Readers' Theater in a Medical Context: On Aging and Old Age
Fall 2010

Instructors: Guy Micco, MD with Linda Spector, Drama director, instructor and playwright
Units: 1 (2nd unit for independent study possible)
Maximum class size: 8 students, graduate level (upper division undergraduate by permission of instructor)
Course number: HMS 210 (HMS 298 for 2nd unit, discuss with Guy Micco)
Room: 590L University Hall and Salem Lutheran Home (see class schedule)
Course Meetings: Wednesdays, 5:30 to 8:30 PM, from September 1 thru November 10, plus two performances toward the end of the course, dates TBA

Live performances help bring new interpretations and new meanings to the written word. Readers' theater is a technique used in the performance of literature in which texts are staged with minimal production values and scripts are not fully memorized. Plays are not the only form of literature that can be “performed.” Poems and short stories, even novels and memoirs (and many other forms of fiction and nonfiction) have been successfully adapted for the stage. With Readers’ Theater, rehearsal and preparation time are significantly reduced so that non-professional performers, who cannot commit to the six to eight weeks of nightly rehearsal traditionally necessary for a fully staged production, can participate; and, performances can be made available to communities with fewer resources.

In this course, we will choose stories, plays, and poems that have to do with aging and old age; we hope they will deal with the pleasures as well as the problems and concerns brought to us by aging in our society. This year, the course will last eleven weeks, with weekly class-time and two outside performances. We anticipate a lively intergenerational and interdisciplinary dialogue among Berkeley graduate students in healthcare professions, humanities, and social sciences, and a group of elders at Salem Lutheran Home, a continuing care retirement community in Oakland. Our course will begin on the Berkeley campus, but several class meetings will be at Salem Lutheran with interested elders who reside there. To spark discussion, we will engage in a variety of theater and role-playing activities in which the topics will pertain to old age and aging, and to intergenerational exchanges. We will also practice dramatic exercises and techniques that focus on voice, body and presentation; and, for those who are interested, there will be opportunities to visit and participate in Linda Spector’s “Imagination Workshop” at a skilled nursing elder-care community in Berkeley (see below).

We will have the time to prepare and perform only a few texts; though we will read and discuss many others together. At the end of the course, we will all ‘perform’ together at Salem Lutheran and on the Berkeley campus, for a wider audience from both sites. After each performance, we will engage in a discussion with our audience. This is perhaps the richest aspect of Readers’ Theater. We look forward to an exciting and fun class!

Small print: Some of our rehearsals, performances and/or after-show discussions may be recorded (audio and/or video) to be used as teaching tools. A dvd comprised of a performance and comments by members of a former class and audience is available for your viewing pleasure.
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Course Objectives

By the end of this course, students will:

• have discussed and learned from examples of the vast literature (poetry, novels, plays, essays, stories, myths) devoted to aging and end-of-life matters in all societies.

• have successfully performed (with the Readers’ Theater technique) various types of "aging" literature before audiences of elders and of their (student) peers.

• have practiced and employed presentational skills such as vocal expression and proper posture while performing.

• better understand the relationship between old and young in our time and place and how that relationship is changing as we are living longer.

• begin to recognize the contributions of wisdom and experience that older people make to all societies.

• have learned more on how to communicate with elders in a positive and relaxed manner.

• understand how theater may be used to provoke action, changes in relationships, and comprehension of ideas.

• understand the potential of dramatic improvisation to enhance communication and comprehension of ideas.

Course Requirements:

1. Attend and participate in all class meetings. Assignments, including readings and writing, are to be completed prior to each class. If a class must be missed, a 3-page paper, discussing the reading for the week, or another topic agreed upon with instructors, will be due the following week. (This will be in addition to any written assignment for the week.)

2. The first 15 (or so) minutes of most classes will be reserved for a student presentation on our topic ("aging")! This could be a poem, story, or essay; a film clip, a newspaper or magazine article, a cartoon, TV program, internet site, or personal experience (or other).

3. Participate in the two Readers’ Theater presentations near the end of course - one at Salem Lutheran Home, the other at UC Berkeley. (These will likely occur during the week of October 25 and/or November 1.)

Readings: some will be posted on the course’s bspace site, others will be brought to class by instructors and students.
Readers’ Theater: On Aging and Old Age (HMS 210)

COURSE SYLLABUS

1. September 1 (590L University Hall)
   - Introductions
   - Guy on aging, Linda on performance, discussion of syllabus
   - Discuss our goals/hopes/reasons/anxieties re being here
   - Read aloud and discuss selected performance texts

Assignment for September 8:
   - Find at least one new reading, write a précis and email to the class by next Wednesday; be prepared to direct an adaptation of it.

2. September 8 (590L, University Hall)
   - Student presentation
   - Warm-ups
   - Discuss assigned readings
   - Try out new adaptations, discuss new readings, make preliminary decisions

Assignment for September 15:
   - READ for next week: Savitt Medical Readers Theater, Long and Hopkins Performing Literature
   - Find at least one new reading, write a précis and email to the class by next Wednesday; be prepared to direct an adaptation of it.

3. September 15 (Salem Lutheran - meet at University and Oxford to car pool)
   - Introductions
   - Discuss reader’s theater, performance possibilities, discuss intergenerational exchange, discuss goals for session (process goals and product goals)
   - Introduce warm-up exercises and why they are important
   - Consider some texts that have already been adapted – read and discuss, including how they change when different voices read/speak them
   - Try texts that Berkeley students bring in, play with how they are read

Assignment for September 22:
   - Find at least one new reading, write a précis and email to the class by next Wednesday; be prepared to direct an adaptation of it.

4. September 22 (590L University Hall)
   - Student presentation
   - Discuss last week – What worked? What didn’t? Surprises? Delights? Disappointments? What do we need to be prepared for?

Assignment for September 29:
   - Find at least one new reading, write a précis and email to the class by next Wednesday; be prepared to direct an adaptation of it.

5. September 29 (Salem Lutheran)
   - Student presentation
   - Warm-ups
   - Role-playing/improv games
- Discuss what comes up, both in terms of form and content; talk about whether any of this can work in performance contexts, and why; how could (or couldn’t) the audience be introduced into this process.

**Assignment for October 6:**
- Find at least one new reading, write a précis and email to the class by next Wednesday; be prepared to direct an adaptation of it.

**6. October 6 (Salem Lutheran)**
- Student presentation
- Warm-ups
- Continue trying out and discussing texts

**7. October 13 (Salem Lutheran)**
- Student presentation
- Warm-ups
- Re-reading texts and final selections for performances

**Assignment for October 20:**
- Consider stereotypes of aging in our society – in literature, the media, advertising, cartoons. Bring examples and be prepared to present them in class. Why and how do we stereotype groups of people? Where do stereotypes come from? Do elders stereotype younger people? How do stereotypes hinder/help intergenerational communication?

**8. October 20 (Salem Lutheran)**
- Student presentation
- Warm-ups
- Role playing. Improv/drama games and discussion of stereotypes
- Linda Spector’s children’s play about stereotypes in fairy tales, “Ol’ Mother Goose Ain’t What She Used To Be.”

**9. October 27 (Salem Lutheran)**
- Student presentation
- Warm-ups
- Rehearsals

**10. November 3 (Salem Lutheran)**
- Possible performance date at Salem Lutheran

**11. November 10 – Final class (590L, University Hall)**
- Wrap-up, course evaluation

**Note:** Our two performances will be during the weeks of October 25 and/or November 1. (Per above, the Salem performance may be on November 3; UCB’s may be on November 4)
Linda Spector is a Drama director, instructor and playwright. For 40 years, she has taught acting, improvisation, and drama techniques to students from 6 to 100 in a variety of settings including public and private schools, senior facilities, hospitals, community centers, and conferences. For 27 years, she served as co-director, playwright and instructor for Stagebridge, a senior theater company whose goal is to use Drama and Storytelling to bridge the gap between the generations, present plays about aging, and make dramatic activities an opportunity for older people. She has written and directed more than 30 plays concerned with aging, intergenerational, and societal issues that have been performed in theaters, schools, and community centers.

Linda has also developed "Imagination Workshops" using drama techniques such as improvisation, stream of consciousness, visualization, and sense memory exercises. Meeting with classes in convalescent homes and dementia facilities, senior centers and assisted living residences, she works to keep the participants' imaginations, memories, and five senses vital and active. The hour workshops are characterized by a sense of fun, exploration, and fantasy. Students may elect to participate in and learn about how to conduct these sessions.

"We spend time and money to feed, house, and clothe our frail elderly and disabled, but their imaginations are relegated to watching television or the view from a window."