

## Feature Article: Teaching Tips

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Geropsychologists are frequently called upon to teach an Introduction to Gerontology course at their colleges or universities. This can be both a challenging and exciting task given that the multidisciplinary nature of gerontology not only mandates covering information from diverse fields, but also attracts students from an array of academic majors. Although students in this course are frequently interested in entering the helping professions (e.g., psychology, medicine, social work, nursing), even those preparing for such fields as journalism, law, business, and architecture are increasingly eager to relate gerontology to their future careers. Thus, it is important to ask "What are the fundamental goals of an introductory course in gerontology, and how might they reflect the diversity of both the information to be covered and the career interests of students enrolled in the class?" This article describes a research-oriented group assignment which addresses these goals.

#### The Goals of Introductory Aging Courses

Hulicka and Whitbourne (1990) identified five major goals for introductory courses in adult development and aging. First, the course should dispense relevant information from a variety of disciplinary perspectives covering the psychological, social, and biological aspects of aging. Second, students' attitudes and values regarding older people and the aging process should be challenged in the hopes of reducing ageist beliefs. Third, the course should extend beyond the college classroom and pro-

vide experiential opportunities to interact with older adults in a variety of settings. Fourth, students should acquire an appreciation of the importance of scientific investigation in gerontology, as well as develop basic research skills. Finally, the introductory course in aging should also foster skills and understanding that will apply to students' future careers.

The last goal is akin to the recommendation of other gerontologists (e.g., Clark, 1994; Richardson, Cooper, Swanson, & Ward, 1995) that the development of interprofessionalism should be a primary concern of gerontological education. This refers to awareness of how professionals from various disciplines contribute to gerontological research and practice by working cooperatively to confront a particular gerontological problem or issue. Clark (1994) suggests that the optimal time to foster interprofessionalism is when students have developed enough professional identity to represent their discipline on a working team, but are not already so bound up in their professional education that they are closed to collaborating with those outside of their discipline. Advanced undergraduate students in an Introduction to Gerontology Course thus represent a promising target population for interprofessional education in gerontology. This goal is also consistent with the belief that developing cooperative and collaborative skills among today's undergraduates will lead to a better prepared workforce for tomorrow (Bruffe, 1993; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991).

#### A Collaborative Interdisciplinary Assignment

My graduate students and I have developed an interdisciplinary research-oriented team assignment that addresses each of the goals described above, which is based on the essen-

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tial principles for cooperative learning in the college classroom recommended by educational psychologists (Johnson et al., 1991). The latter include: Positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual accountability, use of social skills, and group processing. Because comprehensive information regarding the assignment can be found elsewhere (see, Smith & Kohn, 1999; APA Division 20 education website). I will only describe its most essential features here.

We assign students from diverse majors to research teams consisting of five to six students, and each team is given a guiding theme (e.g., "Successful Aging", "Special Populations", "Environmental Design", etc.). Team members must then work collaboratively to identify a more specific problem or issue within the assigned theme while ensuring that the disciplinary perspective of each team member is included. In one semester, for example, the "Special Populations" team investigated the concerns of older heart attack patients. A family studies major explored how heart

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attacks affect late-life marriages, whereas a pre-physical therapy student examined older patients' participation in cardiovascular rehabilitation programs. Other teammates likewise investigated issues related to older heart attack patients, each from the unique perspective of his or her major or intended profession.

The next step of the assignment is for students to conduct a literature review on the content area of their individual topics, which requires them to search major books and journals within their respective disciplines. The readings that students identify not only serve as the foundation for the specific research questions that they choose to address at the individual level, but are also used by students to create interviews that are conducted with three older adults and one professional from the student's field of interest. These interviews provide students with the opportunity to (1) address the research questions identified from their literature review; (2) interact with older adults in novel settings to hear their views on the topic at hand; and (3) meet and observe professionals from the field that the student hopes to enter.

At the end of the semester, each team submits a written report containing the team's collective interpretation of its guiding theme; the individual reports of each member's own research findings; and an interprofessional synthesis of the collective findings. This synthesis requires the team to reach a consensus regarding directions for future research, practice, and policy. Each team must also give an in-class presentation of its major findings and conclusions, which permits students to see the results of interprofessional collaboration for teams other than their own.

**Effectiveness of the Assignment**

Evaluations completed by students have consistently revealed the success of the assignment both in addressing the basic goals of gerontological education and adhering to the principles of collaborative learning (see, Smith & Kohn, 1999). Most importantly, the assignment appears to temper ageist beliefs, as exemplified by such comments as, "I didn't realize how interesting older people could be!". We have also found that demands on the instructor's time are minimized by meeting with teams rather than with individual students, and that this is greatly facilitated by presenting ample written guidelines at the beginning of the semester. The success of this assignment supports the belief that the number and type of experiential activities that may be combined with classroom instruction in undergraduate aging courses are limited only by the instructor's creativity and willingness to implement them (Hulicka & Whitbourne, 1990).

**Education Committee & Teaching Tips**

In this issue, the Education Committee introduces a new feature column in the newsletter, Teaching Tips. This column provides pedagogical ideas of interest to instructors of courses in adult development and aging. Teaching Tips focuses on innovative activities, instructional approaches, and reviews of materials that have proven to be useful in teaching students about the psychology of adult development and aging.

If you are interested in submitting your ideas for this column, please contact:

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- Clark, P. G. (1994). Social, professional, and educational values on the interdisciplinary team: Implications for gerontological and geriatric education. Educational Gerontology, *20*, 35-51.
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## Enhancing Outcomes In Women's Health: Translating Psychosocial and Behavioral Research into Primary Care, Community Intervention, and Health Policy

The American Psychological Association will convene the third interdisciplinary conference on women's health. The conference, *Enhancing Outcomes in Women's Health: Translating Psychosocial and Behavioral Research into Primary Care, Community Interventions, and Health Policy*, will be held at the Hyatt Regency Washington on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, on October 4-6, 2001, with Continuing Education Workshops held on October 3, 2001, and during the conference.

### Conference Objectives:

- Highlight state-of-the-art psychosocial and behavioral research in women's health.
- Identify evidence-based approaches in women's health that translate psychosocial and behavioral research into primary care, community interventions, and health policy.
- Identify research that critically examines the current systems and structures for health care delivery to women, and models that promote patient-provider communications, support behavior change, and improve service delivery.
- Showcase multi-disciplinary approaches in women's health, particularly those that synthesize psychology and the other social/behavioral sciences, medicine, nursing, and public health.
- Identify clinical and community-based interventions that tailor information to the unique needs of diverse women, including age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, risk status, sexual orientation, marital/relationship status, and rural/urban community context.
- Highlight models that effectively communicate scientific findings in women's health and their implications for prevention, early detection, and treatment.
- Identify effective psychological and behavioral interventions implemented in women's health care settings that reduce psychological distress, improve quality of life, and improve disease outcomes (e.g., arthritis, cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, autoimmune diseases).

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Richardson, J. A., Cooper, B., Swanson, L., & Ward, M. (1995). Interprofessional education in gerontology: A problem-based model. *Gerontology & Geriatrics Education*, *16*, 37-49.

Smith, G. C., & Kohn, S. J. (1999). An interdisciplinary team research assignment for use in an introduction to gerontology course. *Gerontology & Geriatrics Education*, *19*, 77-91.

### APA Convention Dates (from APA.org)

#### 2000 Washington, DC, August 4-8

2001 San Francisco, CA, August 24-28  
 2002 Chicago, IL, August 23-27  
 2003 Toronto, August 8-12  
 2004 Honolulu, HI July 30-August 5  
 2005 Washington, DC, August 19-23  
 2006 New Orleans, LA, August 11-15

- Highlight research that addresses the role of mental health, especially depression, in the risk, onset, course, and outcome of chronic and life-threatening illnesses affecting women.

Send requests for Call for Papers, Registration and Information to:

Wesley B. Baker, Conference Coordinator  
 American Psychological Association  
 750 First Street, NE  
 Washington, DC 20002-4242  
 Tel: 202-336-6124 Fax: 202-336-6117  
 Email: wbaker@apa.org

Advance Registration (by 8/15/01): \$300 regular attendees/presenters, \$200 students; Late/On-Site Registration: \$375 regular attendees/presenters, \$250 students.

Official Conference Website: <http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/whc3/whc3.html>