Bridging the Generational Gap: Where We Were, Where We Are, and Where We are Going

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Introduction:

Everyone exists within a diverse society. There are multiple races, ethnicities, and generations. Most people only share meaningful dialogue with people of similar ages. In order to be a cohesive society this tendency has to change. Learning happens throughout the life course. For this reason it is one of the best techniques for bringing different people together. This course combined traditional URI students aged 19-22 and Osher Life Long Learning Institute (OLLI) members aged 50-93.

There were three main topics, entertainment, relationships, and social movements that were discussed over the course of six weeks. The structure of each topic framed each segment in terms of where we were, where we are currently, and where we are going.

Process:

Stage 1: This stage of the project took place during the Spring of 2014. Research was conducted on Intergenerational Learning using various sources including URI’s library directories and Osher Life Long Learning Institutes across the country. This research was compiled and used to create a foundation for the Intergenerational Course.

Stage 2: This stage overlapped with the end of stage 1. I worked closely with Beth Leconte, the Director of URI’s OLLI, to create a course members of the organization would be interested in taking. I led a focus group and presented them with my objectives for the course and some themes to shape this discussion based course. The participants indicated that even though they enjoyed discussion, they would like to learn new material. The end result was a six week course with three topics, entertainment, relationships, and social movements.

Stage 3: During this stage of the project I submitted my course concept for approval by members of the OLLI Course Approval Board. After the course was approved I began searching for a Co-Instructor. It was important for me to select an Older Adult to help teach the course so all the participants felt like they had representation on the leadership team. I selected Nora Hall. She is a retired teacher and an author. We had similar personalities and leadership styles so it was a logical decision. Next, I recruited URI and OLLI students through advertisements, word of mouth, and information meetings.

Stage 4: This is the stage where the course was taught. It took place over six weeks and was divided into three different but connected course topics. The material was presented to the students via Power Point and handouts. The classroom set up alternated between a horse shoe shape and circle. Students were encouraged to sit next to students from a different generation than their own. Each class began with an ice breaker. The first ice breaker was introductory and consisted of passing a volley-ball with questions to answer written on it. After that initial ice breaker the following warm ups were discussions about the previous weeks take home questions and topics brought in by class members. My main objective during this phase of the project was to open discussion channels between the generations present. My goal was to dissolve preexisting stereotypic beliefs through communication and intergenerational learning.

Stage 5: During this stage I used the student responses to take home questions for analyze of their growth and development throughout the six week period.

Evaluation of Objectives:

I had many goals when I created this class. I wanted to address generational stereotyping in a subtle non-direct way, further integrate URI and the OLLI program, and I wanted people to engage in meaningful discussion with people they would not normally share this type of interaction with. I was able to evaluate the outcome of these goals through a qualitative analysis of responses to question prompts handed out after the majority of classes. There were a large variety of questions and each required students to critically think about society and intergenerational relationships.

It was clear students were realizing their own biases and stereo types, because I received several responses resembling this one “I came into this class believing that most older adults were stuffy and very conservative in their thinking. I was so incorrect. They blew me away at how open and liberal most of them were. The OLLI members have shown me that age does not matter as much as I originally believed.” Another student said “I think it’s so clear with our group of people, that generalizations are often fruitless. The best way to speak about someone is to speak to them and learn more about them. I think this class is giving me that opportunity.” The participants were able to discover through meaningful discussion that all people are individuals and being a certain age does not confine them to behaving or thinking a certain way.

An unanticipated outcome was an understanding the class arrived at. A question about commonalities between generations was posed and an OLLI member captured the essence of the class in his response. He said “In terms of a positive commonality I think all humans are slowly realizing our interconnectedness to all that is. Maybe the younger generation is more aware of this than the older generation, but we are realizing we are all in this together.” This is a very important statement and marked great progress. One of my initial reasons for wanting to create this course was, because of a lack on intergenerational communication. It seems that people, outside of their family and professional networks, only interact with people of similar ages and backgrounds. The rest of the time people simply coexist. I believe that big picture success can only be achieved if everyone participates in the conversation. We are all connected and in order to move forward we have to engage with each other and acknowledge that progress cannot be made if we take one step forward and one step backwards. We need to share our ideas and feelings, so other individuals can understand the reasons behind our thinking and desires. A URI student said “I think that we all need to work towards something more than just tolerance. Tolerance allows people to get away with hating others even if they can outwardly or inwardly “tolerate” them. I think that young adults and retirees can engage in more discussion and choose to accept each other for who they are by having a further understanding of the struggles and societey that we all grew up in. This will allow people to become more sensitive to each other because they will be able to see where these people are coming from with regards to their values and ideas.” This student beautifully highlighted the next step in creating a more cohesive society. Tolerance is the silent killer of equality and interconnectedness.

Future Plans:

This project has left me feeling inspired. After hearing all the feedback and knowing what an impact this class had on the individuals who participated I know it has to continue in the future. As a senior I will not be here next year to teach it again. I am currently in the process of meeting with one of my students to help her teach the course next fall. It is important to continue the discussion and intergenerational learning is one way to facilitate it. “Once we can start talking and getting to know each other, I know we won’t agree on everything, but we will definitely be able to find some common ground and maybe even really enjoy each other’s company. Breaking down the barriers that separate the two generations starts with one person taking the first step towards the other and opening up to them; offering to give them a hand with their bags, asking them what kind of music they are listening to on their iPod, shoveling a driveway, or sharing an inviting smile that could lead to a nice conversation or even just brighten someone’s day.”

Intergenerational Student

Conclusion:

This course was amazing. Participants learned about Entertainment, Relationships, and Social Movements. They were able to address their biases in a non-direct way and enjoyed each other’s company.

We shared meaningful dialog and fully engaged in class discussion. As one wise older adult student said, “I sense the most pressing issues between any two groups is truly listening to one another and openly sharing perspectives. Dialogue is the only way to come to understanding.” I completely agree. We live in a society that is always at odds with each other or being pitted against different populations. It important to create venues where discussion and dialogue can be free flowing and judgment free. This class created that environment.

We conversed about topics that mattered and were given the opportunity to explain our reasons for feeling a certain kind of way. Age did not matter. We were just individuals discussing topics that were important to us. Trust was established and I think many people were surprised by the friendships created. Intergenerational communication and learning is important. Society is full of people with various ages, backgrounds, and races. Like in any successful relationship, communication is the key to happiness and societal longevity.

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The moment our discourse rises above the ground-line of familiar facts, and is inflated with passion or exalted thought, it clothes itself in images.” Ralph Waldo Emerson