

TEACHING GERONTOLOGY

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POLITICAL DEBATE ON CAMPUS

"Can we talk?" said television host Joan Rivers in a celebrated commercial.

In many college classrooms, the answer to Joan Rivers' question is, maybe not, or, in any case, be careful about what you say. At least let's not talk about controversial political questions in the classroom. A new book *CLOSED MINDS? Politics and Ideology in American Universities* (Brookings, 2008) by A.L. Fritschler, J.D. Mayer, and B. Smith, argues that there has been a long-term shift away from encouraging political debate on college campuses: "Universities should be the home of lively and civilized political debate," say the authors, but "all too often, for a host of reasons, professors ignore political debate." Instead of open and free discourse, faculty are preoccupied with a narrow agenda or else are hyper-sensitive about issues of gender, race or sexual orientation."

The authors conducted a survey of 1,270 professors at 169 research universities. They found that most faculty consider themselves politically liberal yet 95 percent try to be honest and fair in classroom presentations. Only 28 percent reported that they let students know their political opinions, although other evidence suggests that students figure it out anyway.

What are the implications for teaching gerontology? There are many issues related to aging that provoke intense debate in the public sphere: for example, how to fund Social Security, allocation of resources among different age groups, and end-of-life decisions. If faculty follow the pattern documented in *CLOSED MINDS*, then students will be poorly equipped to assess competing arguments on different sides of the issue. That would be a missed opportunity for liberal education and civic engagement.

For more on these issues, visit:
<http://www.brookings.edu/press/Books/2008/closedminds.aspx>

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TEACHING NONMAJORS

How should we be teaching students who don't plan to concentrate in the field of aging? Some tips are available from Sven Arvidson's new book on teaching. Here are some of his suggestions:

- (1) Assign work right away and get to know your students
- (2) Encourage students to get to know each other
- (3) Have students think about why they're enrolled in the class and have them communicate their thoughts
- (4) Make sure the assignments you give are truly exciting
- (5) Don't lecture for more than 20 minutes straight
- (6) Make yourself as available as possible outside of class

This last piece of advice could be an opening for work-a-holics to offer 24/7 classes. But, like all elements of this advice, it coincides with everything we know about the importance of informal learning. Heard these ideas already? OK, but remember a distinguished historian of philosophy once described Aristotle's "Metaphysics" as "dazzling glimpses into the obvious." But sometimes we need to be reminded of what should be obvious.

For more ideas, see P. Sven Arvidson, *TEACHING NONMAJORS: Advice for Liberal Arts Professors* (State University of New York Press, 2008).

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GETTING THE STORY STRAIGHT

Are you telling stories to your students in class?

Are you encouraging them to listen and understand the role of narrative in gerontology? Case studies are widely used in aging education, especially in clinical settings. But the effective use of cases and stories presents many challenges. Phillip Clark, among others, has argued that teachers need to be more reflective as they use stories in order to evoke their full power and to develop critical thinking that can appreciate the role of facts and values, theory and practice. For a strong analysis on these points, see "Values and Voices in Teaching Gerontology and Geriatrics: Case Studies as Stories," by Phillip Clark, *THE GERONTOLOGIST*, 2:297-303 (2002).

See also:

"Teaching Story: The Pedagogical Potential of Narrative Gerontology," by William Randall, *EDUCATION AND AGEING* (2002), 17(1), 55-71.

"Narrative Pedagogy: Teaching Geriatric Content with Stories and the 'Make a Difference' Project (MADP)" by Mary K. Kirkpatrick and Sylvia Brown, *NURSING EDUCATION PERSPECTIVES*, Vol. 25, No. 4, pp. 183–187.

RE STORYING OUR LIVES: Personal Growth Through Autobiographical Reflection, by Gary M. Kenyon and William L. Randall (Praeger, 1997).

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WHAT DOES IT ALL ADD UP TO?

When the papers are graded and the exams are finished, we might ask the question that is rarely asked: What do students actually retain from their learning? Asking that question exposes the Achilles' heel of higher education today:

"[In higher education today]...whatever pattern of courses is taken by an individual, it is unlikely to be more than a collection of bits and pieces, a specialist's grasp of this, a semi specialist's partial understanding of that, an introductory survey of something else. The question of how these bits and pieces might be related to one another, of whether they are or are not parts that contribute to some whole, of what, if anything, it all adds up to, not merely commonly goes unanswered, it almost always goes unasked..."

Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre traces the failing of higher education to a deeper failing in our collective culture:

"Ours is a culture in which there is the sharpest of contrasts between the rigor and integrity with which issues of detail are discussed within each specialized discipline and the self-indulgent shoddiness of so much of public debate on large and general issues of great import..."

From "The End of Education: The Fragmentation of the American University" By Alasdair MacIntyre, at:
<http://www.metanexus.net/magazine/tabid/68/id/9834/Default.aspx>

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DO BAD GRADES COUNT?

Fred Smith received a grade of "C" on his graduate business school paper in which he outlined his idea for what eventually became Federal Express, the world's premier overnight package delivery company.

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SERVICE LEARNING AND GERONTOLOGY

To develop an approach service learning, look at "A Service Learning Approach to Teaching Gerontology: a Case Study of a First-year Undergraduate Seminar," by Adam Shapiro, GERONTOLOGY AND GERIATRICS EDUCATION, 23(2), 25-36. Full text is available at:
http://www.haworthpress.com/store/E-Text/View_EText.asp?a=3&fn=J021v23n02_02&i=2&s=J021&v=23

See also:

Brown, L., & Roodin, P. (2001), "Service-learning in Gerontology: An Out-of-classroom Experience," EDUCATIONAL GERONTOLOGY, 27, 89-103.

Weinreich, D. M. (2003), "Service-learning at the Edge of Chaos," EDUCATIONAL GERONTOLOGY, 29(3), 181-195.

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NEW RESEARCH ON WORK AND RETIREMENT

The Michigan Retirement Research Center has issued

