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# How College Students and Nintendo Help Redefine the Senior Moment

Three Pace University students involved in a computer science/service-learning course use the Nintendo Wii to help seniors improve and mental and physical function.

By [Lizzie Hedrick](#) | [Email the author](#) | December 16, 2010 [Print](#)

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During the holiday season, many children will ask their parents for the latest video game systems. And—much to their parents' chagrin—the kids will spend hours glued to the screens, discovering the intricacies of the latest games.

According to Pace University professor of computer science and information systems Jean Coppola, technology like Nintendo Wii can serve a social function that transcends entertainment for children. Through her service learning courses at Pace, Coppola's students year-after-year have continuously built on a project that introduces new technology to senior citizens, with the hope of improving their physical and mental functions—ultimately enhancing quality of life.

Three of Coppola's standout students this semester are Daniel Hood, Adam Gharzita and Genevive Lusaria. All undergraduates, Coppola said the trio has taken ownership of their project, independently contacting geriatric care facilities—[Andrus-on-Hudson](#) in Hastings, The Osborn in Rye and United Hebrew in New Rochelle—and conducting their research passionately and professionally.

Hood, Gharzita and Lusaria's "twist" on Coppola's assignment was to introduce the interactive Nintendo Wii console into nursing home and assisted living facilities, logging seniors' progress as their skills improved.

According to Hood, the seniors were, at first, "a little skeptical of being thrown into a bunch of activities. They said, 'Oh, I'm not going to be able to do this.' But throughout the course, we've noticed that they've started to enjoy it more and improve on the skills we've taught them."

In some cases, he said, the college students have been able to compete with the seniors. "And some have even beaten us," Hood said, laughing.

To help oversee the students' work, Coppola has partnered with nurses both inside and outside Pace University, making it clear that the research is more than just a term project for undergraduates.

"At the beginning of the semester. I challenge students to make a difference," Coppola said. "This is a service learning course, which is very different from anything they've ever taken before. Their job is to use the knowledge we've given them in class to make a lasting difference in the community at large."

Adam Gharzita is a fine arts major with a minor in psychology who wants to become an art therapist. For him, working with seniors has been "more than fulfilling."

"In art therapy, one works hard at creating something pleasing to the eye," he said. "Once it's complete, the person can look at his work and say, 'I just did that!' With the Wii, the resulting 'I just did that' moment might be harder to come by, but it delivers the added bonus of the individual learning a

new skill, which is rare for older people."

According to Hood, there were three areas in which playing Wii made the greatest impact on seniors: memory, physical motor function and confidence in their capabilities.

"When you teach senior citizens something, they'll often forget how to do it unless you repeat the instructions many times," Hood said. "With the Wii, the repetition is built into the system."

Marketing major at Pace, Hood was recently hired by United Hebrew as their activities coordinator for senior residents. He said this project has inspired him to continue working with seniors and technology, further developing Coppola's service learning project.

"I think the next step is to raise awareness of technology's capacity to help older people and raise funding for its expanded implementation," Hood said. "There are also controllers and mice that could work better for people with arthritis."

Pace University has recently expanded Coppola's course to be offered not only in White Plains, but at the New York City campus as well. Coppola stresses that her students' research is

In 2002 Pace established a three-credit service-learning requirement for all students enrolled at the university—and though these courses may be more taxing for both students and professors—Coppola said the ultimate reward is most definitely worth the effort.

Though Coppola stressed that the research "is still preliminary"—because the sample size of those tested is still too small to draw conclusions—the program's benefit to individual seniors is irrefutable.

"The older adults love the college students," Coppola said. "They love the social contact with the students, but they also know that they can't be left behind [by new technology]. The old ladies will grab me in the hallway and say, 'I know it's time. I know I have to learn the computer now.'"

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