



Teaching Tips:

Elder Mentorship in Graduate Education

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One of the most distressing features of adult development and aging instruction is how little this process directly involves elders. Didactic lecture formats necessarily offer a venue for talking about elders, and innovative class assignments and service learning opportunities may even allow limited interactions between students and elders. Clearly such pedagogical approaches have merit; any scholarly pursuit requires a certain amount of 'book learning,' and observations in facilities geared toward seniors along with some student-elder interaction lend valuable context to instructional materials derived from class. But to assume that such a mix of learning opportunities alone is optimal, or even sufficient, is in our view an expression of supreme arrogance. Students remain 'outside looking in,' and never really get the chance to fully internalize the true meanings of growing older. Only elders themselves can know the actual experience of their aging, and only full involvement of an elder in a student's learning can allow the richness of this experience to be appreciated and connected to classroom themes and concepts. In the Ph.D. Program in Gerontology at the University of Kentucky, we have developed a strategy for addressing this problem. We have established an elder mentorship component wherein each entering doctoral student is immediately teamed with a community elder, and together they are assigned and work together on a variety of activities that reflect a semester-long progression of topics within a core seminar required of all students.

Recruiting and Matching Elder Mentors

Prior to the beginning of the semester, the instructors of this team-taught course recruit the elder mentors. The only requirements for participation are to be over 65 years of age, to be cognitively intact, and to have a willingness to spend significant time with a student over the period of a semester. Elders are identified through numerous channels. Some are retired university faculty members and administrators, others are members of churches familiar to the instructors, and others are friends of existing mentors or are acquaintances in social or civic organizations. Once the appropriate number of mentors is selected, the teams are established by a random selection of student and mentor names. This pairing strategy was found to be more effective than any efforts of matching mentors and students according to their characteristics. A brief meeting is held with the instructors and mentors before the start of classes to provide introductions, explain the purpose and content of the seminar, describe the mentorship component and articulate expectations,

and answer any questions. The mentors, students, and instructors then gather at a reception as the semester begins. Students are introduced to their mentors, and several icebreaker activities are conducted to initiate relationships between the students and their mentors. (For example, each student and their newly met mentor must decide on, and then share with the group, a single older person who they most admire.) The other business of this meeting is for each student/mentor team to establish mutually convenient times and locations for meetings throughout the semester, and determine a specific meeting within the first week. From then on each student/elder mentor dyad is essentially on its own.

Seminar Assignments

A series of assignments provide focus for student/ mentor meetings throughout the semester. In general the assignments are structured to facilitate a dialogue between student and mentor on various aspects of growing old. The particular tasks and topics of each exercise are intentionally chosen to address three concerns. First, we sequentially address targeted topics, including individual perceptions of aging, societal images of aging, and health issues in aging. These exercises involve, for example, developing a joint definition of ‘successfully’ aging, critically viewing a movie that centers on older characters, and completing a fairly comprehensive health history. Second, we move from exercises that are topically discrete (such as describing general family, employment, work, and place life-lines) toward exercises that are integrative in nature (a narrative life review that explains life trajectories and the development of meanings). Finally, we structure exercises sequentially to foster growth in the student-mentor relationship. Our intention here is to promote quality interactions by providing opportunities to establish trust between the student and mentor, recognizing diversity among individuals and how such diversity informs the dynamics of any relationship. Early assignments are necessarily descriptive and non-threatening in terms of the information that is shared by the student and mentor. Later assignments, on the other hand, can become more sensitive, with highly personal events, feelings, and emotions often becoming part of the discourse between student and mentor.

Permeating each assignment is an attempt to relate what is being learned in the classroom and from reading assignments to the lived experience of each elder. We have found that most elder mentors are highly perceptive and are able to provide the student with a different point of view than they gain from texts and lectures. The overall objective is to enhance student sensitivity to the complexities and richness of the aging experience, and to develop an appreciation that most elders are not decrepit and withdrawn but rather have horizons of meaning in their lives and a depth of experience that cannot be understood from superficial contact. The aging experience is one of ongoing adjustment to change—in body and in environment—and students gain a much clearer understanding of how their own elder mentors negotiate their lives in the face of such change. We feel that an understanding of what aging can be provides an important baseline for subsequent work in which invariably students will tend to focus more on pathological conditions.

Outcomes

Formal course evaluations and feedback from both students and the 48 elder mentors who have participated in the program to date suggest multiple positive outcomes. Students report obtaining insight into substantive dimensions of their mentor's lifeworld—understood in environmental and temporal context—that are not revealed in class or through their reading. Most participants, elders and mentors, claim to have achieved a deeper level of self-understanding from having participated in the process of reflexive dialogue over an extended period that is the essence of the program. In many cases, both students and mentors perceive that what they learn through the process transcends what each brings to the interaction individually. It is also our assessment that, in contrast to the isolated and solitary scholar model, the program provides a useful model of the collaborative process of inquiry that is increasingly the focus of contemporary science. Finally, an unexpected outcome of the program has been the development of some friendships involving frequent contact that have lasted for years beyond the completion of the course. Indeed, the graduation celebration of the first three graduates of the doctoral program, almost five years after the completion of the course, was graced by the presence of all three of their mentors.

For a fuller description and evaluation of the initial mentorship program see:

Victory, K., Ravidal, H. & Rowles, G.D. (1998). The Conundrums of Collaboration. In R.J.F. Elsner (Ed.). *Voices of Experience: Listening to Our Elders* (pp.11-35). Athens, GA: University of Georgia Gerontology Center.