Building an Eldertopia: An Activity for a Sociology of Aging Course

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In his book, *What are Old People For?* (2004), William Thomas wrote about “a community that improves the quality of life for people of all ages by strengthening and improving the means by which (1) the community protects, sustains, and nurtures its elders, and (2) the elders contribute to the well-being and foresight of the community.” (page 302). Thomas termed this community an Eldertopia. In an Eldertopia, adults support elders and elders support adults, and elders acculturate children and children provide assistance to elders. This is a community of cooperation and interaction between individuals of all ages. The Eldertopia became my focus for my course is the sociology of aging and the basis of a course project.

In my Sociology of Aging course (a 400-level course), I use the concept of an Eldertopia as both a focus for my course and as a culminating project for my students. My course is comprised largely of upper-level sociology majors and with few gerontology majors or minors. This composition made some approaches to this course challenging – for example, while this course is a 400-level course, it also serves as the introduction to our gerontology program. To teach these students about the sociology of aging, I found it necessary to have an overarching theme for the semester. In the past I have used a demographic approach, a problems/solutions approach, and a community resources approach. None of these have worked as well as the Eldertopia approach to excite and motivate my students to think about aging in a sociological way.

I started the semester by introducing Thomas’ Eldertopia. We read excerpts from his book (Thomas, 2004) and his AARP article (Thomas, 2011). There are other readings
available as well as a video, all of which are easily found with an Internet search. We considered examples of proposals for senior centers and elder-friendly programs, rating each (poor, good, excellent) on how well they match the requirements of an Eldertopia. Throughout the semester I would provide more complex examples and students were required to rate each with specific drawbacks. I found these examples within Thomas’ book, and make up examples based on newspaper articles about similar attempts. Each lecture, each field trip (nursing home, senior center), each guest speaker (Hospice social worker, retirement specialist) was tied to our discussions of the Eldertopia. We ended each class period with a simple question: “How does this contribute or detract from an Eldertopia?” Quickly, students began answering this question without being asked. Students started bringing in articles about service and programs that they thought were an Eldertopia and searching for existing services and programs that matched our class discussions. Throughout the semester, students’ engagement increased as evidenced by their attendance, participation, thoughtfulness in discussions, and quality of work on assignments and exams. I attribute much of this change to the focus of the course – the Eldertopia.

For the final project, students were asked to design an Eldertopia of their own. Students were purposefully given little formal direction. Students were allowed to be as creative as they wanted to be, so long as their Eldertopia met Thomas’ definition. Other than this requirement, students had little instruction on the project itself – I wanted to encourage them to interpret Thomas’ Eldertopia as they wanted or saw fit. Students were not required to use outside resources (although many did) and there was no format requirement. Students presented their projects to the class, which included community
members representing a variety of programs and services for the older population. The goal of this activity was for students to (1) show their understanding of the concept of Eldertopia, (2) to assess the needs of an aging population, and (3) to incorporate the course activities, lectures, and materials into their interpretation of an Eldertopia. Assessment of these goals became easy, as the student projects were nearly exactly as I had envisioned. I used a rubric to assess individual pieces of the project and presentation. I would recommend that future projects (or perhaps projects with different audiences) include a bit more detail in the assignment itself. For my students they were not used to a lack of formal instruction and this make them nervous – they wanted a page requirements, for example (this of course was challenging, as most students did not write a formal essay-type project).

Students prepared interesting and unique projects – from a grant proposal to a letter to the editor to a map of an Eldertopia to video game simulation. Students developed education programs where elders would teach courses on sewing or canning at a local elementary school and students would teach the elders about digital cameras or Skype. Other programs included cooking classes taught by elders and taken by elders, and where food was provided to local food shelves or meal programs. One student presented a sales pitch to interested elders for a newly constructed Eldertopia. Students’ projects represented a clear and in-depth understanding of both the concept of an Eldertopia and of the social issues involved in working and living with an aging population.

Students commented throughout the semester about this project and often asked Eldertopia-type questions of quest speakers and of me. Previous approaches to this course did not seem to solidify the material from the class the way this approach did. The
problems/solutions approach was often too macro for students to comprehend and the demographic approach was often too abstract for a group of students without a demographic background. The community resources approach was a start towards this level of student engagement, but did not fully engage students the way the Eldertopia did. I would recommend to others having a theme for their courses – any theme. For me, and for this particular population of students, the Eldertopia approach seems to have worked.

Bibliography
