

Evaluating "Get a Life": A Semester-long Project to Enhance Students' Knowledge of Diverse Patterns in Human Development

By Cynthia J. Smith
Wheeling Jesuit University

One of the challenges I have found in teaching a life-span developmental psychology course is to have the students appreciate and understand the complexity and diversity in the developmental process. This is a challenge, in part, because most students are relatively young (late teens, early twenties) and have not had a great deal of experience with normative developmental changes that occur in the human life-span. This paper describes a semester-long project for undergraduate developmental psychology students and its evaluation.

Previous research on the teaching of psychology has stated the value to connecting course material to real-life events. There have been a number of methods used to help students connect course-based information to real-life experiences in developmental psychology courses, including observations (Clements, 1995), community service (McCluskey-Fawcett & Green, 1992), and biographies of senior citizens (Neysmith-Roy & Kleisinger, 1997).

One creative way in making developmental concepts relevant is by having the students engage in a variation of a first-person account of psychological concepts (Banyard, 2000). However, I wanted my students to understand how a particular life event could disrupt or delay later development so I used an evolving case study approach in my course. In my developmental psychology course, instead of reading about a person's account, the students made up a story about a hypothetical person. Hamill and Hale (1996) reported a similar project using one particular life event and had students complete a paper and poster presentation on the life event.

My semester-long project was modified from the "Get a Life!" project by Janowitz (1995). The project was created to integrate students' learning about the entire life-span by including non-normative events to challenge students to think about different developmental pathways and to personalize developmental concepts that many students may not have considered as influential in development, such as gender, race, culture, and major illnesses. Janowitz further complicated the developmental process in his project by having "wild cards." These wild cards were events or issues that were factored into the life the students were describing. I use these wild cards but have modified them to include more positive events based on my students' evaluations of the events and how realistic the events were.

Early in the semester in my course, students acquire "new identities." They are given basic information about a hypothetical newborn baby. This information includes birthweight, gestational age, sex, and parental background including age of parents, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Throughout the

semester, the students are given additional information about their new selves following in chronological order from infancy to late adulthood. This additional information contains the wild card events created by Janowitz and modified by me. The students draw the new information out of a bowl that contains items for that particular chronological age (i.e., infancy/ toddlerhood, middle childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood, late adulthood). This new information contains a variety of events that may have an impact on human development. There are good things that happen to the individual (e.g., win the lottery, inherit money, get married), there are bad things (e.g., raped, mugged, parent dies), and there are ambivalent things (e.g., birth of a sibling, parent gets new job, parent gets re-married). The idea is that the student would be exposed to information that is not in the student's current developmental perspective, for example a change in sex or cultural upbringing.

In the "Get a Life!" project, the students write two short papers throughout the semester. The paper in the middle of the semester covers the person's life up to adolescence. The final paper covers the person's life since adolescence. The grade on the papers is based on the students' ability to incorporate research to back up their claims they make regarding their life events.

The first year I used this project I asked students to provide qualitative comments about the project. Many of the comments indicated that the students liked the project because they could be creative, enjoyed writing the paper, and realized how lucky they were. But several students indicated that they needed more direction on how to incorporate research into the project, needed more positive things - "life is not as bad as it was in my paper", and needed fewer items because too many things were happening in the person's life. As one can see, there were some positive statements and there were some areas that needed to be improved in the project.

The second time I offered the course and the assignment I provided more positive items throughout the life-span and offered to help students find research sources for their papers. Additionally, I used a seven-item survey evaluating the level of effectiveness in learning developmental concepts, level of enjoyment, and level of realistic information (this came out of the first qualitative evaluation). Students in the course completed a survey specifically designed to measure the impact of the semester-long project on the students. Students responded to 4 questions on a five point scale (1 = not at all to 5 = very much) regarding the students' learning. Three other questions measured how enjoyable the project was, how challenging the project was, and how realistic the information received was.

As shown in Table 1, the results of the survey items indicated that the students enjoyed writing the paper, supporting the qualitative data from the first semester of students. Students also indicated that the project was effective in learning developmental psychology and the idea of diversity. The students indicated that the project itself was somewhat challenging and the students were

somewhat effective in integrating previous research into the project. Again there was some indication that the "wild card" information received may not always be realistic. My impression of the project is that the students learn about the impact of various social factors on development, but are hesitant to actively seek information that confront their assumptions about human development or they lack the necessary skills to seek out this information.

Overall, the results indicate that the students enjoy this project and identify the project as being effective and somewhat challenging. Students responded positively to the project both in their written comments and on the evaluation measures. The informational pieces (wild card events) provided throughout the semester include a diverse collection of developmental changes and processes that appear to be effective in learning about developmental psychology. Students reported that the project made them think about the problems and illnesses others have in their lives. The evaluation of this project is limited in that I evaluated the project only after the students completed the course.

A student criticism of the project involves the notion that some of the items are unrealistic (one student suggested the items were far-fetched). Although I agree that continually having negative information about your life could be unrealistic, the students draw the information out of a bowl (luck of the draw in life so to speak). The chances of continually receiving negative information are rather low. Also, I am not sure I would get rid of some of the negative items and replace them with more positive items.

In this project the student obtained a new identity and that may have created some discomfort when bad things happened to him/her. Despite these comments about some of the items being unrealistic, this project is useful and provides an additional way to help students understand developmental psychology concepts beyond personal narratives. In the future, I will discuss the project by telling the students that some of the life events appear to be unrealistic but in reality these events do occur and stress the importance of how these events impact development. Additionally, based on Hamill and Hale's (1996) application of the "Lot in life" project to the local community, I will ask the students to identify several sources in the community that would be able to address the challenges associated with their life events.

References

- Banyard, V. (2000). Using first-person accounts to teach students about psychological disorders. Teaching of Psychology, 27, 40-43.
- Clements, A. (1995). Experiential-learning activities in undergraduate developmental psychology. Teaching of Psychology, 22, 115-118.
- Hamill, S., & Hale, C. (1996). Your lot in life. Teaching of Psychology, 23, 245-246.
- Janowitz, J. (1995, January). "Get a Life!" Overcoming student egocentrism in life span courses. Paper presentation at the 17th Annual National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology Conference, St. Petersburg, Florida.
- McCluskey-Fawcett, K., & Green, P. (1992). Using community service to teach developmental psychology. Teaching of Psychology, 19, 150-152.
- Neysmith-Roy, J., & Kleisinger, C. (1997). Using biographies of adults over 65 years of age to understand life-span developmental psychology. Teaching of Psychology, 24, 116-118.

Table 1
Responses to the Seven Evaluation Items measuring the impact of "Get a life"

Evaluation Items	Mean	sd
How effective was the life-span project in your learning about developmental psychology?	4.23	.44
How enjoyable was writing the life-span project as compared to other papers you have to write?	4.54	.66
How effective were you in integrating previous research and information in the life-span project?	3.92	.28
How effective was the project on your realizing .65 how different circumstances impact development?	4.38	
How challenging was the project for you?	2.92	.64
How realistic were the different pieces of information you received during the project?	3.88	.82
How effective was the project on you understanding the idea of diversity in human development?	4.23	.73

Author Note

Cynthia Smith, Psychology Department, Wheeling Jesuit University.

I want to thank C. James Goodwin for his helpful comments on an earlier draft. Results from this evaluation were presented at the 23rd Annual National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology, St. Petersburg, Florida, January 2001.

Send correspondence and requests for copies of the complete project description to Cynthia Smith, Psychology Department, Wheeling Jesuit University, 316 Washington Avenue, Wheeling, WV 26003; email cysmith@wju.edu; Office phone: (304) 243-4429; Fax number: (304) 243-2608.