

Teaching Tips (June 2008)—Beginnings and Endings

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With the recent close of one semester and the realization that my fall teaching schedule includes a course I haven't taught for three years, beginnings and endings have been on my mind. Thus this column will share exercises I use in my Psychology of Aging course, one at the beginning and two others toward the end of the semester.

The Beginning. Not surprisingly, students enroll in Psychology of Aging with many stereotypes about older adults. A prominent generalization is that *everything* falls apart with age. A contrasting set of generalizations comes from students who have at least one vibrant older adult in their lives. My goal is to highlight from the beginning of the semester that older adulthood has pros and cons, just like any other period of life does. Thus after defining what our working definition of older adulthood is, which includes dispelling the notion that it starts at age 30, I ask students to think about stages of life they have already experienced. I ask them what was good and bad about being 8 years old. When responses die down, I ask them what was good and bad about being 14 years old. Again, when students are out of responses, I ask them what is or was good and bad about being 18 years old. This Q & A often allows much shared laughter as we identify common experiences, a wonderful way to start a course. I wind up this exercise by stating that every stage of life has good and bad things about it, and that we should expect that from older adulthood as well. To reinforce this point, I show students an excerpt from the book *Tuesdays With Morrie* (Albom, 1997) that includes statements such as,

As you grow, you learn more. If you stayed at twenty-two, you'd always be as ignorant as you were at twenty-two. Aging is not just decay, you know. It's growth. It's more than the negative that you're going to die, it's also the positive that you *understand* you're going to die, and that you live a better life because of it....if you've found meaning in your life, you don't want to go back. You want to go forward. You want to see more, do more. You can't wait until sixty-five....You have to find what's good and true and beautiful in your life as it is now. Looking back makes you competitive. And, age is not a competitive issue. (pp.118-120)

Many students comment later that the *Tuesdays With Morrie* passage startled them and got them thinking about aging in a new way.

Parts of the Ending. After we have studied a wide range of topics in the psychology of aging, students have two opportunities to discuss what they have learned with actual older adults.

The last mini-paper, due sometime within the last couple of weeks of the semester, asks students to interview an older adult about that person's experience regarding one of the topics we have covered (e.g., personality, memory, creativity). The assignment acknowledges that a given person's experience may or may not fit with the general patterns of data discussed in the text and lectures, and it asks students to reflect on and write about how well the individual's experience matches the typical experience. Students often take this opportunity to contact an older-adult relative or family friend, an experience which students spontaneously comment has its own rewards. For students who do not have an older adult in their social network, I pair the student with one of local older adults who has expressed interest in working with my students. I have a deadline mid-way through the semester for students to let me know that they need this help to

avoid last-minute, panicked requests that my older adult contacts may not be able to accommodate (only 1 or 2 out of 30 students per semester request assistance).

About the time this writing assignment is due, students also interact with older adults from a local continuing care retirement community (CCRC). When possible, the retirement community sends their bus to campus to transport the class to their facility, giving some students their first exposure to a CCRC. At other times, several of the residents meet us on campus. Typically 4-5 older adults talk with roughly 6-7 students at a time. After about 20 minutes, we rotate the older adults around the groups so students talk with two different older adults. My contact at the CCRC invites a range of individuals in terms of age, marital status, health, and personal background. The students and the older adults alike report that they love this experience.

I designed both the written assignment and the conversations with older adults from the CCRC to remind students that actual older adults can differ from the “average older adults” that we have studied, but many older adults’ experiences match the typical patterns we have discussed. When we debrief from the conversation experience, at least one of the students typically exclaims something like, “Wow, Dr. Multhaup, everything you have been talking about all semester is actually true!” This gives me another opportunity to talk about three of my hopes for my students: (1) Instead of seeing one or two people’s experiences as powerful evidence that validates large-scale studies, students learn to value large-scale studies’ data for what they tell us about the typical aging process independent of vivid anecdotes, (2) students understand variability among people, often illustrated by the kinds of anecdotal evidence they learned about in their conversations with several older adults, and (3) students realize that the choices they make today can impact the kinds of experiences they will have if they are lucky enough to become older adults.

This column is an ending in another way. My term as chair of the APA Education Committee concludes at the end of the summer. I look forward to reading about other people’s teaching ideas in future Teaching Tips columns!

Albom, M. (1997). *Tuesdays with Morrie: An old man, a young man, and life’s greatest lesson*. Random House: New York.