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Teaching Tips:

Challenges and Highlights of Having Older-than-Average Students in an Adulthood & Aging Class

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When I first started teaching the Adulthood and Aging class, I never realized what a great natural resource I have right in the classroom: the older-than-average (OTA) student. If we assume that the average college student is between the ages of 18-22, OTAs can be defined as anyone in their mid-20s and beyond. More likely, they are in their 30s, 40's, 50's and 60's. My view of such OTA's, however, has not always been typical of my thinking about the OTA, however, and I have always been a little gun-shy re: OTA's.

This reserve can be traced back to a comment an OTA made once when I was teaching Developmental Psychology several years ago. The topic was childbirth and as I was going over the various stages of childbirth an OTA student raised her hand to ask a question. In previous lectures I had mentioned some personal information to the class (birthplace, family photos, etc.). The question, which I can still remember so vividly, was "If you don't have any children how can you possibly know what childbirth is like?"

There was a brief silence (amazing with a 200+ classroom full of students) and all eyes were fixed on me as I fumbled for a witty response. As I usually do, my humorous response was something like "Lady, I don't know how an car engine works either but I can still drive to work". This broke the ice, the class broke up in waves of laughter but I was forever wondering how to deal with these OTA's. I couldn't very well set an age limit for my classes (no one over 45 need not register) or card them at the lecture hall door. And given the sharp increase in the average age of the typical college student in recent years, with more and more of them now considered older than average, I realized there would be more and more of them out there (sounds like a bad B-movie huh?). My response? Take advantage of these people (figuratively, of course) in a way that makes them useful and integral to my classes. This is especially relevant for both my Developmental and Adulthood and Aging classes and I now try to identify and accommodate these individuals.

Here are some tips and tried-and-true methods that have worked for me in the past.

1. Don't make too much of a big deal that you have OTA's in your classes (they don't like all the attention), but at the same time don't ignore them either. I consciously try to make an effort the very first class session to chat with them, ask them questions, and make them feel comfortable in my class. Of course, I do that with all my students but I make an effort to make the OTAs feel welcome.
2. Don't ask them how old they are. Rather, ask them their date of birth. In many of my classes I ask for such information on Day 1 and also ask hometown favorite music, etc. Such personal information is invaluable as the semester progresses regarding cohort effects, generation gap issues, retirement, etc. Watch out though. One semester I had a Vietnam Veteran in my class and he had no qualms about showing me his battle scars, which ran parallel to his upper thigh and buttocks!
3. Rely on them frequently re: class discussions of relevant topics and take advantage on what they have to offer. I have found that many OTA's are not shy in the least and are often wanting to contribute (really the anecdote above re: childbirth stages). I have had many OTA's come up and disclose some pertinent information (e.g., I just retired and know a lot about that, or I just turned 65 and can discuss how I have transitioned into this, etc.).
4. Give them some latitude when they speak up or ask questions in class. Many of my OTA's have been out of formal school for many years and may be a bit uncomfortable about dealing with individuals 10-30 years younger than they are (for many it may be like having to deal with their own children).
5. Related to #4 above, attune the class to issues related to OTA's in as subtle a way as possible. I try to do this in the context of ageism. It has been my experience that when an OTA asks a question (and they typically sit front and center and ask a lot of questions) the rest of the class (the more typical college age student) usually roles their eyes and sees their own parents in the class rather than some other OTA. This is a relevant issue, at least for me, as in some previous classes mid-semester and end-of-the-semester comments have sometimes included things related to the output of the OTA students.

Sometimes their comments have not been terribly nice ("Tell that old man to shut up!" or "Have that older lady ask these stupid questions after class or during your office hours"). Many contemporary college students still think that only 18-22 year olds are in the class (a good starting point re: a discussion about ageism).

Since that initial outburst re: whether I am competent to discuss stages of childbirth despite not having any children, I have come to rely on the OTA student in many of my classes, but especially Adulthood & Aging. They not only offer a unique perspective, they bring to the class information that no textbook can ever bring to the class. It is inevitable that the population of OTA's will steadily increase in our classes and it is now

more commonplace for a college or university to allow OTA's in some classes at reduced tuition charges (I have seen these for adults 60 years and older, for instance). Turn this inevitability into a golden opportunity and watch the results. I have informally noticed that the more I involve OTA's in my classes they more non-OTA's perceptions and stereotypes of older adults decreases. This is certainly good news on many levels.