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Talk of Ages: Using intergenerational classroom modules to engage older and younger students across the curriculum

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ABSTRACT
Age-friendly college campuses offer opportunities for lifelong learning for students of all ages. University-based retirement communities are especially well aligned with this goal by allowing residents to enroll in college courses. Although this arrangement is a standard educational option for college-linked communities, it can have challenges. In particular, the semester-long schedule may be inconvenient for many older students. The Talk of Ages intergenerational module program described in this case study was designed to offer an alternative curricular format to bring older and younger students together for 1 to 2 weeks in focused course activities. To encourage participation across the curriculum, instructors were urged to draw on existing course content. Initial feedback about the program indicated that instructors as well as older and younger students found the program appealing. Useful suggestions for refining the program were also revealed.

KEYWORDS
University-based retirement communities; intergenerational; curricular innovations; college students

Background
Paralleling dramatic shifts witnessed locally and globally in age demographics, retirement communities associated with institutions of higher education have emerged as common living options for older adults across the United States. In 2006, Andrew Carle, founder of George Mason University’s program in senior housing administration, coined the term “university-based retirement community” (UBRC) to describe the approximately 100 UBRCs with an established relationship with a nearby college or university. Although UBRCs vary in the strength of their affiliation with their neighboring institutions, they offer tremendous age-friendly opportunities for lifelong learning by virtue of being part of an academic community. This article describes a case study of the Talk of Ages program recently launched at one UBRC to address a common challenge faced in these college-affiliated programs. It is hoped that this study will serve as a model for other UBRCs that wish to extend their age-friendly, intergenerational curricular programming.

Lasell College, where the Talk of Ages program was developed, enrolls approximately 1,800 undergraduate students pursuing professional majors within a liberal arts curriculum. Lasell Village, housed on the campus of Lasell College, is a distinctive UBRC that features a formal, individualized continuing education program requiring residents to complete 450 hours of learning and fitness activities each calendar year. Although Lasell...
Village is one of a growing number of college-affiliated retirement communities, it is the only one to feature a formal, individualized educational program. The required number of annual credits was determined on the basis of the number of in-class hours completed by undergraduate students annually. When individuals decide to move to Lasell Village they sign a contract of agreement to the educational requirement. Accommodations are made if residents are unable to fulfill their educational plans because of medical issues they may experience over time. Residents may accomplish their plans in a variety of ways, and it is frequently the case that they complete more than 450 hours annually through their active participation in the educational program. In addition to participating in onsite 4- to 6-week courses, lectures, cultural events, service projects, and physical fitness classes for which they receive credits, residents may enroll as students in any 15-week, semester-long course offered at the college, in any major or program. Although older students in these courses are not required to take examinations or complete major assignments in the courses, they are expected to complete routine requirements and participate in daily class activities. Certain semester-long intergenerational college courses are also offered onsite, such as “Aging in America,” in which older and younger students are enrolled. Other activities that carry continuing education credit include participation in special projects in college classes, such as interviews students conduct with older veterans about their experiences during wars and international conflicts, or interviews around changes in media formats and usage experienced by older consumers over time.

**Educational programming challenges**

Although these curricular efforts are similar to educational efforts seen at other UBRCs, they have been found to have some challenges for older students. In particular, the 15-week schedule of college courses can be inconvenient for older students who are involved in a variety of other activities. As such, they may be reluctant to enroll in full-length classes. As well, they may not be very interested in courses that focus on age-related issues often covered in designated intergenerational classes. In addition, some instructors feel that they lack the expertise or skills to mount an intergenerational project, and some older participants tire of being designated informants about historical events or phenomena because of their age.

It is also interesting to consider the potential negative consequences of specifically age-focused projects. Although empirical attention has been given to the study of intergenerational exchange in the college context (e.g., Kessler & Staudinger, 2007; Meshel & McGlynn, 2004; Montepare & Zebrowitz, 2002), it has focused primarily on the extent to which intergenerational exchange affects younger students’ attitudes toward older adults and aging. This research has shown that, in many cases, intergenerational activities result in more positive attitudes among younger students. Much less is known about how such interactions, especially those that call attention to older adults’ age status, may affect older students’ age attitudes. In light of age stereotyping research showing that attention to age can have a negative impact on older adults’ self-perceptions and undermine performance such as in the case of stereotype threat (Chasteen, Kang, & Remedios, 2012; Levy, 2003), it may be speculated that bringing older adults’ attention to their age has the potential to “backfire” and prompt negative age attitudes (as we have sometimes observed in the case of interviews about older times and experiences). Indeed, recent experimental
studies of age identification have shown that when older adults engage in an activity associated with age differences they feel significantly older than when the activity is disassociated with age (Hughes, Geraci, & De Forrest, 2013).

**Talk of Ages: A new modular classroom format**

In light of challenges associated with engagement and inadvertent negative age attitudes, an alternative curricular format was launched in the fall of 2013 as part of a broader Talk of Ages initiative. The guiding framework in the Talk of Ages approach was to bring older and younger students together around topics of common educational interest, rather than around issues that brought age or age differences into explicit focus and might trigger negative self-perceptions. To address concerns around engagement, the curricular format was built around course “modules” in which older and young students participated in focused activities designed by instructors in their courses for 1 or 2 weeks. To encourage instructors across the curriculum to participate, especially those with no formal training in aging and adult development, instructors were advised to make use of existing course content and planned course activities. To launch the program, instructors were awarded a professional developmental stipend for their time and effort, as part of the Connected Learning Curricular Grant Program sponsored by the Office of Academic Affairs.

To date, 67 modules have been offered across a total of 3 years (six semesters) with between seven and 16 modules offered each semester. Participation has been strong and growing with approximately three to 20 older students participating in different modules in classes with approximately 15 to 25 students per class, indicating that the Talk of Ages approach appeals to the interests and schedule concerns of the older students. Using this instructor-friendly framework, a wide-range of activities have emerged across disciplines that make use of different exchange strategies—including interactive lectures, small group discussions around selected readings, along with art, music, and performance activities, as well as book groups, and film screenings and analysis. Topics have been equally diverse. For example, in a class on sensation and perception, nine older students attended lectures in a class and learned about visual illusions. In an English composition class, 20 younger students met with seven older students and broke into small groups to explore ethical questions surrounding several controversial scientific studies. In a course on American folk music, 14 older students joined a class to explore the culture of children’s song, with an opportunity for performance. In a course in social psychology, a group of older than age 45 and younger students gathered to explore issues around transgender development by way of an invited speaker in one class, a film screening in another class, and small-group discussions in the final class. In a criminal justice forensics class, groups of younger students developed interactive presentations about cybercrime for an audience of 12 older students. In a drawing class, two older students met with a small group of younger students to learn about the Ghost Army of World War II and create art works that dealt with deception. Examples of other module topics in various courses across the curriculum are listed in Table 1.

To assess reactions to the program and gather information to refine it, an informal survey was conducted during the first four semesters of the program to which a subset of 18 instructors, 20 older students, and 59 younger students responded about their experience in the intergenerational module program. The surveys used open-ended questions
and a few rating scales (see the appendix). Highlights of responses are provided below with the insights they revealed.

**Instructors’ experience**

Instructors were asked how their younger students responded to the modules. They indicated positive experiences evidenced by comments such as:

- Very positive, based on the feedback given to me by the students. They felt that this was an eye-opening experience, with so many older adults sitting in the same classroom learning the same material with them. Clearly older adults had many different but insightful perspectives, which significantly enhanced their understanding/learning of the course material.
- They loved it! They were able to reflect on the conversations and we actually kept on talking about the activity throughout the semester.
- Very positively. Several students who rarely speak out in classroom discussions spoke out confidently here.
- They loved it! They really felt it was valuable to interact with the residents and learn from one another as well as about one another through discussion of encounters with and among other cultures.
- It was especially nice to have women who lived at that time to be able to give first-hand impressions of the events of the day. My students were deeply impacted by this, and it helped to dispel many myths that they had accepted about women during wartime. What was the most fun was seeing the younger students reactions when they found out that women the age of their grandmothers had the same feelings, emotions, difficulties, and experiences that they did.
In addition, instructors were asked about logistical issues and suggestions for refining the program. Consistent with the motivation for the modular format, instructors felt the design was well suited to their course needs. As one instructor remarked, “I like the module approach. It can be difficult in my area to build an entire course around intergenerational activities since I have required content to cover.” From their “on the ground” perspective, instructors also offered invaluable information such as the importance of receiving information in advance about who would be attending their class. In response, new instructors were given information about the older students who sign up for their class, and they were asked to provide a copy of their syllabus, a brief note about how to prepare for the module, along with any readings, handouts, or other class materials. Program staff assisted instructors with distributing materials to older students to make for a seamless and efficient experience. Instructors appreciated the collaborative efforts, as reflected in this instructor’s comment, “I would like to express thanks for your support.”

Instructors also noted the need to prepare their students in advance about the design of the activity. Following this recommendation, subsequent instructors were advised to spend time beforehand letting students know what the module entails and what is expected. This advice appears to have been very worthwhile as seen in this instructor’s comment that I received positive feedback from the older students that the discussion activities with the students went really well. I believe the reason is that the students were prepared in previous classes, so if the discussion faltered, the students had fallback questions to help further the discussion.

Another instructor whose students knew that they would be giving a presentation to an older audience as a final component of the module observed that they approached their presentations with a different level of seriousness and attention to detail than in classes where the audience was students’ peers. Such observations are consistent with those of other scholars who have argued that bringing generations together in higher education can serve as a strategy for sharpening basic academic skills in addition to broadening content knowledge (Sánchez & Kaplan, 2014).

Previous research examining the impact of intergenerational exchange in the classroom has suggested a positive impact on younger students’ attitudes toward older adults. Evidence that stereotypes were challenged by interactions during the relatively brief modules was found in comments by instructors such as:

- This was one of my favorite activities that my students have undertaken. The rapport between students and residents was great, and the discussion was open. Students said, without my asking, that the conversation challenged one of their stereotypes (stereotype was that older people would not want to talk about and would not be familiar with issues around sexual assault and rape myths) since the residents spoke freely and authentically.
- They enjoyed discussing issues with the residents. They were surprised at how much knowledge the residents had, not only about older issues but current issues as well.
- Sharing stories about the interesting and valuable learning experiences many students and residents had while travelling, studying, and doing service in other countries. This did lead to everyone seeing the value in cultural immersion. Having students interact with residents in a general sense also opened everyone’s eyes to the wisdom both generations have to impart to one another on a variety of topics.
Research has not investigated in systematic detail the extent to which these interactions actually deepen the learning experience. However, comments from several instructors suggested that the modules did bring aspects of the course material into sharper focus and the interactions raised the level of attention to them. Although the extent to which these observations reflect a reliable impact on learning warrants more systematic research, they are promising observations:

- There were numerous experimental demos and examples designed to foster and promote in-class discussion and interactions between the young and older audience throughout the module, and the audience generally found these examples relatable to their own lives. The intense interaction that occurred as a result of this really enhanced the depth and quality of their educational experience, which in turn made the course materials a lot more accessible and easier to understand.
- Sharing stories about the interesting and valuable learning experiences many students and older students had while travelling, studying, and doing service in other countries. This did lead to everyone seeing the value in cultural immersion. Having students interact with older students in a general sense also opened everyone’s eyes to the wisdom both generations have to impart to one another on a variety of topics.

Other comments by instructors suggested that intergenerational exchange challenged them to think about how they delivered content and managed classroom interactions. For example, one instructor noted that “I think I would use a circle set-up both times so that everyone is facing one another—that made the class a richer experience and the whole arrangement of the room encouraged better conversations and responses.” Several instructors mentioned unevenness in the participation of older and younger students with discussions sometimes dominated by the older students. Although instructors are often called upon to manage student dynamics, they felt more reluctant doing so in the same way with older participants invited to their class. These responses suggested the need to provide instructors with more educational support around intergenerational curricular design and class management.

**Older students’ experience**

Older students were also very positive about the module experience, and indicated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (probably not) to 5 (definitely would) that they were in favor of participating in similar activities ($M = 4.06, SD = .11$). Individual comments reinforced this positive evaluation:

- I would like to see more opportunities.
- Keep them coming!
- These classes give us (old and young) a chance to share ideas on a wide variety of subjects in a comfortable and supportive way. I think we learn a lot from each other in a nonthreatening setting.
- I enjoy relating to the students in any way we can, good for us and good for them!
I enjoyed the student presentations and the active participation of the students in discussion. They were well prepared, interested and enthusiastic. I also enjoyed resident participation in the discussion.

Discussions among older and younger students are both interesting and enlightening. They also encourage remembering our experiences of long ago. Comparing experiences allows us to see how times change and how they, in many ways, don’t.

Reactions by older students also suggested that their attitudes toward younger individuals was positively impacted, as was seen in the case of younger students’ views of older individuals. For example, several older students noted:

- It’s useful to me to understand better what younger people are experiencing and it makes me feel good to think I may be contributing to young people’s awareness of the thinking and ideas of people of my generation.
- Great to get to know students—have enjoyed formal intergenerational courses in the past, but this interactive course and a group performance really let us become friends!
- I think they’re fun and informative. I also think they broaden the perspective of the both the elders and youngers on the attitudes and ways of thinking each of the other.
- I think it is important for people of different generations (and backgrounds) to meet and talk about aspects of their lives that both share. Growing up has so many common experiences for everyone yet there are interesting differences to explore.

Older students also offered suggestions for improvement that were consistent with the observations of instructors. In particular, it was suggested that the length of modules be extended somewhat to afford great opportunity for intergenerational interaction that was perceived as uneven at times. As well, instructors should explore using different interactive formats (e.g., small-group activities vs. general class discussions) to facilitate interaction. Unexpectedly, it was observed that the modules may also have served as ways to garner more interest in semester-long classes, as suggested by the comment of on older learner who said, “Only four sessions did not allow me to learn as much as I would have liked. But I probably would now have signed up for the entire class, so a taste was great!”

Younger students’ experience

Students’ responses also evidenced a positive experience participating in the modules, as demonstrated by typical comments such as:

- It was a lot of fun, and they brought a different insight to the class.
- I enjoyed the variety of opinions the residents shared. Each person had something different to contribute to the conversation.
- It provided me with another perspective of the topic we were discussing that I didn’t know much about.
- I wish we had more time.
- I liked everything we did with them.
- Everything was great.
- Keep having classes like we did this semester to meet together and share ideas like we did.
- Do it more often.

Quantitative responses to scales students completed supported their qualitative comments. When asked on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a lot), with a midpoint of 3 (somewhat), to what extent did having older students in the class contribute to their learning experience, more than 90% of students indicated that it had somewhat and even more impact on their learning ($M = 3.80, SD = 1.00$). As well, when asked if they would like more such opportunities on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (no more) to 5 (a lot more), with a midpoint of 3 (occasionally), more than 90% indicated that they would like to have more modules occasionally or more often in their classes ($M = 3.47, SD = .82$).

Consistent with the notion that intergenerational exchange can deepen learning and enhance academic skills, several students noted that older students asked a lot of questions and challenged them:

- They expect us to have the answers to all their questions.
- Be prepared because they ask a lot of questions. I think it’s a positive thing to do in a class.
- Be open because there might be completely different outlooks on things or situations.

Although younger students’ experience for the most part was positive, students did offer suggestions for improving modules. Consistent with instructors’ observations, students noted the importance of preparing all students in advance about what to expect during the modules. Students who participated in modules in which they were required to develop presentation or final products also noted that it was important for the older students to understand the learning goals of the activity for the younger students. Also consistent with observations about classroom dynamics, several students suggested that attention be given to managing the sometimes uneven balance of conversation between younger and older students.

Conclusion

In the course of developing and offering the Talk of Ages module program for engaging older and younger students across the curriculum, a great deal has been learned about organizing, implementing, and assessing intergenerational exchange in the classroom. An exciting aspect of this work is its emergent nature and the important role that instructors across the curriculum, along with younger and older students, can play in collectively discovering what elements make for an age-friendly intergenerational classroom experience. The feedback that was received from instructors and students indicated that the modular format was a viable, appealing one that warrants further development and evaluation. The format appears to be an effective vehicle for bridging generations and engaging students in the learning experience. In addition to breaking down stereotypes, the format also has the potential to hone students’ academic skills. At the same time, attention needs to be given to planning the content and structure of modules, preparing participants, and managing interaction dynamics.
In addition to these revealing insights from instructors and students much was also learned about the importance of “behind the scene” work. For example, lead time is needed to plan and sort out logistical details. Instructors need advanced notice about signing up for the module program so that they have time to think about what they might do. Time is also needed to promote the modules, enroll older students, and arrange for any special programming needs.

Finally, one cannot underestimate the importance of building personal relations when launching a program of this type. It simply is not the case that “if you build it, they will come.” Connecting with individual instructors teaching courses on topics that may be of interest to older students and lend themselves to modules is an important activity for the program director. Moreover, it is important to respect the effort exerted by instructors to diverge from their course plans and incorporate a new activity. This is one reason (in addition to the age-bias concern) why instructors were encouraged to draw on existing course content and activities, as opposed to designing new work. At the same time, instructors welcome ideas and the personal invitation to participate in the program. It is hoped that the description of this inaugural Talk of Ages module classroom program will inspire curricular efforts at other institutions affiliated with lifelong learning communities and inform educators’ collective efforts for creating more age-friendly learning environments on college and university campuses.

Note
1. In accordance with Lasell College’s Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS), this work was considered to be exempt from review because it fell in the category of research conducted by faculty on the effectiveness of instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management.

Acknowledgments
Portions of this work were presented at the inaugural Age-Friendly Universities Conference, Dublin, Ireland, November 2015.

References

Appendix

The survey given to instructors included the following questions:

- In which course did you include the intergenerational activity? Give course title.
- Briefly describe that nature of your module, in a sentence.
- What aspects of the activity worked well?
- Did you run into any difficulties in the planning or conducting of the activity?
- If you were to do this type of activity again, how would you modify it?
- How did your students respond to the intergenerational experience?
- Do you have any questions or suggestions you would like to add regarding intergenerational activities?

The survey given to older students included the following questions:

- Briefly describe the intergenerational class activity in which you participated.
- 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 these types of intergenerational exchange?
- Would you like to participate in other short-term intergenerational class activities? (5-point scale with responses ranging from 1 (probably not) to 5 (definitely would})
- Do you have any questions or suggestions you would like to add regarding intergenerational activities at Lasell?

The survey given to younger students included the following questions:

- Briefly describe the intergenerational class activity in which you participated.
- To what extent did having older participants in your class contribute to your learning about the material? (5-point scale with responses ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a lot), with a midpoint of 3 (somewhat)
- What did you like about interacting with Lasell residents in your class?
- What didn’t you like about interacting with Lasell residents in your class?
- Would you like to have other classes include Lasell residents in activities in your classes? (5-point scale with responses ranging from 1 (no more) to 5 (a lot more), with a midpoint of 3 (occasionally)
- What advice would you offer instructors for developing opportunities for intergenerational exchange in your classes?