



## Designing Intergenerational Exchange

### Some Ideas, Teaching Tips & Frequently Asked Questions

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### Some Ideas

from [AGHE Teaching Brief: Using Intergenerational Exchange in the Classroom to Advance Age Inclusivity](#)

*Intergenerational teaching and learning can take many forms and be integrated across the curriculum. The activities described in this overview offer a few suggestions for bringing older adult learners into your classroom for one or several class periods. These activities lend themselves to classes held on campus with older participants or in classroom activities held off campus (at local community centers, residential sites, etc.). They also offer a way for you to begin to see how intergenerational exchange can enhance the classroom experience for students of all ages—and from there you can begin to explore more advanced ways to integrate intergenerational teaching and learning in your courses and programs of study, as other educators have done (see [AGHE Biblio Brief: Intergenerational Teaching and Learning](#)).*

**Icebreakers** are important in intergenerational exchange as they offer a time for students of all ages to get to learn a little about each other, which opens the door for exchange around other class topics. You may simply have all students introduce themselves and say something about their background—or you can try something like this: Have the students say their name, their major (for undergraduates), and where they consider home. After each student shares this information, ask that person a “would you rather” question. After the student responses, ask others how they might respond, trying to keep the conversation light, informal, and moving. You can generate your own questions or search for questions online. Use questions that cover broad topics such as: Would you rather have to sew all your clothes or grow your own food? Would you rather never get angry or never be envious? Would you prefer to visit Earth in 2300 or travel back to 1776? Would you rather find 10 dollars on the ground or find all of your missing socks? Would you rather live without the internet or live without air conditioning and heating? Would you rather be able to talk with the animals or speak all foreign languages?

**Inviting a speaker** is an excellent way to bring older adults with special expertise into your classroom. Speakers can include older adults with work experience related to the content in your course as well as scholars and researchers (including emeriti faculty at your institution) who can share information about their professional development and areas of study. Older adult writers, artists, musicians, and others whose work connects to the focus of your course can also bring intergenerational exchange to life. Moreover, while in-person interactions are appealing, virtual visits offer opportunities to bring intergenerational speakers to your class who may not live in the local area, or they may have a disability (age-related or otherwise) that precludes them from presenting in person. Whenever you arrange for speakers to visit your class, be sure to give your students information beforehand about the speakers—and let the speaker know about the goals of your class and some background about your students. During the session, work in time for the speaker and your students to get to know each through interactive exchange.

**Small group discussions** are also good intergenerational teaching and learning strategies. These can be organized following an assigned reading, a screening of a film, the viewing of a TED Talk, or another activity that sets the stage for the discussion. Form groups composed of both younger and older students and arrange to have them sit so that they can face and clearly hear each other as they engage in discussion. Give each small group a set of suggested questions to work through during the discussion. You can ask a student to volunteer to read each question or have the group move together through the questions. Tell the group that after the discussion the whole class will reconvene at which time you will ask students to say something about what “stuck with them” from the discussion.

**Interviewing older adults** about their lived experiences can provide a rich intergenerational exchange. Interviews can be conducted on a variety of topics in diverse classes, not only those that focus on adult development and aging. Interviewees may be older adult community members, family members, or friends. Several key considerations for successful interview projects include having students work together to develop the interview protocol and suggested questions; helping students develop an efficient interview schedule; informing interviewees in advance about the goals and nature of the interview; and building in a way to share the final project with participants. Get a glimpse of conducting oral history interviews in [Moving Stories Guide: Conducting Culturally Competent Oral History Interviews with Older Adults](#). Learn about a unique interview format in [Teaching Gerontology Using the Self-Discovery Tapestry: An Innovative Instrument](#). Be sure to talk with students about age biases in communication as described in GSA’s [Communicating With Older Adults: An Evidence-Based Review of What Really Works](#).

**Intergenerational book readings** work well for small classes. Read chapters for scheduled classes and have students come to class with a question or two printed on an index card or small note paper. In class, put the cards/notes in a hat and pass it around to students. The student to pick the question reads it and gives a response. Afterward, other students are asked to comment and discuss. Pass the hat around so that each student has the opportunity to pick and respond to a question. Depending on the class size, time, and nature of discussion, it is possible that not all of the questions will be selected and discussed. Remind students that learning how to ask questions is an important component of the experience.

**Co-created art projects** are engaging intergenerational pursuits. This activity has been used with great success in a painting class at an AFU partner institution. In celebration of National Poetry Month in April, arrange for the art students to meet with older adults to talk about poetry. Following an open discussion about poetry, pair art students with older adults who share a favorite poem and talk about what it means to them. Following

the meeting, have students create art banners or another art form illustrating poems. Organize an intergenerational exhibit of the art when the older participants read their poems and the students describe what their art works aimed to capture about the poems. Art projects built around other areas of focus can offer additional creative ways for older and younger students to co-create.

**Student presentations** provide an opportunity for students to share something about what they are learning in a class with an intergenerational audience—and an opportunity to hone their communication and presentation skills. These student presentations also provide an avenue for an older audience to learn something new. Depending on the class size, presentations may be crafted by individual students or groups of students and may vary in length. Presentations may be part of an activity during the course of a class or may be final class presentations—and content may focus on a myriad of topics in diverse classes. Whatever course of action you decide, be sure to give students time to draft their presentations and get your feedback. If PowerPoint presentations are used, some instructors have found that providing students with a formal format to follow (e.g., specific number of slides, specific information described on different slides) is useful. Others have used the [Pecha Kucha](#) 20x20 presentation format that shows 20 chosen images, each described with narrative for no more than 20 seconds, which makes for lively presentation sessions.

**Team projects** can be designed using an intergenerational format. For example, organize an intergenerational team (of 3 – 5 older and younger participants) to lead a class discussion about a topic chosen by the team or the class. Or, have the team design a class activity around a particular topic, or collaborate on a class project like designing a new intergenerational activity for your campus. Intergenerational projects give students a sense of working in an age-diverse environment – which they will encounter in their future work lives.

## Some Teaching Tips

*Tips are based on the experience of intergenerational program coordinators who work with faculty in arranging for intergenerational classes, modules, and related activities.*

- It is important to have a central coordinator who can assist with logistical issues, work with faculty in developing their ideas and strategies, and communicate with older adult participants.
- Having good lines of communication in place is important so that instructors know whom they can contact when questions arise.
- Equally important is providing opportunities for faculty to communicate with each other, have formative discussions, and share experiences and best-practice recommendations.
- If possible, providing professional development incentives is a good way to encourage instructors to try an intergenerational venture (e.g., small stipends). Some activities may require project-related funds, which should be considered in advance of inviting instructors to participate in developing intergenerational activities.
- Advanced planning is important, especially if lead time is needed to enroll older participants, consider space and travel arrangements, and work out other organizational details. This can include developing a “call” inviting instructors to develop an intergenerational class, module, or related activity.

- For intergenerational classes and modules, when older participants have been enrolled, it is helpful for the instructor to send them a welcome note, and to pass along the class syllabus along with information about how they can prepare and what their responsibilities will be.
- For intergenerational classes that involve the use of technology (e.g., LMS), consideration should be given to supporting access and use for older participants.
- In advance of an intergenerational module and related projects, it is useful to let students know what the session will entail and how they should prepare and engage in class.
- At the onset of classes, modules, and related activities, experience and research has shown that giving younger and older participants time to introduce themselves to each other (or having an icebreaker activity) goes a long way in setting the tone for intergenerational interaction.
- In large events (like speaker or film sessions), it is useful to ask attendees to “mix up” their seating so that individuals from different age groups can connect better – and have them turn to their neighbor and introduce themselves before the event begins.
- If the activity involves a lecture or speaker format (vs. discussion or small group activity), it is also useful to build in time for younger and older participants to engage in exchange about the topic (Q/A, Think-Pair-Share, and related strategies).
- At the end of an intergenerational activity, a brief “recap” of take away points goes a long way in pulling the session together and reinforcing the goals of the intergenerational exchange.
- Gathering reaction/assessment data from participants is always useful – such as asking them to complete a brief survey at the end of the activity or semester.

Some suggested questions for student participants:

- ✓ *To what extent did having older adults in your class contribute to your learning about the material? (Likert 5-point scale response, end/mid-points labelled not at all, somewhat, a lot)*
- ✓ *What did you like about interacting with older adults in your class?*
- ✓ *What didn't you like about interacting with older adults in your class?*
- ✓ *Would you like to have other classes include older adults? (Likert 5-point scale response, end/mid-points labelled never, occasionally, a lot more)*
- ✓ *What advice would you offer instructors for developing opportunities for intergenerational exchange in your classes?*

Some suggested questions for older participants:

- ✓ *What aspects of the activity did you enjoy?*
- ✓ *What aspects of the activity did not work well for you?*
- ✓ *Do you have any suggestions about ways the activity might be modified and improved?*
- ✓ *What do you see as the value of intergenerational exchange?*
- ✓ *Would you like to participate in other intergenerational activities? (Likert 5-point scale response, end/mid-points probably not, maybe, definitely would)*
- ✓ *Do you have any questions or suggestions you would like to add regarding this or other campus intergenerational activities?*

***Always remind instructors to enjoy the intergenerational exchange, and to know that their efforts contribute greatly to making a more age-friendly, engaged campus!***

## Some Common Questions

*Responses reflect the observations and experiences of Lasell University faculty who have taught intergenerational classes.*

### Course Content

What courses lend themselves to intergenerational instruction?

*Content need not be about age or generational differences. Courses that allow older and younger students to explore topics of mutual interest (e.g., art, music, culture, social issues), incorporate shared activities (e.g., service), or venture into unique and novel experiences (e.g., forensic science, chemistry of fashion, the lure of the occult) are all great options.*

### Classroom Dynamics

To what extent should older adults' "age-related background" be acknowledged and leveraged in the classroom during discussions about age- or history-related issues?

To what extent is it acceptable to "teach from behind" in managing age-related interactions (e.g., pre-arrange groups so that they reflect a mixture of students of different ages and experiences)?

*Our best answer to these questions is that it depends on the goals of the class or activity, and if it is done, it should be framed and explained so that students understand why their generational or age perspectives matter and contribute to the learning experience.*

A common "complaint" by younger students is that some older students dominate class discussions – while some older students express discomfort about "over-talking" and then hold back -- how can these dynamics be managed?

*One strategy faculty have used to address these issues is to spend time up front speaking with students about respectful communication – which is a good practice in any classroom. As well, faculty have found that older participants are receptive to getting feedback about how to best interact with younger learners, - and so, taking time to speak with them outside of class about how they might do this can be effective.*

### Ageism

Subtle "ageism" may emerge in intergenerational classes (e.g., younger students acting in a patronizing manner, older students pointing out the problems of younger generations). How can it be addressed?

*Ageism can rear its head in both subtle and explicit ways – and it can come from, and be directed at both younger and older generations. Faculty suggest several strategies such as building in opportunities that challenge ageist assumptions and call for expertise and input from all generations to address issues or solve problems. Also be mindful of language that emphasizes age differences as opposed to experiences of "us, as we age." And of course, we need to be good models for our students.*

## Individual Differences

Older adults may have different learning expectations, motivations, and background experience. How can we balance or offset these learner differences?

*“An underlying concept when designing courses for adults who vary in age, cognitive, and physical levels is to consider a variety of choices in the way information is acquired, demonstrated, and assessed. Choices built into courses give students of all ages agency and diminish the isolating effects of having to create ad hoc concessions to age-related learner variability.” Hortense Gerado, Professor of Anthropology and Theater Arts, Lasell University*

## Some Resources

Jarrott, S. E., Scrivano, R. M., Park, C., & Mendoza, A. (2021). The state of evidence-based practices in intergenerational programming: A scoping review. *Research on Aging*, 43, 283-293.

Montepare, J. M., & Farah, K. S. (2018). Talk of Ages: Using intergenerational classroom modules to engage older and younger learners across the curriculum. *Gerontology & Geriatrics Education*, 39(3), 385-394.

Montepare, J.M., Farah, K. S., Bloom, S., Tauriac, S. (2020). Age-Friendly Universities (AFU) – Possibilities and power in campus connections. *Gerontology & Geriatrics Education*, 41(3), 273-280.

[Ageism First Aid](#) An online multi-module course designed by the Academy for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE) of the Gerontological Society of America (GSA) to teach about common negative misconceptions and myths about aging and replace them with facts that should be common knowledge. The course is a useful supplement for any class where aging is discussed, as well as a professional resource for students doing internship and practicum work. A small fee is charged per student, member discounts available.

[75+ Resources for Gerontological Education](#) AGHE

[A Hands-On Approach to Teaching about Aging: 32 Activities for the Classroom and Beyond](#) (2017)  
Hallie Baker, Tina M. Kruger, & Rona Karasik (Editors)

[Intergenerational Contact Zones: Place-based Strategies for Promoting Social Inclusion and Belonging](#) (2020)  
Matthew Kaplan, Leng Lang Thang, Mariano Sánchez, & Jaco Hoffman (Editors)

[Tools for Advancing Age Inclusivity in Higher Education](#) (2020) GSA, sponsored by AARP