

Teaching Tips:

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Adult development and aging instructors frequently voice a concern that their students, “Just don’t get it.” What do they not get? What it is like to be a 75 year-old retiree experiencing normative, and sometimes non-normative, cognitive, psychological, and physical changes? Rare is the student who can relate to these experiences; thus, a colleague and I developed an active learning strategy for bringing home to our students some of the factors that they will face in their own families and in their careers (Jarrott & Blieszner, 2001). The *Family Meetings* are in-class group activities that occur throughout the semester for an introductory class on adult development and aging that typically enrolls 60 students. In the families, students develop personas and consider the changes associated with later life that their “family members” face. They then reflect on how their families’ sociodemographic characteristics contribute to their experiences of the event. In this column, I describe the creation of the families, the scenarios families play out, and how the Family Meetings could be modified for other gerontology classes.

Family Formations

Each student is assigned to a family that is made up of five to six persons. Every group then receives family characteristics, including members’ ages, genders, roles in the family (e.g. father, wife, uncle), ethnicities, religions, educational levels, any special needs (physical, emotional, and/or cognitive), employment, and socioeconomic levels. Each family consists of at least two older adults (65+), two middle-aged adults (40-64), and one or two members of varied ages. Ethnicity, socioeconomic status, family structure, special needs, and religion vary considerably between families, and sometimes within families. Each student adopts the persona of one member of their family and role plays this

persona at each Family Meeting. Students are encouraged to name their families, and they introduce their families to the class at the end of the first meeting.

Family Meetings

Students meet in class with their families eight times over the course of the semester to role play various later life scenarios. Topics for family meetings are: (1) physical changes, (2) gender and family roles, (3) caregiving, (4) work and retirement, (5) elder abuse, (6) successful aging (selection, optimization, and compensation), and (7) death. Students spend 10-20 minutes considering with their families how they will respond to the scenario and how their response is affected by the family’s sociodemographic characteristics. After discussing the situation, a representative from each family summarizes his/her family’s resolution before the class. Typically, two families receive the same scenario, yet responses to these identical scenarios vary widely as factors of ethnicity, SES, religion, and family structure influence the effects of an event on the family. One person in each family writes a summary of the family’s response to the situation, which is submitted with family members’ signatures at the end of class for credit. The Family Meetings have been used by the author for several years, and the current description of the meetings includes an important change from the original format. A significant modification is the assignment of sociodemographic traits. Originally, students created their personas, selecting sociodemographic characteristics for the family members they would play. However, students often identified characteristics that were unrealistic, contradictory (e.g. a wealthy fast food worker), or never played into their Family Meetings (e.g. practicing Buddhism when the student is unfamiliar with the tenets of Buddhism). With such characterizations, students often found it difficult to meaningfully consider the

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role of their personas' characteristics in how the personas would respond to a situation.

By assigning varied characteristics to the students and structuring discussion questions to tap into the impact of these characteristics, the instructor can guide the summary discussion to incorporate these meaningful variations in the responses of families to similar situations. Students appreciate the purposefulness in assigning characteristics, especially since they are not sure how the traits they select early in the semester will influence their ability to complete the activities throughout the semester.

Student evaluations of the Family Meetings are consistently positive. Students enjoy the opportunity to get to know their classmates, they enjoy the break from a lecturing format, and they leave the course with a greater appreciation for situations they may face as their grandparents, parents and they themselves age and as they enter careers that serve families with aging members. Finally, they are reminded throughout the semester that not all families are able to or would choose to respond similarly to situations faced by older adults and their families.

Family Meetings could be adapted to different gerontology or human development classes in order to promote active learning and student collaboration. For example, in a course I am currently teaching on community services for older adults, students are assigned to "constituency groups" in which they consider and represent the needs of their personas and other members of their constituency group. With family meetings and related role play activities, students have the benefit of active learning with their classroom families while exploring characteristics unlike those of the families to which they belong.

For a full report, see:

Jarrott, S.E., & Blieszner, R. (2001). Creating families in the classroom: An active learning approach. *Gerontology & Geriatrics Education*, 22, 15-27.

Meet the new student rep.....

I received both my BA and MA from Cleveland State University (CSU). At CSU, I was enrolled in the Experimental Research Program, under Dr. Boaz Kahana. For my second year, I worked on Dr. Philip Allen's grant. I am currently a doctoral candidate at The University of Akron in Applied Cognitive Aging (Psychology).

In the past three years at UA, I worked and continue to work with Dr. Harvey Sterns. For the first two years, I was also involved in various projects with Dr. Karen Kopera-Frye.

I am honored to be chosen as a student representative to Division 20, and hope to be an asset to the organization. One of my goals for the upcoming year is to get students more involved. I want to encourage students to develop symposia, conversation hours, and informal get togethers at the APA annual meetings. Last year, Cindy de Frias achieved many of these goals, and I want to acknowledge her fine work. I look forward to working with Cindy and all the other individuals involved with the committee.

Ana Begovic