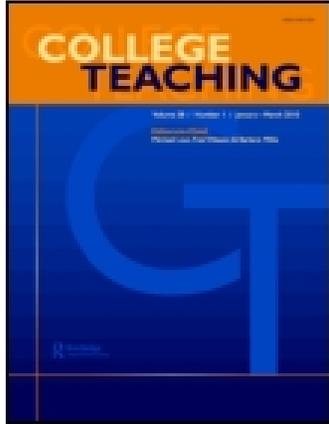


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### Student-Directed Learning: An Exercise in Student Engagement

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## ARTICLES

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# Student-Directed Learning: An Exercise in Student Engagement

Laura Gibson

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Student engagement and retention is a concern of many university professors. To engage sophomore-level students in a Sociology of Aging class, I challenged them to design the course in a way that would make the outcome personally meaningful to them. The class was asked to identify specific learning objectives related to the university's course catalog description, to choose assignments that would evaluate their learning, to weight assignments based upon their perception of importance, and to designate due dates for assignments. A qualitative review of their feedback on this exercise is provided.

**Keywords:** motivational strategy, student-directed learning, student empowerment, student engagement

### Background

Good educators continually try to find ways to engage students in the learning process. As a new teacher, I have been looking for ways to make my classes interesting and to present content in a way that will help students learn. I'm sure that is probably typical of most teachers. Before being hired at a community college in the Midwest, I practiced social work for many years. As a social worker working in the field, my practice has been consistent with social work values: respect for individuals and their personal autonomy, empowerment, and self-determination. Engaging successfully with clients has meant helping them reach their own goals, not just the goals of the social worker. I decided to use this philosophy in my teaching.

I was inspired by an exercise I read in a workbook that discussed using a student-designed syllabus to increase motivation and empowerment (Haynes 2001). Haynes used the first few class periods to encourage students to choose assignments after she had selected the course objectives (Haynes, personal communication, November 13, 2009). I decided to take this a step further and ask the students to select the course

objectives as well. Because we have block classes and only meet once a week, I strove to accomplish this in one class period.

### Review of the Literature

Empowering students in this way means a change in the typical power dynamic between professor and student (Hudd 2003). Although Sweet (1998) stated that genuine shifts in power are limited by institutional constraints, I would argue that such constraints are natural and normal in our society and do not entirely prohibit a shift in power. None of us is free to make our own rules without the influence or sanction of the social environment. Telling students up front what things are not negotiable because of university constraints contributes to the genuineness of the experience. Students do not expect a free-for-all. They appreciate the boundaries with which we all live. University policies such as attendance, academic honesty, and following the catalog course description of the class were not negotiable. Lang (2006) likened it to starting a conversation with students, not a soliloquy, about how their learning will be measured. Characterizing the process as a conversation suggests that students have some measure of power in the relationship. Although students do not typically influence syllabi at this university, the dean was supportive of this project.

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Some might say that giving students the power to establish course objectives might compromise the integrity of the course. For instance, accredited institutions are committed to teaching specific content. Gray and Madson (2007), however, responded to this argument with the fable of the pitcher and the glass. The pitcher tried to teach the glass by pouring a great gush of water upon it. Some water landed in the glass, but most of it splashed upon the table. The moral of the story is that learning is not about what is poured from the pitcher, but what lands in the glass. Unleashing a huge volume of water from the pitcher does not fill the glass better than carefully pouring a small stream into it: "It is not how much the instructor covers in class that determines how much students learn" (Gray and Madson 2007, 85). It is possible to meet academic and accreditation requirements, empower students, and achieve learning at the same time.

In teaching sociological theory, Rinehart (1999) found that using collaborative instructional methods transformed student passivity into active engagement. In other examples of collaborative learning, Hudd gave students the task of independently creating a list of possible assignments at the first class session (2003). Students are socialized to expect certain traditional assignments—e.g. exams, papers, presentations. In fact, Hudd (2003) found that students typically chose traditional assignments and rarely came up with unique or original ideas. Haynes also found that students chose typical assignments (Haynes, personal communication, November 13, 2009). Hudd (2003) restricted students' input into syllabus construction to assignments, in part due to the students' inexperience and lack of understanding of course topics and their logical presentation.

Hudd (2003) concluded that students who participated in the process of choosing their assignments were more invested in the course and in the evaluation of their performance. However, Stewart-Wingfield and Black (2005) found that using an active course design in which students helped create the syllabus and choose graded assignments had no impact on student satisfaction, grades, or perceptions of the course.

When Mihans, Long, and Felton (2008) involved undergraduate students in the redesign of an education course, they found that students and faculty had different perspectives with regard to the desired content of textbooks. They found that faculty preferred textbooks that focused on theory, while students who were anticipating their first year of teaching preferred textbooks that were practical and concrete. They found that while students wanted practical knowledge, faculty could balance that by supplementing the text with material that could deepen students' understanding of theoretical underpinnings. In this manner, the needs expressed by students were met, but the expertise of faculty was also recognized. They also found that students did not try to design a course with an easy "A." They designed a course that was more meaningful to them.

## METHOD

I teach at a small, two-year university in the Midwest. The student body ranges from those who are committed to their educational goals to those who are there because they don't know where else to be. Social work students typically transfer to an accredited BSW program when they have completed their first two years of course work. I selected a class based upon size and student experience. I chose the course *Sociology of Aging* because it had reasonable number of students (13) and was comprised primarily of sophomores who already had some college experience. I felt this experience would help them build on previous learning, and they would have already encountered the expectations of the college milieu. The course transfers to a BSW program as either a sociology course or as a social work course.

I often struggle to develop assignments that will inspire, motivate, and engage students, while also making them relevant to learning specific concepts. This project was going to be a new experience for my students and myself, and I believed they would feel lost if I asked them to come up with assignments on their own, or even through group discussion. I wanted to open their eyes to new possibilities of the things they could accomplish. I provided students with an extensive list of possible course objectives for them to consider. This introduced them to course concepts and stimulated their interest in those concepts by providing examples of learning outcomes. I had already selected the text due to the university's need to order textbooks far in advance of the first day of class. While students did not have a choice over the textbook, the advantage of having it available is that it gave students the opportunity to refer to it, especially the table of contents.

After organizing the chairs and desks in a circle to facilitate communication, I asked students to identify four to six course objectives—things they wanted to learn by the end of the course. Prior to the first class, I created a list of 50 possible objectives for them to consider. Because there were so many, I further organized the objectives into 11 categories: (a) field of gerontology, (b) research, (c) ethics, (d) theoretical perspectives, (e) demographics, (f) practice, (g) resources/services, (i) policy, (j) ageism, (k) diversity, and (l) other relevant issues (Appendix A). I handed out the examples, encouraged students to discuss them, and left the room for about five minutes. When I returned, they were talking (whew!). They continued their discussion until they had chosen eight course objectives by consensus.

I explained that their next task was to find a way to evaluate if the objectives had been met by the end of the course. I gave them examples of 22 different types of assignments, and they reviewed them (Appendix B). There were a few things that were not negotiable. First, the course required a service learning component to be completed in a gerontology-related setting. Second, the course must remain consistent with the university's course catalog description. Third, if they chose to write a paper, it had to be in APA

TABLE 1  
Students' Chosen Learning Objectives and Evaluation Methods

Learning Objectives	Evaluation Methods
1. Discuss controversies in aging such as rationing healthcare, euthanasia, and autonomy.	Classroom Debates
2. Describe the sociological aspects of aging including role transition, family life, religion, and spirituality.	Life History Assignment
3. Develop skills in assessing the indicators of normal aging and recognition of abnormality.	Life History Assignment; Volunteer Placement
4. Demonstrate understanding of the linkage between declining health and social service.	Benefit-Checker Assignment
5. Discuss basic needs and issues for older persons in the United States.	Medicare Drug Plan Assignment
6. Discuss why many of the myths and stereotypes about aging are inaccurate.	Classroom Debates
7. Recognize social and cultural differences of older adults.	Life History Assignment; Volunteer Placement
8. Explain the role of work, retirement and leisure, e.g. long-term care, AIDS in older adults, victimization, euthanasia, and family caregiving issues.	Classroom Debates

style. Finally, I had a (negotiable) request that they create posters which promoted social work with aging adults, which I could display in the building. They could not just pick the assignments that looked like fun; they had to choose assignments that would evaluate their chosen course objectives. They completed this task (Table 1). They were not terribly interested in creating posters, but they opted to do the poster assignment as extra credit.

They were then asked to choose when the assignments would be due. This was clearly a new experience for them, and they loved it. They could not each choose individual due dates for assignments, but could negotiate with each other and choose due dates that would then apply to the whole class. Once they decided on due dates, they were held accountable to them.

Lastly, I asked them to weight the assignments in terms of which were most important and should count the most toward their grade. After receiving a group of puzzled looks, I asked them to advise me as to assignments that should contribute less weight, medium weight, and more weight to their grade. I used this information to determine the exact weight of assignments. At the end of the class, students were asked to write a paragraph or so about what the experience was like for them.

After class, I organized topics into a logical order for the semester. This was perhaps the most stressful aspect of the process: my responsibility to incorporate all of their choices into a coherent format and distribute it the following week. This included identifying readings that were related to their interests but were not included in the textbook. At the end of the semester, students were again asked for feedback about the process. This was done in the form of a class discussion.

## RESULTS

Students completed a variety of assignments. They learned how to compare and choose the most advantageous Medicare Drug Benefit policy for a hypothetical client (a practical skill), they conducted a Life Interview of an older adult (an experience that helped them become more comfortable with older adults and appreciate their stories), they provided

a potluck breakfast for a local assisted living facility (ungraded), they completed the 10-hour service learning requirement, and they participated in a number of in-class debates. The debates were probably the most intensive learning opportunities for students. They debated current issues of controversy such as assisted suicide, rationing healthcare, financial exploitation, autonomy versus beneficence, etc. They learned to think critically about issues, examine them thoroughly, and consider alternative perspectives. It was the assignment they enjoyed the most.

Students unanimously appreciated the opportunity to design their own syllabus. It was a refreshingly new experience for them. They made comments such as

*"I have been taking classes now for 2 years and this is the first time a professor has asked what the students wanted to get out of the class. I loved this process!"*

*"The idea that you trust us is awesome. We are adults."*

*"This was my first time doing this process and I wish all my professors will [sic] do this."*

Students commented on the way the process engaged them in the class and how the class became personally relevant to them.

*"It really helped that you gave us lots of choices."*

*"Letting us choose gives more incentives to do the work and participate."*

*"Giving students some input to their education means we are more accountable. It is also nice to be able to tailor the class to our interests."*

*"I feel that by picking what we wanted to do will help us as students learn more and be more interested in the class rather than having the assignments already picked out and becoming boring."*

Students learned for the first time that a syllabus is more than a collection of arbitrary assignments. They learned about the connection between learning objectives and assignments that would evaluate that learning.

*"It allowed me to understand the process [of designing a syllabus] better."*

*"I am glad that I am not, nor will I ever be, a teacher/professor, because deciding what to do, when to do it, and when items need to be turned in is very difficult."*

The feedback at the end of the semester was also positive. Students stated they "felt like we had a better class" and that they "learned a lot." Of interest, students reported that they worked harder on the assignments because they were interesting, than they would have on easier, boring assignments. Two students said that they preferred taking tests (there were none in this class) because it was easier to just study the night before the test, and less overall effort was required. However, they also acknowledged that they only remember the information long enough to get through the test and "forget it within a week." This class required more work, but they felt like they had actually learned information they would take away from the class.

I taught this same course once before in the previous year (2009), so I compared the attendance rates of the two classes. In both classes, a few students dropped the class at various points in the semester. The reasons for dropping are unknown: there was no indication that this was related to the class itself. In both semesters, classes met once a week for sixteen weeks. In the 2009 class, eight students completed the class with 21 absences (16.4% absentee rate). In the 2010 class, in which students designed the syllabus, nine students completed the class with eight absences (5.6% absentee rate). While one should be cautious drawing conclusions using a small, nonrandom sample, it would be interesting to explore through additional research a possible association between absenteeism and student-directed syllabi.

### Implications for Teaching

Subjectively, students felt that they learned a lot, but how much did they learn? And did they learn what they needed to learn? Assignments did, in fact, relate to established learning objectives, and learning objectives were appropriate for the class. I do not think that giving an exam would have better assessed their learning. Some students reported that they don't test well and that tests don't measure very accurately what they have actually learned. Other students reported that they liked tests and tended to do very well on them, but that while test grades suggested that they learned a lot, they actually had

just memorized the material effectively and could not recall it shortly afterward.

Some might argue that syllabi should be standardized in order to meet accreditation requirements or to honor articulation agreements with other schools. I did exercise some influence over the course content in two ways. First, I selected the textbook in advance. This was primarily due to the school needing to order textbooks far ahead of the beginning of classes. When deciding on learning objectives, students used the table of contents of the text to inform their subsequent decisions. Second, I provided many possible learning objectives from which students could choose. All of the objectives were appropriate to the course and were consistent with the school catalog's description of the course.

In comparing the absentee rates of two different Sociology of Aging classes, the class that participated in the student-directed syllabus had fewer absences. While it cannot be concluded that the process of creating their own syllabus actually *caused* them to miss fewer classes, the data suggest that this might be an important area of future inquiry.

Students understand when the university environment has requirements that cannot be breached. They appreciate the professor's willingness to share the design of the course with them to make it personally relevant to their lives and to their future careers. Professors have traditionally been in control of course design. The onus is upon the professor to give up control over the parts of the course which can be negotiated.

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## Appendix A

## Course Objectives Choices Given to Students

## Field of Gerontology

1. Identify careers in aging.<sup>3</sup>
2. Describe the advantages, disadvantages, opportunities, and drawbacks to a career in gerontology.<sup>1</sup>
3. Demonstrate understanding of the development of the field of gerontology.
4. Understanding the terminology associated with gerontology and demography.<sup>3</sup>

## Research

1. Discuss the unique research methods employed in gerontological research (i.e., longitudinal methods).<sup>2</sup>
2. Identify and evaluate current research findings in relation to different issues concerning aging and older adults.<sup>1</sup>
3. Explain the ways in which geriatric care and gerontological research are multidisciplinary and the benefits of such an approach.
4. Discuss the current professional literature on death and dying.

## Ethics

1. Apply the NASW (National Association of Social Worker) Code of Ethics to practice with aging populations.
2. Demonstrate understanding of basic issues of social and economic justice in relationship to the aging process.<sup>2</sup>
3. Discuss controversies in aging such as rationing of healthcare, euthanasia, and autonomy.

## Theoretical Perspectives

1. Explain the process of aging from at least two theoretical perspectives.
2. Apply theories of aging to case scenarios.<sup>4</sup>
3. Describe and use theories of aging.<sup>3</sup>
4. Students will be able to discuss the process of aging as part of the life course perspective.
5. Demonstrate understanding of the social, psychological and physical aspects of aging.<sup>5</sup>
6. Describe the physical aspects of aging including life expectancy, age-related physiological changes, sexuality, and health status.<sup>4</sup>
7. Describe the psychological aspects of aging including age-related psychological changes, mental health issues, and dementia.<sup>4</sup>
8. Describe the sociological aspects of aging including role transition, family life, religion and spirituality.<sup>4</sup>

9. Discuss aging within an historical and cultural context.

## Demographics

1. Describe the demographic shift toward an increasingly aged society and the manifestations of such a shift.<sup>5</sup>
2. Summarize the population trends of aging in America.<sup>4</sup>

## Practice

1. Demonstrate understanding of the use of the generalist model for practice with elderly populations.<sup>2</sup>
2. Demonstrate through interaction and volunteerism greater understandings of the aging process and the aging network.<sup>3</sup>
3. Model appropriate professionalism in interactions with people and agencies.<sup>3</sup>
4. Apply death and dying principles in working with older adults.
5. Develop skills in assessing the indicators of normal aging and recognition of abnormality.<sup>1</sup>

## Resources/Services

1. Use appropriate academic and applied resources to assist elderly populations.<sup>2</sup>
2. Acquire knowledge about different services for the aging and know the criteria for assessing those services.<sup>1</sup>
3. Identify a network of community resources which serve aging individuals.
4. Demonstrate understanding of the linkage between declining health and social service.<sup>2</sup>
5. Discuss basic needs and issues for older persons in the United States.

## Policy

1. Demonstrate an ability to critically analyze the following social policies for the aged and understand their value as well as their limitations: Social Security, healthcare, Medicare, and Medicaid.<sup>5</sup>
2. Discuss the implications of Social Security reform and Medicare/Medicaid reform, especially for women and low-income older adults.
3. Discuss the impact of healthcare reform on older adults.
4. Demonstrate an understanding of the historical origins of Social Security and make recommendations for reform.

## Ageism

1. Discuss why many of the myths and stereotypes about aging are inaccurate.

2. Debunk at least ten myths related to older adults.<sup>4</sup>
3. Show recognition of aging images held by self, others, and society and the ramifications of those images for aging individuals and aging societies.<sup>3</sup>
4. Demonstrate understanding of the linkage between socioeconomic status and the aging process.<sup>2</sup>
5. Demonstrate understanding of the social relationships associated with the aging process.<sup>2</sup>
6. Demonstrate respect for the human diversity among aging populations.<sup>2</sup>
7. Discuss the meaning of “elderly” as a “population at risk.”<sup>2</sup>

#### Diversity

1. Demonstrate understanding of the intersection of race, gender, and class on aging.<sup>5</sup>
2. Increase sensitivity to the heterogeneity of the older adult population.<sup>6</sup>
3. Recognize social and cultural differences of older adults.<sup>1</sup>

#### Other Relevant Issues

1. Explain the role of work, retirement and leisure, e.g. aging and the minority experience; long-term care; AIDS in older adults, victimization of older adults; euthanasia, and family care-giving issues, etc.<sup>4</sup>
2. Describe the implications of typical changes experienced by older people.
3. Describe four areas of change (biological, psychological, sociological, and economic) experienced by older people and the implications of those changes on older individuals.<sup>1</sup>
4. Demonstrate understanding of the shifting roles of the aged and the manifestations of such.<sup>5</sup>

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#### Appendix B

##### Assignment Choices Given to Students

1. Identify Benefits: Interview an older adult (65+ years). Go to the website [www.benefitcheckup.org](http://www.benefitcheckup.org), answer the questions on the website, and identify the benefits for which the older adult may qualify. Write a 1–2 page summary of the experience and the benefits.
2. Life History Interview: Interview an older adult to learn about notable experiences which have affected his or her life. Type a paper summarizing this information.<sup>7</sup>
3. Elder Service Partnership: Students are paired with older adults and fulfill the service learning requirement together. The students will maintain a journal of the experience consisting of personal reflections and integration of course material and theory.<sup>7</sup>
4. Nested Glossary: Compile a glossary of gerontological terms, ideas, concepts, and theories. Organize the glossary in a way that is personally meaningful to you.<sup>8</sup>
5. Annotated Bibliography: Gather information on a gerontological topic from professional journal, reputable web-sites, texts, etc. Summarize key information in a specified format.
6. Integrative Paper: Use the Nested Glossary and Annotated Bibliography write two 3–4 page papers integrating information, personal reflection, and professional insights.<sup>8</sup>
7. Teach a Class: Facilitate a lecture and class discussion about a specified gerontological topic.
8. Class Debate: Debate specified topics such as the principles of beneficence and autonomy in decision-making, passive and active euthanasia, etc.
9. YouTube Video: As a class or in small groups, create an educational video presenting information about a gerontological topic and upload it to YouTube. For example, debunk common myths about aging, present information, or develop a skit that illustrates a controversy.

10. **Campus Newspaper:** Write an article for a campus newspaper that educates students and helps them understand why gerontology is important to them.
11. **Potluck Dinner:** As a class have a potluck dinner for residents at a local assisted living facility. Present information about this experience in class.
12. **Attend a Caregivers' Support Group:** Attend a caregiver support group for people who care for older adults. Present a summary in class.
13. **Legislator:** Interview your federal legislator about Social Security reform. Write up your interview and submit for publication in the campus newspaper.
14. **Oral History Project:** Work in partnership with a resident at the local assisted living facility. Develop a timeline for the resident's life. Create an ecomap and genogram. Summarize this information in a paper.<sup>9</sup>
15. **Intergenerational Family Dynamics:** Write a 10–12 page paper describing a three-generation family, analyzing the developmental tasks faced by each member the current life stage and the impact of others in the family.<sup>9</sup>
16. **Longevity Assignment:** Go to a specified website which provides you with an estimated life expectancy. Discuss what lifestyle factors are associated with a long or short life. What things would you want to consider to accommodate your own aging?<sup>9</sup>
17. **Medicare Prescription Drug Plan:** Given a specific scenario, identify the Medicare D drug plans available, available pharmacies, monthly premiums, deductibles, etc. Choose the plan that you feel is most beneficial to the client and explain why.<sup>9</sup>
18. **Area Agency on Aging:** Identify resources available for specific case scenarios that involve fuel assistance, respite care, nutrition assistance, and other needs.<sup>9</sup>
19. **Reminiscence:** Write a 4–5 page paper. Talk with an older adult about a special memory from his or her childhood. Discuss the role of reminiscence in later life development.<sup>10</sup>
20. **Developmental Stage:** In a 4–5 page paper, describe how a specific event represents an aspect of later adulthood. Examples include widowhood, menopause, death of parents, shrinking support network, etc.<sup>10</sup>
21. **Self Concept:** Write a 4–5 page paper analyzing two professional articles on self-concept and relating the key points to the development of self in later life.<sup>10</sup>
22. **Awareness of Death:** Write a 4–5 page paper about the way in which you believe awareness of death impacts development in later life.<sup>10</sup>

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