Facilitating an Intergenerational Classroom

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At the beginning of the 2016-17 academic year, Needham Yancey Gulley published an *Inside Higher Ed* article challenging educators to move away from a seemingly dated term—*nontraditional*—because it labeled students in a way that could harm their opportunities in the classroom. This is just one way in which the generations have been objectified in higher education, a recent (and popular) question being how to “deal with” or “manage” Millennials.

But why must we compartmentalize generations in an effort to “deal” with them? Beyond the obvious condescension in the language, we can no longer describe millennials only as problem students. The older end of the bracket is now (and has been) joining academia as faculty and staff members: a shift that Stanford University has recognized in structuring its faculty mentorship programming.
At the same time, there really are differences among and between the generations, as both the academic literature and popular culture attest. Rather than enjoying a cohesive or intergenerational approach, Millennials, Gen Xers, and Baby Boomers are often pitted against one another in what The Washington Post calls “generational warfare.” Generations of people either feel or are perceived to be in competition with one another for power, decision making, and inclusion at a variety of community fronts, such as the classroom.

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities observed in 2010 that “nontraditional is the new traditional,” and that higher education would need to be more reflective of and on its diverse range of students (Pelletier 2). More classrooms are becoming multigenerational, which means that courses, disciplines, and colleges, are growing increasingly diverse in terms of age. The age-diverse classroom, moreover, no longer conforms to scheduling categories such as daytime (traditional) vs. evening (nontraditional), and hybrid and online approaches to course delivery increase the opportunity for age diversity.

However, while a class may be multigenerational, it may not be intergenerational. Multigenerational simply refers to a composition—people from different generations are present. Intergenerational refers to an active exchange or connection between and among the generations, and this is where teachers have a great opportunity to enrich the learning environment.

Students often are aware of their age categories, and they can approach age diversity as a conflict of “us versus them.” I still remember my first multigenerational course (though I certainly did not call it that at the time), where I didn't want to be like “the old guy up front who talks all the time.” On the other hand, students also struggle with their own age-based identities, especially when they feel that the stereotypes do not accurately depict them. Unfounded generalizations based on age can be a form of stereotype threat: an anxiety that one’s actions will confirm negative stereotypes.

Figure 1: Ferrell’s 2015 focus group on building aging-friendly communities
My work responds to these difficulties and seeks to make the classroom—even the university as a whole—an aging-friendly community. While the instructor does not entirely bear the burden of responsibility in socializing the multigenerational classroom, we do have an opportunity to facilitate an intergenerational environment. The reality is that students have to engage in class discussions and participate in team-based assignments, both of which will likely involve age diversity. Here are a few strategies to accomplish this meaningful work.

1. Don't get hung up on who fits where.

Although it may be important to have a discussion about age and the differences students bring to the classroom, this should not dictate or overwhelm the path of the course. Such conversation could actually be counterproductive (or at least non-productive) for course goals and learning outcomes. At the same time, it may be helpful to talk about student concerns, hopes, and expectations during the class (we usually do this anyway), and how we can view differences and similarities in these ideas based on age.

If an age-diverse class is dictated by generational differences, it could quickly be enveloped by power differentials and assumptions made based on perceived experience or lack thereof. In particular, if the class perceives that the instructor favors one generation of student over another, others students may feel marginalized or completely shut out of the course entirely.

2. Establish an even playing field early.

This is perhaps the most difficult practice for instructors of any course. Do traditional students lack enough experience to engage with the course concepts? Do the nontraditional students have too much life experience to keep an open mind? Do we assume that the traditional students are technology wizards while others will struggle? It is crucial in facilitating an intergenerational classroom that the line is drawn early and often: that all students are on an equal playing field. Sure, some may have more experience, and some will have more to learn. Ideally, all students will learn from the class (and hopefully from one another); they are in the class because they need it or are interested in it. They are not yet scholars on the subject, and their experiences do not make them any more of a scholar than a lack of experience would detract from their ability to learn.

In practice, this means knowing your audience. On the one hand, for example, instructors should make sure that they support all levels of digital literacies (e.g., including basic steps and integrating how-to guides, especially in technology-rich courses). All of this would be done so that all digital literacies can grow and all students can succeed, regardless of age. On the other hand, instructors should make sure that they foster an environment in which all levels of experience are respected as
sources of wisdom. This way, students entering a field with no experience can still learn to succeed in light of those who may be entering from a similar field with an abundance of experience.

3. Identify points of consensus.

John Rawls, a theorist of distributive justice, writes about “overlapping consensus” in his approach to promoting collective work in communities—in this case, the classroom and university community. An instructor can be a key guide as students find ways in which they agree, whether in large class discussion small group assignments.

Consensus refers to the level at which people can agree and work with one another without feeling that they’ve compromised their beliefs or identities. According to Rawls, we can achieve overlapping consensus despite considerable difference in opinion. Through a lens of consensus-building, we can empower students to find an agreement without losing sight of—or being impeded by—important differences. The moments in which there is agreement is what we refer to as consensus, which can be crucial for setting classroom norms.

For example, whether in small groups or in class discussion, it is important to focus on points of agreement, where students can establish norms and goals, and how they can achieve them. It is not to say that we should encourage them to lose sight of those components that make them unique nor what is meaningful to them. Rather, we should work so that such characteristics—be they age, experiences, literacies, cultures, or otherwise—come into the conversation in a way that supports the learning of all students and doesn’t disempower or marginalize the perspectives of some.

I have facilitated many classes in which age-diverse groups of students have had to develop and present final projects. In many cases, the older students prefer writing everything down, using hard copies, and working ahead of schedule. The younger students typically prefer saving everything digitally, using visual/presentational aids, and working under pressure. To transform what otherwise would be a multigenerational divide into an intergenerational consensus, the instructor might facilitate student reflections on having public speaking anxieties and striving for high grades, as well as strengths-and-weaknesses assessments that allow students to understand and appreciate one another while articulating their own roles within a small group or class.
4. All of this serves to establish equity in the classroom.

The key in all of this is that we establish equilibrium, or intergenerational equity, in the classroom. This is what Rawls calls "reflective equilibrium." When thinking about consensus, it is important to know about the ways in which we might conform to emerging norms and expectations, as well as the conditions in which others might conform. In achieving equilibrium, we do not need to encourage students to suppress their own beliefs, but to focus on those moments of agreement and consensus as a way of moving forward as a group and/or as a class. When the terms established in the class (e.g., the syllabus, classroom norms and goals, and acceptable/encouraged language) can be representative of students who are all in agreement, we can argue that the class has reached "wide reflective equilibrium."

As the classroom is becoming increasingly age diverse, there is a real advantage in promoting consensus in the classroom. Consensus allows the students to “regress toward the mean” in terms of their own abilities, and learn from one another in terms of what they take out of the class and their educations. Ultimately, through consensus building and the achievement of reflective equilibrium, there is an opportunity to overcome some of these unfounded generalizations that come with age in the classroom. As the classroom can be seen as a microcosm of community, facilitating an intergenerational classroom can foster an aging-friendly community.

NOTES


5. For an explanation of Rawls’s notion of overlapping consensus, see the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry at plato.stanford.edu/entries/rawls/#StaOveCon.
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MEDIA

Lee Ferrell, “Intergenerational Focus Group,” All Rights Reserved, Used with Permission (Figure 1).

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AUTHOR

Lee Ferrell is a doctoral candidate in the College of Social Work at the University of Kentucky, and a graduate teaching assistant for Presentation U! He is planning to defend his dissertation in 2017, pertinent to his studies on community planning and intergenerational communication. He has been commissioned by AARP and the World Health Organization to facilitate age-friendly community initiatives in Kentucky, specifically in Lexington. He holds a Master of Social Work from the University of Kentucky with an emphasis on community development and organizational communication, and a BA in Sociology from Shawnee State University. His teaching and research interests include community development, social policy, research methods, organizational communication, and gerontology.