sample." Journal of Gerontology, 31 (1976), 193-197. (Collette-Pratt reported that attitude toward death was an excellent predictor of devaluation of old age.)


Unit Seven: Mass Communication and Aging

The unit review research in mass communication and aging. Major theories of mass communication are discussed. Topics include media's portrayal of the aged, elders' viewing/listening habits, and special programming for the elderly. In-class activities include (1) replication of a research project and (2) watching and critiquing an "Over Easy" show. ("Over Easy" is broadcast by most public TV stations.)


General Resources

Numerous general resources are available to aid in planning or updating a communication and aging course. The author has found the following resources particularly helpful:

"Aging and Sex Behavior [Bibliography]." Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Institute for Sex Research, 1978 (Xerox).


Shock, Nathan W. "Current Publications in Gerontology and Geriatrics." Published as the closing article in each issue of Journal of Gerontology.