



Elders as Resources – Intergenerational Discussion Groups

One effective way of developing communication skills and broadening aging awareness is to bring elders and students together to share perspectives in a discussion of common themes and issues. Without necessarily discussing aging, young and old persons can learn to appreciate differing points of view that are influenced by age, historical experience, culture and other sources of a person's identity.

Successful programs have been conducted where young and old persons participate in a series of discussions based on various readings. In addition to readings, a teacher might show a film and then lead a discussion. One approach to literature is to treat films as readings that encourage young or old readers to explore issues narrated by great writers. A discussion group may help young and old participants to understand alternative points of view. This teaching strategy may help to overcome possible reservations about reading. Suggested activities include the following:

- Assign an intergenerational group to discuss selected short stories by different authors on the same theme and to compare and contrast the authors' treatment of the subject.
- Organize programs on health and aging issues by featuring fiction, poetry, essays and films that examine what it means to grow old. Appropriate themes include intergenerational relationships, traditional and newly created family roles, and physical and mental health concerns of older adults. Readings that depict older men and women facing life's challenges as they live and interact with family members, friends and people in their community should be selected.
- Organize a film discussion program around the American Short Story series. This series contains approximately 20 well-produced dramatizations of short stories by North American authors. It was broadcast on public television in recent years and is available from PBS. This series is appropriate for thematic programs, where several films can be organized on a general theme. Examples are *The Life Cycle*, where each dramatized short story depicts a central character at a different life stage; and *Vice and Virtue*, in which each film presents a particular moral or ethical issue. Paperback anthologies containing the stories in this series are readily available.
- Have students investigate current events such as natural disasters, storms or fires. Here, older adults comment on the news articles of their day and how society regarded the events and dealt with the aftermath. Students gain by doing research, establishing parallels and directing interviews.

Example: Conard High School, in West Hartford, Connecticut, sponsored a student-moderated intergenerational discussion group at the West Hartford Senior Center. An initial topic for group discussion involved the respective images that young and old people have of each other. Other subjects for discussion, selected alternately by elders and students, have included environmental issues, abortion, state government and taxes, the impact of budget cuts on education, interschool rivalry, student conduct, and police-student relations.