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## FACULTY MENTORING AND PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIPS: PERSPECTIVES FROM A TEACHING AND RESEARCH COLLABORATION ON REMINISCENCE WORK IN NOVA SCOTIA MUSEUMS

Katie Aubrecht, Janice Keefe, Lisa Bower and Marco Redden

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# FACULTY MENTORING AND PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIPS: PERSPECTIVES FROM A TEACHING AND RESEARCH COLLABORATION ON REMINISCENCE WORK IN NOVA SCOTIA MUSEUMS

## **Katie Aubrecht**

Department of Family Studies and Gerontology and Nova Scotia Centre on Aging  
Mount Saint Vincent University

## **Janice Keefe**

Department of Family Studies and Gerontology and Nova Scotia Centre on Aging  
Mount Saint Vincent University

## **Lisa Bower**

Cultural History Collection  
Nova Scotia Museum

## **Marco Redden**

Faculty of Arts  
Mount Saint Vincent University

## **Abstract**

*Our session shared student, junior part-time, and senior faculty and non-university partner perspectives on a senior level undergraduate directed study. The directed study course was offered by the Department of Family Studies and Gerontology (FSGN), at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU), in Halifax, Nova Scotia in Winter 2017, and was made possible by a partnership between Nova Scotia Museums and Nova Scotia*

*Centre on Aging. The co-designed course aimed to address an identified gap in dementia and arts and artefact-based reminiscence programming for galleries and museums, and create an opportunity for applied and experiential learning in gerontology. Each perspective highlights the impact of pedagogically-driven cross-sectoral collaboration, co-mentoring (Kochan & Trimble, 2000), and individualized experiential learning among differently located learners, with a view to the implications for collaborative program development, teaching, learning and applied research. Department and program partnership mapping exercises are recommended as a deliberative approach to co-mentorship that can be used to support multifaceted curriculum development and mutual learning between university and non-university groups.*

### **Keywords**

*co-mentoring; dementia studies; directed study; experiential learning; museum programming; pedagogical partnership*

### **Introduction**

This report describes the perceived impact of an undergraduate social sciences directed study offered by the Department of Family Studies and Gerontology (FSGN) at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU), Halifax, Nova Scotia in Winter 2017. The course, titled "Dementia, Art & Artifacts: Theoretical & Applied Perspectives on Reminiscence Work" (FSGN 4491), was the result of a pedagogical partnership. It was co-designed by an undergraduate student in his graduating year, a postdoctoral fellow and part-time faculty instructor who served as the primary supervisor for the course, the Department Chair and Director of the Nova Scotia Centre on Aging (NSCA), a university-based research centre that conducts applied research on aging-related issues, and the Assistant Curator of the History Collection, Nova Scotia Museum (NSM).

The course involved a review and analysis of theoretical and empirical perspectives on gallery-based reminiscence work for people with dementia, an environmental scan and background analysis of existing programs and practices, and the development of a toolkit for use by staff of the History Collection with the potential for broader scale implementation in Nova Scotia. The goals of this work were guided by provincial initiatives calling for enhanced access and inclusion for people with dementia and their friends, families, and communities, such as the Provincial Action Plan for an Aging Population (2017) and Dementia Strategy (2015). Supervisor and student

perspectives described below illustrate the value of formal cross-sectoral partnerships to university and non-university program development, and to student skills and competencies that support the movement of knowledge to action. Here, co-mentoring (Kochan & Trimble, 2000) was most pronounced in the co-design of the syllabus and directed study goals, and involved negotiating student learning needs with community and industry needs, as well as faculty development.

### **Partner Perspective – Lisa Bower, Assistant Curator, History Collection, Nova Scotia Museum**

The Nova Scotia Museum is responsible for the provincial collection of over one million artifacts and specimens. As well, it oversees the maintenance of more than 210 buildings, four floating vessels, and nine locomotives. The collection continues to develop through donations, exchanges, and field collecting and provides Nova Scotians with a rich resource that is accessed for research, education, exhibits, publications, and interpretive programs for a variety of audiences, including youth and older adults.

Increasingly, museums are trying to remain relevant to audiences and are reaching out to underserved demographic populations such as seniors and those with dementia or Alzheimer's disease. In order to address this concern, museums across North America and in other parts of the world have been developing programs involving touch and memory therapy, referred to as Reminiscence Therapy (RT). Therapeutic reminiscence can stimulate memories and emotions, thus improving the quality of life. These memories can best be stimulated through touching objects, participatory activities such as arts and crafts, or even by smells and sounds such as music. Three dimensional objects such as photographs, artwork, tools and equipment, games, sports, technology, and the decorative arts can trigger memories, provoke emotions, and prompt verbal discussion. While processing a collection of objects that had once been a part of an educational outreach program, the assistant curator of the Cultural History Collection became aware of the existence of this type of programming being offered at other museums such as the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the SPARK Alliance of Museum and Cultural Institutions in Wisconsin, and began working to determine if similar programming could or should be offered by the NSM.

In the fall of 2016, the NSM partnered with MSVU's Nova Scotia Centre on Aging. This partnership resulted in a directed course of study for an MSVU gerontology student to develop a research and guideline paper on implementing an RT program at the NSM. An important component of the research involved identifying museums offering this type of programming, examining how they were structured, and assessing their strengths and weaknesses. This environmental scan of museums occurred at the local, national, and international levels. The student was also tasked with documenting and confirming that the need for such programming did in fact exist in Nova Scotia,

as evidence to date had been primarily anecdotal. Determining program delivery best practices, recommendations for next steps and providing a list of potential program funding opportunities for program implementation were other important components vital for program development.

**Faculty Perspectives – Dr. Janice Keefe, Chair, Department of Family Studies and Gerontology, Mount St. Vincent University and Director, Nova Scotia Centre on Aging; and Dr. Katie Aubrecht, Postdoctoral Fellow and Part-time Instructor, Mount St. Vincent University**

The partnered approach to the directed study set the stage for program development, as well as future research collaborations. It also provided an opportunity to explore new directions in dementia studies, a subfield within gerontology. The social and policy-focused approach to understanding and responding to dementia, central to the directed study work, was the focus of a special topics course offered by the Department of Family Studies and Gerontology in 2012 and 2015. The directed study offered a unique occasion to assess the strengths of the special topics course as a foundation for dementia studies, and consider and discuss areas for improvement. Gaps in knowledge assumed to have been provided in the introductory special topics course, knowledge needed to move from conceptual to applied understandings of dementia, were captured which would not have appeared using standardized metrics and conventional course evaluations. The targeted and deliverable-oriented focus of the directed study also provided an opportunity for faculty to revisit the importance of analytical and communication skill development within academic work, as well as a “refresh” on innovative methodologies and conceptual approaches. The balanced emphasis on learning process and product, as well as attention to mutual learning as a condition of success, meant that not only was the student being mentored through skill development, but the junior faculty was as well.

Under the overarching supervision of the Department Chair/NSCA Director, and in continuous conversation with the Assistant Curator of the Cultural History Collection, both the junior faculty course instructor and directed study student were learning the art of collaboration. While all too often stripped of its significance and reduced to “group work,” the directed study served as a site for reflecting on and refining the meaning and practice of collaboration as a creative project with social implications – specifically, the possibility of improving access and reducing social isolation of older adults living with dementia and their family/friend caregivers. The directed study course achieved all of the benefits of traditional service learning courses – experiential learning, portfolio development, enhanced leadership competencies, and transferrable skills (and by extension, enhanced job readiness for graduates). It also supported the junior faculty instructor

in developing competencies and skills beneficial to career advancement, and laid the foundations for future industry-research collaborations between the NSCA, MSVU and NSM..

### **Undergraduate Student Perspective – Marco Redden, Mount St. Vincent University**

The directed study student was presented with the opportunity to take part in this partnership with the museum after approaching the Department Chair about completing a directed study in gerontology. The student's previous coursework in person-centred approaches to dementia care meant that the proposed project was of interest and would make it possible to apply his learning in a practical setting. The open format of the directed study allowed him to work with supervisors to co-design the syllabus and reflect on his own learning processes.

The course engaged the student in working with the assistant curator to establish the goals of the project and complete steps within the syllabus to produce a document of implementation guidelines for the NSM to use moving forward. This included compiling an annotated bibliography of relevant academic sources, conducting an environmental scan to determine whether similar programs existed in the province, and then describe the structure of established programs in other provinces and countries.

Because the ultimate outcome of the directed study was to present the partner with a useful set of guidelines, there was a motivation for the student to build skills in knowledge translation and problem solving. Working with the partner encouraged recognition of the need to be flexible and receptive when considering how to create a program that is both theoretically sound and practically possible with the resources at hand. All parties to the partnerships also needed to consider how to explain and justify the developing program's necessity to potential government and institutional funders as a response to academic research and goals stated in the aforementioned Provincial Action Plan for an Aging Population (2017) and Dementia Strategy (2015). This experience was important in clarifying the realities of program development in relation with questions of resource allocation and scarcity. As directed study student Marco says,

Being a part of this partnership and pedagogical approach was invaluable to my development as a learner. Having the mentorship of both a non-university partner and a professor who were enthusiastic about the project motivated me to elevate the quality of my work and to contextualize course concepts into a real-life setting. This unique learning experience was challenging but overwhelmingly rewarding.

### **Partnership Exercise**

The NSCA/MSVU and NSM pedagogical partnership offers a case that can be used to design deliberative approaches to university and non-university collaborations. The individual directed study model may not be feasible in all situations. Nonetheless, our experience suggests that it may serve as a valuable resource in university and college program and curricular review initiatives, and present unique opportunities to pilot new courses with non-academic partners. The co-mentoring approach differentiates it from traditional service learning approaches by turning attention towards teaching as a collaborative and continuous learning process.

To support this kind of approach under different conditions, we shared with conference participants a small group partner mapping exercise that was comprised of three parts. First, participants identify a course that they are teaching (or would like to teach) and map the possible partners with whom they could collaborate to support enhanced experiential teaching and learning practices. Participants should also consider the resources each partner contributes to teaching and learning, and with what benefit to non-university partners. Second, participants identify other faculty in the university with whom to collaborate (senior if junior, junior if senior). Third, participants develop a plan for inviting a non-university partner or partners, a description of the ways the partner(s), other faculty, and students will be engaged and evaluated, and what will happen when the course is completed (exit plan).

### **Conclusion**

The directed study yielded important insights about the impact of purposeful teaching and research collaborations for undergraduate applied social sciences courses. Participant perspectives identify course activities and assignments that can be used to develop analytical skills and competencies that can help students bridge theory and practice and move knowledge to action. Perspectives also highlight the benefits of advancing faculty development through partnerships with university-based research centres and non-university groups (industry, government, cultural institutions) that involve different kinds of experience and expertise. The course encouraged our attention to existing resources and tools that can be used to support innovation in program development (i.e., partnership maps), and a more reflexive relation to the socio-political and economic conditions that shape whether and how programs are implemented.

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### Authors

**Katie Aubrecht.** Katie Aubrecht, PhD, is a Canadian Institutes of Health Research Health System Impact Postdoctoral Fellow, Nova Scotia Centre on Aging, Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU) and Nova Scotia Health Authority Continuing Care-Research. Katie supervises students and teaches graduate and undergraduate courses as part-time instructor in MSVU's Department of Family Studies and Gerontology. [katie.aubrecht@msvu.ca](mailto:katie.aubrecht@msvu.ca)

**Janice Keefe.** Janice Keefe, PhD, is Full Professor and Chair, Department of Family Studies and Gerontology, Mount Saint Vincent University, Lena Isabel Jodrey Chair in Gerontology, and appointed Director, Nova Scotia Centre on Aging. Janice's research areas are caregiving policy and practice, rural aging, continuing care policy, and projecting the needs of older Canadians. [janice.keefe@msvu.ca](mailto:janice.keefe@msvu.ca)

**Lisa Bower.** As Assistant Curator, Nova Scotia Museum's Cultural History Collection, Lisa is responsible for preserving, storing, documenting, acquiring, and exhibiting 55,000+ historically significant artifacts. Lisa's career spans private and public sectors, including exhibit renewal at the Fundy Geological Museum and reorganization of the province's historic textile and clothing collection. [lisa.bower@novascotia.ca](mailto:lisa.bower@novascotia.ca)

**Marco Redden.** Marco graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Psychology from Mount Saint Vincent University in 2016 and works as a research assistant with professors in MSVU's Psychology, Education, and Gerontology departments. He will begin his Master of Arts in Family Studies and Gerontology in 2018. [marco.redden@msvu.ca](mailto:marco.redden@msvu.ca)