An Intergenerational Community computer Tutoring Program: Keeping Seniors Connected

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Abstract

Since there has been an upsurge in computer and internet use, people have become more dependent on technology as a primary way of communication and staying connected with their communities (Saunders, 2007). Regrettably the aging population has not been able to keep up with this change (Saunders, 2007). Along with declining health and cognitive function, social isolation is an enormous challenge in the aging process (Shapira, Barak, & Gal, 2007). Social isolation or withdrawal can lead to a feeling of "powerlessness", which in turn is associated with an overall lack of well-being among the aging population (Shapira, Barak, & Gal, 2007). This poster will describe an intergenerational tutoring computer program implemented at the Central YM & YWHA, which is geared towards increasing computer literacy skills among the elderly. The participants of the program include the seniors from the community center and student volunteers from the local high school, who teach the elderly basic computer skills, such as understanding terminologies, opening an email account, and exploring various social news media websites. In turn, the student will receive community service credits. Additionally, the program is geared toward promoting a meaningful intergenerational connection between the high school student volunteers and the elderly population at the community center. Preliminary anecdotal data of the efficacy of the program will be presented along with a proposal for a systematic study that will test the following hypothesis: the more frequently the elderly participate in a computer tutoring program, the more frequently they will use computers to connect with their community.

Literature Review

The internet has introduced a world of opportunities including:
- Online therapies and counseling
- Support groups, blogs and other health information

The use of the internet can "enhance the quality of life" because "internet-based communication with other people is convenient and affordable, thus enabling social needs to be met more easily and directly" (Shapira, Barak & Gal, 2007). Saunders (2007), supports this in stating:
- computer use reduces isolation
- Positive correlation with self-esteem and computer use
- community based computer program having a positive outcome on the elderly population

Mellor, Firth, and Moore (2008), discusses one of the concerns that could cause a hindrance in the following study, that is the individual's cognitive abilities. As pointed out by Mellor, Firth, and Moore (2008), the use of computers requires certain skills that could be effective due to the aging process, such as:
- Memory
- Reasoning
- Attention
- Learning
- Problem-solving

Shapira, Barak, and Gal (2007), studied an interventional computer program similar to the computer program that will be examined within this implicated study. As a result of the computer program the elderly displayed signs of less depressed and loneliness (Shapira, Barak & Gal, 2007).

Senior Adult Center

The Senior department of the Central Queens Y aims to offer fresh, innovative and engaging programs for our members. The Center offers a full range of social, recreational and educational activities that have been carefully designed to address the specific needs of older adults. Activities and Programs include a variety of day and evening offerings such as the computer tutoring program.

- Senior members sign-up for the program
- They are assigned to a young adult (Each elderly person has their individual tutor.)

The students are volunteers through their school and they receive community service credits toward their graduation, this is a predetermined arrangement between the agency and the school. The students and seniors meet for an hour once or twice a week, depending on the availability of students and seniors. Some students tutor multiply seniors on varied days and the program is open ended.

Senior Computer Tutoring Program

Goal:

To enhance and empower seniors by providing basic computer education, allowing them to stay connected with their community.

Program Description:

At the Central Queens YM & YWHA, the seniors that attend the agency have the opportunity to participate in a computer tutoring program. Intended to bridge the technological gap of the aging population the program focuses on the needs of senior community, such as:
- Beginning with familiarizing them with the basic parts of a computer
- Understanding computer jargon/terminologies
- Icon recognition
- Setting up an email account/sign-in/ check and compose emails.
- Online searches/exploring various social and news media websites

Collaborative Partners:

The senior computer tutoring program is a collaborative effort of the following partners:
- Senior Department Social Work Intern (myself)
- Central Queens Y Senior Department Social Work Director
- Agency Technical Department
- Senior community at the Central Queens Y
- Forest Hills High School Liaison
- Student volunteers

Participants:

The participants consist of senior members of the Central Queens Y and students from Forest Hills High School.

Anecdotal Data

Preliminary anecdotal data illustrates positive reactions to the program. Furthermore, the data reveals that there is positive socialization and connection between the seniors and student volunteers that occurs.

Seniors

- "Definitely helpful, I recently sent a birthday card to a family member in France". Senior said she does not have a computer at home but goes to the library at least twice a week and uses it for the hour she is allowed. She also has build a friendship with her tutor and she finds her to be very "smart, funny and absolutely beautiful".
- "I love it". Senior expressed that she is more comfortable using the computer and is very happy with her student tutor. "I wish I could come twice a week". She has also mentioned that she does not have internet but she will go where she has WIFI and use it as often as she can get out, something her tutor has taught her. She uses her computer knowledge to read the news, shop online and confirm appointments.
- "I can't say enough about my tutor. Oh, she is just lovely and extremely bright. I think it's a wonderful program and we are the benefiters". Since participating in the program for the senior has an email, which she uses her to communicate with her two daughters, research the news and recently ordered her walking shoes from an online catalog after 15 years of shopping form the same company.

Student Volunteers

- "I really like it and I have learned a lot from the person I tutor". The student has also mentioned that there is a mutual respect and understanding that has developed of the time and she would love to do the program again.
- "I actually found the program to be more fun and insightful than I thought it initially would be. I have definitely been able to build a friendship with my senior citizen. Not only did I teach her, but in some ways she taught me about the era she grew up in. The senior I was paired with had a bubbly friendly personality, and believe it or not. I actually found out we have some things in common. If I had more free time on my hands, I would join this program again."
- "I have only had one session with my senior, but it seemed to go very well. I was able to teach my senior some things she didn't know before, and we seemed to get along. Even though I've only done it once, I am enjoying the program so far. I look forward to continuing with this program in the future, and I have plans to meet with my senior again this week."

Implications For Future Study

Rational for Study:

Anecdotal data shows satisfaction with the program. A future study should focus on investigating the relationship between the frequency of seniors participating in a computer program and the frequency with which they use are using the computer to stay connected with their community

Hypothesis:

The more frequently the elderly participate in a computer tutoring program, the more frequently they will use computers to connect with their community.

Anticipated Results

It is expected that the hypothesis will be supported that there will be a positive relationship between the frequency of attending the computer program and the frequency of using the computer to connect with the community. The researcher anticipates that the hypothesis will be supported.

Method

Variables:

Frequency of elderly participating in a computer program:
Log-in attendance sheet
Frequency of connecting to community via social media/use of email:
Elder's family
Friends
Connecting to services (such as health care or social benefits)
Cultural and community events

Design:

Correlation design-phone survey

Instrument:

Checklist of attendance log-objective
Self report rating scale assessing frequency of connecting with community.
- Daily
- 2-3 times a week
- less than 2-3 times a week

Conclusion

Along with anticipated data of a positive correlation between frequent use of the computer and seniors being able to connect with their communities, further benefits of the program, as the literature has shown, may include:
- Overcoming stereotypes and relationship building
- Both seniors and students may foster mutual beneficial interactions with each other.
- Through shared life experiences young adults will become more aware of the elder population developing respect and understanding for the senior community, essentially building bridges between generations.

References

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