The Mixed Generation Classroom: What Does the Research Tell Us?

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Today I attended a luncheon for the Executive Committee of the University of Georgia's Teaching Academy (TA). The Teaching Academy is comprised of faculty members who have automatic invitations to membership by virtue of their recognition with a university-level teaching award and those faculty members who have been nominated by a dean or department chair (and then selected by the TA membership committee) for outstanding teaching in a specific college or school. Eight to ten faculty members are invited into membership each year.

Founded in 1999, the UGA Teaching Academy emerged from the initiative of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching to foster a national network of teaching academies. The UGA academy conducts a mentoring program for early-career faculty members, plans and coordinates an annual two-day symposium on important institutional issues vis-à-vis teaching and learning, leads workshops, and sponsors other one-time projects to emphasize the importance of the instructional mission in a large, research university. Recently, the academy issued the second edition of "Chalk Talk," a compendium of short articles on teaching tips penned by many of the most effective instructors on campus. The Academy's website is maintained by this all-volunteer group; thus, it is streamlined, but still worth a visit: <http://teachingacademy.uga.edu/>. If your campus does not have a teaching academy, I fully endorse its establishment and would be glad to correspond by email to discuss this undertaking with any interested readers.

Now to the real story, the luncheon conversation among the dozen Teaching Academy participants was quite lively. Most were long-time members of the academy (like me), but others were newly inducted and brought new perspectives. The discussion over lunch bounced from topic to topic. What could we do in the fall to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the Academy that would have a lasting impact yet require no new resources (the perennial problem)? How could we recognize the nontenured faculty group, especially lecturers, who are so valuable to the instructional mission of the university yet do not qualify for current institutional-level awards. There was also a sharing of amusing experiences from current and prior courses.

During this free-wheeling conversational time, what caught my attention was a story that one of the new inductees shared. It was about the energetic influence by a senior citizen (60+) who was enrolled in her undergraduate course. Other TA members quickly chimed in, and it

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seemed that almost all had experienced (and most said recently) a cross-generational classroom. They told stories with great vigor and excitement about the interactions. One academy member claimed the oldest undergraduate (over 80). Another told of an accomplished corporate person who had been unable to complete his degree due to the demands of his job, and he flew in on the corporate jet twice a week for classes (no need for a Pell grant there). Most stories seemed to imply non-degree students; but in all cases these older students were described as totally engaged with the course, other students, and classes. A political science faculty member told how she was teaching about the war in Vietnam and discovered she had a Vietnam veteran among her students. The examples from this interaction were truly amazing.

Perhaps I should not have been surprised by the number of faculty members who had “senior” adults in their classrooms. The Teaching Academy members are truly extraordinary instructors, and perhaps the adults sought them out. On the other hand, the University of Georgia has a supportive policy for enrollment of Georgia residents who are 62 years of age or older if space is available in a course; the policy waives all tuition and mandatory fees for either degree-seeking or non-degree adult students. (See http://reg.uga.edu/registration/person_62_or_older.) The UGA 2013 faculty book shows that 62 adults over age 62 were enrolled in fall 2013, not a large number but certainly substantial enough to provide interesting stories and to justify further research.

I began thinking: this adult population demonstrates that college has a purpose beyond the current emphasis on workforce development and skill-based training. Their engagement supports the idea of a liberal education that provides for personal growth and enrichment. So many questions arose from this lively lunch discussion that I could see the beginning of a worthwhile research project for a graduate student. Not only would it be informative to interview the adult students and good practice in qualitative research, but interviewing the instructor could also yield important pedagogical insights. Why do these mature students attend classes with undergraduates? What is the benefit to the individual, both adult and undergraduate student? To the learning environment? To the institution?

Some of the academy members speculated that the adults may be returning to their “first” love and studying only electives of interest. Others saw “development” or fund-raising opportunities for a department or program from what may be an accomplished retiree. Considering the current emphasis on the production function of colleges (get them in, get them out), I wondered if some institutions might see the older adult as an impediment to quick progress and thus be less lenient in the enrollment policy. There does seem to be a growing tension between quality in education and quantity/efficiency.

I know there is robust literature on adults returning to college in their 30s and 40s as part-time students with special needs to accommodate their status as parents and workers. I don’t think however that the senior adult in the classroom with the new tech-savvy teenagers and 20-somethings has received as much attention. Perhaps we need an older adult in every classroom! I imagine the dynamic would be interesting. I hope your week is filled with lively discussions and innovative research questions. Continue to send us your best research!