
TEACHING TIPS: Examining Stereotypes of Aging in an Undergraduate Life-span Development Course

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A few years ago I found myself in an unexpected situation. The students in my life-span developmental psychology class seemed to be uninterested in the information I was presenting about late adulthood. I found this surprising because I spend most of the semester looking forward to finishing the sections devoted to earlier points in the life span so that I can teach what I love most—adulthood and aging. Even more troubling was the fact that after they had read the text and listened to lectures on cognitive and socioemotional development in adulthood they still missed many exam questions about older adults. Furthermore, when they missed questions, the answers they chose were in line with stereotypes of aging rather than scientific fact. What follows is a brief description of a series of exercises I developed to both engage students and get them to question the beliefs they hold about what older adults and life in late adulthood are like. I have used the exercise in my undergraduate life span course, but it could easily be adapted for a research methods or a graduate developmental course.

Early in the semester I ask students to write down one thing they believe about older adults. As an in-class exercise, we talk about what they have written. Their answers usually range from beliefs that older adults are wise to beliefs that older adults are bad drivers. Even in large classes a lot of conversation is generated. After this discussion, I introduce an assignment that involves identifying the origins of their particular belief and determining whether or not the scientific evidence supports such an idea.

In terms of trying to identify the origin of their beliefs, I ask students to bring to class an example of something they have read or seen that represents their stated belief. Items typically range from magazine advertisements targeted at older adults to greeting cards that carry ageist messages. Students have also brought video clips of characters on television or in the movies. For example, one student brought in a clip from the Simpsons that prominently featured the character of Grandpa. Depending on the size of the class, I either have the students share their items with the entire class or with a small group of class members. This part of the exercise provides the class with a very convincing demonstration that stereotypes of older adults are pervasive in Western society.

After a brief discussion about the difficulty of counteracting stereotypes, I explain that the next part of the assignment is to conduct a limited literature review of the recent scientific evidence related to their belief. For example, if a student's belief was that older adults are wise, they are asked to find and read five articles about age differences (or, similarities in this case) in wisdom. This part of the exercise is a good way to introduce students to the databases that are available to support scientific research. It also provides an opportunity to discuss what a peer-reviewed article is and to discuss the difference between primary and secondary sources.

Next, students are asked to write a paper describing the research findings of the articles they read. At the conclusion of the paper, I ask students to discuss how the scientific evidence either fits or does not fit with their previously held belief. This part of the exercise provides students with the opportunity to integrate research findings on a narrow, well-defined topic. It is also a nice way to introduce the basics of APA format, such as what a cover and reference page should look like and how references should be cited.

Finally, I ask students to share their findings either with the class or with a small group. This part of the exercise allows students to hear the scientific evidence related to a wide variety of topics in the field of adult development and aging.

I've found that students are engaged by this series of activities. They clearly enjoy some parts (finding examples of stereotypes) more than others (writing the paper), but they learn from each step of the assignment. By the end of this one series of exercises, students have identified stereotypes of older adults, learned about the challenge of overcoming stereotypes, conducted a literature review of scientific evidence, and thought critically about one of their beliefs concerning older adults. One unintentional benefit of the exercise is that it helps me stay informed of the latest research findings presented in journals that I do not have the opportunity to read on a regular basis.