



## Elders as Resources Lesson Plan

Elders as Resources programs are designed to encourage the active cooperation of older adults and young students in educational experiences. By exchanging viewpoints and working together in Elders as Resources programs, older and younger people can learn to appreciate the concerns - and the contributions - that they offer to each other.

### Appreciating Age and Cultural Diversity

One of the most important goals of education is to instill a sense of appreciation for the diversity of the human experience. This includes the different ways people from varying cultural backgrounds view the world. Appreciation of human diversity also includes understanding the perspectives of people born at different times in different historical periods.

In a rapidly changing world, each succeeding generation shares experiences as different from other generations as there are differences among cultures. By introducing members of the older generation into the classroom, teachers add another perspective to cultural diversity.

Without adding units or topics, teachers can expose their students to the subject of aging by having older and younger people working together in learning activities. When the young interact with older persons, there is increased understanding of aging, and the contributions and perspectives of older men and women are more appreciated.

In many cultures, family and community members traditionally looked to older persons for guidance. Older persons enjoyed respect for their years of living, working and experiencing life's changes. But in a complex world that is changing rapidly, older people are less valued for their years of accumulated knowledge. As technology advances, a transfer of knowledge often is initiated by younger persons. Without opportunities for meaningful exchanges of ideas, young people may view older people as old-fashioned, behind the times or a hindrance to progress. Older people may view younger people as self-important or shallow.

In most families there is regular intergenerational contact, whether family members live in the same household or in separate towns. However, even if they see each other often, communication may be limited in scope. For example, although grandparents and grandchildren may be in daily contact, they may not significantly understand each other, or exchange thoughts and feelings about past and present events.

In some cases, family arrangements make frequent contact difficult or impossible. Older and younger generations become separated when families relocate for jobs or through divorce. Older family members may move to another region after retirement. Immigrant families with limited means may leave younger or older family members in their country of origin. As a result, many young people are deprived of regular contact with older persons and do not benefit from the experiences their elders might share with them about the world in which they live.

Like families, schools may have established relationships with the surrounding community, but teachers may know little about the community and the resources it offers. Among

those resources are older men and women who are active in various community groups, such as local senior centers and volunteer organizations. Older residents have valuable information and perspectives to share when schools provide intergenerational educational opportunities.

By promoting intergenerational education, schools respond to the needs of the larger community and strengthen classroom instruction. Elders as Resources programs described in this guide are designed to bring schools and communities together and allow younger and older persons to learn from each other.

### Life Writing

Another vehicle for intergenerational learning is the written word - the exchange of personal thoughts committed to paper and shared across generations. Life writing is an opportunity for younger and older people to share life views and experiences through writing exercises. Suggested activities include the following.

- The teacher focuses on a life event or theme, such as family relations, childhood or personal values. Variations on this project involve several forms of literary expression, such as poetry, short dramatic works and keeping a journal.
- Include older adults in classroom writing exercises. Assign both older adults and young students to compose a short paper describing something about their own lives.
- Elders and students present their completed assignments in class. In an open discussion format, students compare perspectives of elders and themselves. Understanding the ways in which their views are similar or different, especially relating to life themes or events, is sure to generate enthusiasm.

Example: Students from a writing class at Windsor (Conn.) High School visit an adult day care facility. Students interview elders and transcribe their interviews on word processors at school. They then write a journal-type article, based on the words of the people interviewed. Students present essays to the elders who were interviewed during a special day of celebration.

### Food and Culture

Among the most common, yet important, of all family traditions is preparing food. Food preparation is an art. Each culture and region has unique kinds of foods and ways of preparation. People from different cultures and regions differ in the role that food plays in their lives. By having elders instruct students in the art of food preparation from their culture or region, the class becomes a forum for both aging awareness and multicultural education. Suggested activities include the following.

- Elders attend class and share samples of ethnic food from family recipes passed down through the generations. Students are invited to share their own family food traditions.

- An ethnic festival is organized and food is displayed and consumed by festival participants. Elders describe the foods and food preparation in specific ethnic celebrations.
- Social and cultural circumstances often lead groups to develop diets that are distinct from others. With the assistance of elders, students may record recipes and stories for a shared publication.

Example: Canton (Conn.) High School's "Link" program sponsors a variety of intergenerational projects throughout the school year. Many of the projects involve home economics activities. Local elders are invited to school for meals prepared by school staff members and students. These residents share family recipes and food preparation traditions. Ethnic foods and their significance are subjects of formal and informal educational exchanges between students and elders.

## Planning Intergenerational Programs – Elders as Resources

Successful intergenerational programs require considerable thought and planning. Attention to objectives, logistics, group composition and group process is necessary. Organizers of intergenerational programs will increase the success of these activities when the following suggestions are considered.

Clearly define educational objectives. Intergenerational activities should support curricular goals. "Getting the generations together" is not a sufficient reason for schools to promote intergenerational activities. There must be purposeful interaction that addresses specific learning objectives. When intergenerational programs do not have clear educational goals, young students and older adults are less likely to know what is expected of them. If an intergenerational program is not perceived as being purposeful by all participants, younger and older persons may question the experience. All participants need to know the purpose, process and timing of activities.

Present a balanced view of older adults. Portraying older people as wise sages living in a glamorous, romanticized period is as much a disservice as emphasizing the negative stereotypes of older adults as being poor, frail and helpless. Teachers should allow as much exposure as possible to a variety of older people. If intergenerational exposure must be limited, programs that use advantaged groups of older adults are preferable, because they serve as models for successful aging. Active and alert older adults also are more representative of the over-60 population. Successful programs with frail or disabled persons can be accomplished with proper attention to details, and emphasis on the positive - even in difficult circumstances.

Consider the needs of students and older adults. In addition to educational objectives, educators must consider the special abilities and interests of both younger and older participants. This will influence the length of time and kinds of activities that will hold both of their interest levels. The more successful intergenerational programs match the needs of both age groups. For example, one teacher prepared students to interview older men who played pool at the local senior center. Unfortunately, these men were not interested in sharing their life stories at a time that interfered with their pool games. By recognizing these needs, the organizer could have arranged for a different older group or a different time and place. The older pool players may have been more appropriately matched with a group of geometry students who wanted to figure out the best angles of different shots. Or they could have talked with social studies students about how and when they learned pool and what other games they played. To balance the experience, young students could have introduced their video games to the older persons. With some modifications, programs can be designed to meet the needs of both students and elders.

Review effective communication skills with students. Acquaint students with listening and speaking skills that are helpful in communicating with older adults who may experience a hearing or vision loss. However, health problems associated with age should not be over emphasized. This would only reinforce students' fears and negative attitudes about aging. Brief explanations of hearing and vision changes are appropriate. Practical communication suggestions include facing the person when listening or speaking, not speaking too fast or too slowly, clearly enunciating words, speaking in complete sentences with the use of appropriate hand gestures and, if necessary, repeating information through the use of different words. Emphasize that these are good communication skills to use with people of all ages.

Choose the setting carefully. When choosing a location for intergenerational activities, consider such aspects as location, size of room, restrooms, accessibility for disabled persons, distracting noises or activity, ventilation, chairs and general aesthetics. An uncomfortable setting can ruin the best programs.

Allow sufficient time for opening and closing intergenerational activities. Intimate, meaningful interaction is possible only after participants have overcome initial skepticism and insecurity about the group. Intergenerational organizers can provide the structure for opening activities that introduce persons and set a positive tone. Children along the age continuum react differently to older people whom they may not know.

Effective group development also includes attention to separation or termination. Time should be allowed for participants to consolidate learning and to emphasize positive aspects of intergenerational experiences. Students and elders can express what they liked or did not like. In some cases, they may have questions that need to be addressed. Organizers may want to allow for future informal exchanges if students or elders express interest in continuing communication in person or through correspondence.

## Facilitating Intergenerational Discussions – Elders as Resources

The following suggestions are offered as guidelines for facilitating discussion programs that include older adults. Detailed guidance is available in Deren, et al (1985).

Older persons may or may not have characteristics commonly associated with old age. Their interests and capabilities vary more than those for any other age groups. Do not assume that older participants will behave in predictable ways or hold uniform views.

Challenge group members to think critically. Young students may lack experience in critical thinking. Elders may have been taught to accept, rather than challenge, ideas from "experts." Participants will learn from a discussion that allows them to question, examine and analyze issues.

Experience is the older adult's counterpart to formal schooling. Some older adults who participate in school programs may have little formal education. Their experience provides lively examples of the issues and events students are studying.

Keep the discussion on the subject. While challenging participants to go beyond a superficial view of a subject, encourage participants to share their reactions to materials and to take stands on the issues.

Present different viewpoints and perspectives. Encourage participants to examine the author's point of view and other related information. For example, when discussing a short story, ask why the author chose specific characters or described characters in a certain way. What was the author's intent and what was the impact on the reader?

Draw general or universal themes from personal responses. The most common reaction to a discussion is a personal response. For older adults, the discussion provides a setting for life review, a process of evaluating, understanding and accepting one's past. If the discussion digresses too much into personal reminiscences, the teacher, as facilitator, can paraphrase key points and gently guide the discussion back to the subject at hand.

Acknowledge any intense emotional responses. Open exchanges are positive and reflect a genuine interest in the issues. The facilitator can draw others into the discussion to relieve tension and stimulate group acceptance and understanding.

Be sensitive to special needs of young or old group members. This includes enunciating clearly for the hearing impaired and avoiding visual aids for the visually impaired.

Adapt materials and methods to the group's abilities. Individuals may lack reading skills or be visually impaired. The discussion facilitator may choose to read aloud portions of the text before initiating a discussion. Having literate group members read excerpts aloud during a discussion is an effective teaching strategy for groups ranging from informal gatherings to college seminars. This approach reinforces the readings by drawing attention to the material. It also provides a review for those who have forgotten or missed the reading.

## Oral History Interviewing – Elders as Resources

This brief outline is intended to provide guidance for people preparing oral history interviews. For additional information consult Sitton, et al (1983).

### Preparation

Several preliminary steps are essential before one conducts the interview.

Define the purpose of the interview. Determine the focus and subject of your interview. That focus may be an individual, a family, an event or a topic, e.g., the history of a neighborhood, community, workplace, ethnic or religious group. List specific topics you wish to discuss. This list will guide your interview.

Collect background information. If you wish to record the life story of an individual, talk first with friends and family members of the individual in order to get an idea of important life events. Your interview subject may not always mention significant incidents. Include background research from books and newspapers - enough to generate a list of the kinds of questions you will need to ask about the topic.

Obtain recording equipment. Learn to use it before you go to your interview. A good audio-cassette recorder is acceptable. A separate microphone is better, since built-in microphones pick up machine noise. Select a good-quality tape, 60 to 90 minutes in length (30-45 minutes per side) -definitely not longer.

Arrange a pre-interview visit. Get acquainted with the subject of your interview before you bring your tape recorder. This is especially important if you do not already know your subject. During this short visit, you can locate the best place to have the interview (near an electrical outlet, if you need one, and away from outside sources of noise, such as appliances, televisions, telephones or nearby roads).

Prepare open-ended questions. Anticipate that you should talk less than 20 percent of the time. You want interesting stories, not just answers to questions (see pages 15 and 16 for sample interview questions).

### Interview Strategies

The following suggestions will improve the quality of the interview.

- Encourage the interviewee to answer freely. Provide adequate time for responses. This sets a conversational tone for the interview. Allow for changes in the order of information or events. Fill in gaps as the interview progresses and organize the information later. The important thing is to put the interviewee at ease.
- Use conversational style. Talk with rather than down to the interviewee. Adopt an interview style that is natural, using clear, precise language.
- Do not interrupt. Do not be concerned with following a set, preconceived order of topics. Your interviewee may introduce a topic that you had not planned to discuss. If she or he skips a subject you want to explore further, remind yourself to return to it later in the interview. Write short notes during the interview to track topics and ideas.

- Encourage the interviewee to offer more detailed information. For example, if the person you are interviewing finishes describing the kind of work he or she had done, follow up with a question such as: What were the conditions like in the workplace? How did co-workers get along with each other? What changes took place in the workplace during the time that you worked there?
- Avoid giving your own opinions. You are not the interviewee. Be encouraging, courteous and noncommittal. Find a balance between formal and informal conversational styles. Never argue.
- The interview should last from one to two hours. It may be shorter or longer, depending on your energy level and that of the person you are interviewing. Arrange a second appointment to address topics missed in the first interview, to clarify points covered previously, and to explore new topics generated by the first interview.

#### Release Form

Release forms assure that the interviewee understands the purpose of the interview and grants permission to use it.

Ask the person you interview to sign a release form. The form is a simple statement to clarify the fact that she or he is willing to allow you to use the contents of the interview for purposes such as public presentation, publication or a class report.

Release Form Sample – Elders as Resources

I give the tape recordings, the contents of this interview and any future transcripts made from them to \_\_\_\_\_ as a donation for whatever scholarly or educational purposes may be determined

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Signature of Interviewee

Signature of Interviewer

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Interviewee Name (print)

Interviewer Name (print)

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Street Address

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City

State

Zip Code

Restrictions:

(Sample restriction: A person may not want his or her real name used. In such a case, indicate under "Restrictions" that a pseudonym must be used.)

## Sample Interview Questions – Elders as Resources

The following sample interview questions are organized around specific themes. Do not feel compelled to complete your list of questions during the interview. Rather, use your own list of questions as guidelines for stimulating discussion.

### Personal background

When and where were you born?

Why did your family settle there?

Did they come from another state; another country?

Do you remember any stories your family told you about how they arrived? Did they move around a lot before you were born, or as you were growing up?

Tell me about your grandparents.

How do you feel the time and place that you were born shaped your life?

What were some of your early experiences as a child growing up in the old country (small town, the farm, or in a large city)?

What kinds of games or sports did you play?

What kinds of toys did you play with?

Who were your childhood heroes?

What were your favorite songs and music?

What slang expressions did you use?

What schools did you go to?

What was school like for you?

Which teachers left a special impression on you? Why?

Did your parents have expectations about your education and future career?

How did you get your first job?

What kinds of jobs have you had?

What was or is your main trade, skill or profession?

### Family history

Tell me something about your family background. What cultural, ethnic or religious traditions are you apart of?

Do you remember any stories about family members, about the origins of your family and the family name?

What family customs do you recall?

Did family members celebrate certain holidays and prepare favorite foods?

Were any family members singers, musicians, artists or craftspeople?

In what ways have family traditions changed over the years?

Community history

What was community life like on the farm or in the town or city where you were born or raised?

Were there any community traditions, such as annual celebrations, festivals, parades, fairs, church or synagogue events?

What do you remember of the people in your neighborhood?

How has it changed over the years?

What do you think brought about those changes?

What were the main trades or occupations in your community?

Have any of those jobs changed or new ones been created?

Social history

How old were you during the Depression (World Wars I or II, or during the "Cold War")?

How were you, your family and your friends affected by these major events?

What did you do during these times?

How did those experiences affect you later in life?

Describe some of the technological changes that have taken place during your lifetime.

What kinds of changes took place in the nature of the work you did for a living?

What kinds of relationships did you have with the people you worked with, with your supervisor or boss, with customers or clients?